

"We did," she said.

"You?" Autumn and I spoke in unison.

Second Harvest's laugh displayed her perfect teeth. "Yes. We were the core. And Uncle Last Gust in Vinh Kim."

I felt shaken. I found myself looking at Second Harvest through a tumble of complex feelings. What was right in all this? How could I reconcile my youth of affluence and freedom with hers of squalor and persecution? What would I have done in her place? Didn't pacifism become academic when speaking out brought death by guillotine? Would I have had her courage? No, I decided with a sigh. No.

I reached for another palm leaf, thinking the feel of its smooth texture in my fingers might be soothing. "So cadre came from Ben Tre to help you?" I said into the silence. Once Nguyen Thi Dinh, who is renowned in Viet Nam as leader of *Dong Khoi* in Ben Tre, had recounted for me how the Ben Tre women terrified Sai Gon soldiers at dusk by slipping through the shadows with pretend wooden guns. Under Mrs. Dinh's command, the women liberated three districts. Mrs. Dinh went on to become the Viet Cong general whose forces helped capture Sai Gon in April 1975.

Second Harvest picked up another leaf and bent it around her palm stem. "People from Ben Tre didn't help us, but we heard about their Uprising through the Market Mouth. The women buying and selling, that's all we talked about—'*Dong Khoi!*' '*Dong Khoi!*'—how our men had all been sent to the North by the Geneva Accords, but now women in Ben Tre were rising up! So we here thought, Why don't we rise up, too?"

"The Americans never did understand the power of women!" Sixth Rice Field said as he added arrows crisscrossing between the villages on his map in the dust. He drew canoes and then wavy lines to show the *xuong* darting back and forth. "Women are the ones who buy and sell. They carry our news. Women were crucial in *Dong Khoi* and in the Tet Offensive, too."

Second Harvest folded a last water-palm pinnule and stitched it. "I told you how I bought and sold from a canoe while my mother was in Phu Loi. I organized at the same time." She began to tie off the end. "But our independence in Ban Long brought

such revenge! Bombs, mortars, rockets." She lifted her finished layer of thatch and held it up for me to see.

"How," she said, "can a house made of thatch like this withstand American bombs?"

..."Ours was no world for children! I had to change it, for my son's future." Second Harvest nodded at Eighth Senior Uncle. "That's why, when Longevity was three months old, I gave him to this family to raise. For three years, from 1972 until peace came in April 1975, I was never sure whether my son was alive."

I later learned that many women gave up their children to work for the Revolution. Once in Sai Gon, I talked for some hours with Nguyen Thi Ngoc Dung, the Provisional Revolutionary Government's representative to the Joint Commission responsible for implementing the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. After the war, Mrs. Dung was Viet Nam's ambassador to the United Nations. Born in My Tho, she had joined the Resistance base in Ban Long after *Dong Khoi*. She'd given her son to relatives to raise in 1952, when he was two, and did not see him again for twenty-three years; by then, in April 1975, her son was himself the father of a two-year-old.

Another time I visited women who had lived in the Cu Chi tunnels, a revolutionary base twenty-five miles northeast of Sai Gon. Near a major American compound, the Cu Chi tunnels included a two-hundred-kilometer web with underground classrooms, meeting rooms, a smoke-tight kitchen vented into a nearby river, and a field hospital. In an effort to capture Cu Chi, the American military turned the area into the most bombed, defoliated, and gassed region in the history of combat.

The Cu Chi women had never before met an American. They were reticent, with the exception of Sixth Candy, who was in her mid-seventies. Sixth Candy led me through a tunnel that had been enlarged to accommodate Western visitors and then into a meeting room dug into the earth, its roof of camouflaging thatch only a foot above the ground. She invited me to sit at the table made of lashed bamboo. Opening her basket, Sixth Candy set out rice cakes, peanuts, bananas, and hard candies.

During the war, Sixth Candy had supplied the men and women defending the Cu Chi tunnels. This was among the war's most dangerous missions because she had to cross through heavily contested territory. Like other women, she smuggled rice and ammunition in her yoked baskets, but only Sixth Candy was famous for tucking sweets for the soldiers into the pocket of her white *ao ba ba*.

Now, layer by layer, Sixth Candy unfolded the steamed banana leaf wrapping on a rice cake. As she began to tell her story, the other women leaned forward. Only Third Fragrance, a young woman who'd come with me from Sai Gon, turned away. She'd been a sunny companion, but now her expression turned dour.

"My son was only a few months old," Sixth Candy said as she offered me the rice cake, green from hours steaming inside the banana leaves. "I gave him to a cousin to raise. My breasts were so full of milk! I could stand that pain and even the pain of separation. But to think about my son inheriting my life— that pain was unbearable."

She set before me a pile of peanuts and added a toffee candy. "I said to my cousin, 'Say I am dead! For my son's safety, don't



Fifth Harmony (far right) demonstrates how she once hid amid the water palms along the bank of Roaring River until American and Sai Gon helicopters passed.

When the men went south during the American War, the women learned to plow and to run the large irrigation pumps. Both jobs had previously been done by men.

Photo: Ha Noi Women's Museum



say that I died for freedom. Just say I'm dead. My son must never miss his mother, but I will always miss him'." As Sixth Candy spoke, a tear slid over the dark wrinkles on her cheek, but her voice remained steady. I felt my throat catch. Third Fragrance wept openly.

Later, as we were leaving, I put my arm around Third Fragrance's shoulders.

"I never understood," she said, staring at the camouflaging thatch.

"Understood...?" I asked.

"During the war, my mother gave me up to cousins in Sai Gon. All through my childhood, I thought my father and mother were dead. Then when I was fourteen my cousins decided I was old enough to know about my family. They told me my parents were with the revolutionaries in the jungle. I was furious! I hated my mother for abandoning me. When peace came, I met my mother. I was sixteen. For years I was silent and sullen."

Third Fragrance rotated her watch back and forth across her wrist. She watched a butterfly flutter through trees thriving in what had been the Cu Chi wasteland. "Now," she said, "I'm a mother raising a daughter and a son. You'd think I would understand a

mother's feelings. But only this afternoon while listening to Sixth Candy did I finally understand my mother's sacrifice."

... "I wasn't married then," Second Harvest said. She cupped her hands as if catching a newborn. "I didn't know how babies came, I saw that baby coming. Oh! Shocking!"

"Our hero fallen," Fifth Harmony teased.

Second Harvest laughed; her cheeks took on a rosy hue like prize milk fruit. "I'll tell you another funny story, from several years later," she said, picking her pineapple up again. She finished slicing. "Sixth Peach Blossom was in labor when our scouts warned that the Americans were coming. The helicopters landed, but by then the baby had started to crown. I caught the child, cut the cord, and gave the baby to Sixth Blossom. I was about to flee. They'd posted a reward for me dead or alive!"

Second Harvest shaved the rind off another fruit. "But then I noticed Sixth Sister's belly was still huge. What should I do? There had to be a twin inside. By now I could hear the Americans shouting. I was catching the second baby's head, like this"— she cradled the wet pineapple— "when two GIs entered. The first GI was black. They always sent the black soldiers first to trigger our traps. The black man took one look at that baby coming out. His skin turned as white as yours, Little One! The white man fled first. The black man fled after him."

I laughed and popped a nubbin of pineapple into my mouth. Its sweetness startled me. "Now what's this about a reward?" I asked.

"You know Forever Silent Bridge," Fifth Harmony said. "The puppet troops were terrified to cross over from their base at Vinh Kim because Second Sense controlled the territory on the other side."

"Who's Second Sense?" Autumn asked.

Second Harvest grinned. "Me."

Senior Uncle came around the corner of the house. "She had an extra sense, like an extra set of eyes," he said, lifting the bamboo ladder off the fresh water urns and propping it against a jackfruit tree. He climbed up and scraped a wormy spot out of

a young jackfruit. "She was like a mosquito inside the enemy's sleeping net, do you understand? They knew she was there, but they couldn't catch her. Not even with their huge reward!"

Fifth Harmony poured sugar into the basin. "Little One, you remember piasters from when you lived in the South." She turned to Autumn. "Five hundred thousand piasters, Autumn. It was a fortune! A teacher's salary for more than a hundred years. Enough money to marry off over a hundred brides from wealthy families. Still, no one fingered Second Harvest."

"This is true, Little One," Second Harvest said, touching my fingers. Flecks of gold pineapple freckled our hands. "Once, I was among villagers the puppet soldiers had rounded up. I was terrified! This is it, I thought. 'Where is Second Sense?' the puppets demanded. 'Take us to her, you'll win the reward!' I was standing there among the villagers when the puppet soldier said that. But no one betrayed me."

"This must have been the Phoenix Program," I said, referring to a joint effort between the South Vietnamese government and the CIA to "neutralize" the Viet Cong infrastructure largely through assassinations.

"I don't know what you Americans called it," Second Harvest said. "I only know there were different rewards, beginning with twenty-five thousand piasters for people they didn't care much about. The puppets offered ten thousand piasters for an old photograph of me, but to get the five hundred thousand, villagers had to bring me in alive. The people were told that if they had to shoot me, they were to wound me, but if they killed me by mistake, they were to bring back the corpse. The women in the strategic hamlets knew there was a reward for me. They lit tiny lamps, the ones we call 'American lamps', as a signal when it was dangerous for me to enter."

"But why did they put such a price on your head?" I asked. I couldn't imagine anyone wanting Second Harvest dead.

"I carried a rifle," Second Harvest said, "and I shot that rifle, but I'll tell you the truth, Last Child. I never killed anyone." She sliced another pineapple. "I'll tell you why they posted such a reward. Because I fought with my mouth. That's what made me effective: what I had to say, the truths I told."

"Once," Second Harvest continued, "I ducked into Sixth Spring's house. This was inside the puppets' strategic hamlet. Terror! Puppet soldiers sat on the bed! Sixth Spring wasn't home. Her four-year-old son was there. I don't know how he knew to do this, but he cried out, 'Ma!' He ran over and hugged my knees. Such a little child. How did he know to do that? No one had taught him. He saved my life."

"Another time when I was at Sixth Spring's house, the puppet soldiers were about to arrest me. Sixth Spring wasn't there that time, either. All four of her children clung to my trousers. 'Ma, Ma!' they cried. 'Don't leave us!'

"'Where's your father?' the puppets asked. The oldest boy was seven. 'Dead and buried under the earth,' he said. He pleaded with the puppets. 'If you arrest our mother, who will take care of us?' "

Senior Uncle leaned over the side of his ladder to examine another young jackfruit. "If any of those children had called her 'Aunt Second Sense' or 'Aunt Second Harvest'," he said, "she'd be dead now. We never taught the children what to say. They just knew."



During the French and American wars, children as young as three and four could tell who was friend and who was foe. Once when Second Harvest slipped inside a Sai Gon-controlled strategic hamlet, a friend's four-year-old saved her from arrest by Sai Gon soldiers when he clung to her legs, crying, "Ma! Don't leave me!"



Fifth Harmony (left) helps make rice flour cakes for Tet.

Fifth Harmony wiped her hands and gave the towel to Autumn. “Once the puppets thought they’d captured Second Harvest,” she said. “There was this journalist named Phuong who’d come down from the Central Women’s Union, from Ha Noi. She was captured and killed, her body turned in for the bounty.”

“Phuong!” Autumn dropped the towel. She stared at Second Harvest. “I knew Phuong by her photo. I never thought of it until now, but you do look like her, the same round face and full lips.”

“Phuong and I had spent the day working together,” Second Harvest said. “We were near the American base at Binh Duc and were to work together the next day, too. I told Phuong she should cross over to Ban Long for safety, but she said, ‘No, I’ll sleep here’, so I went on to Ban Long. The puppets arrested Phuong that night. When she resisted arrest, they killed her, thinking she was me.”

Second Harvest’s face sagged and her voice took on a bitter cast. “The puppets put out the word that I was dead. Third Pear heard about my death from Tenth Treasure while she was in Vinh Kim Market picking up medicines. Third Pear paddled back to Ban Long to give my mother the news. My mother cried herself to exhaustion.”

“One of the old women told me,” Fifth Harmony said. “I cried and cried. Then I decided to go look at the body— the puppets had put it on display— just to be sure. I checked the teeth and knew it wasn’t Second Harvest.”

“I refused to believe the news,” Senior Uncle said, climbing off his ladder, which he set back on the fresh water urns. “I knew the puppets couldn’t catch Second Harvest.”

Second Harvest wiped her hands on a cloth. Settling into the hammock strung between two jackfruit trees, she stared up at the small fruit. “I’ve never before told those stories,” she said, speaking softly, as if to the air. “Who would want to think back on those times?”

... I had first met Fourth Honesty in early 1987, when I was still confined to the Province Guest House in My Tho. The main room of the province Women’s Union office, which was filled with women, fell silent the moment Fourth Honesty entered. No one, it turned out, had ever heard Fourth Honesty’s story. Until I arrived in the province, no one had ever asked.

During every subsequent visit I made to the Mekong Delta, Fourth Honesty repeated her story for me as if doing so might help erase it from her mind. “If you ever visit Con Son Island,” she would say, “you will see the sixty tiger cages.” Now, sitting in Senior Uncle’s main room, Fourth Honesty pointed to the rafters as she repeated her story. “A catwalk ran across the top of our cage so the guards could look down on us. Each cage was 1.2 meters wide and two meters long. Five sisters in that space! We slept two on the bottom, three on top.”

“Same for the men!” Sixth Rice Field said. He wore a new white shirt for Tet.

Fourth Honesty tucked a strand of hair into her nape knot. “I had epileptic seizures from so many beatings, and then I would bleed. There was a hole in the floor with a wooden bucket inside for our excrement. For eight months I had to sit on that hole so that my blood would not mess the cage. Up above us on the catwalk, the guards kept a bucket of lime. If we sisters sang or spoke to each other, the guards would throw lime down on us. But we had to sing and ask about each other! Otherwise we would surely die.”

Sixth Rice Field shook his head; his brush of white hair wavered. "So many died from starvation," he said. "One night I heard a shudder. The man lying on my right died. I heard another shudder. The man on my left died."

"We lost so many." Fourth Honesty spoke just above a whisper. "The gruel stank. It wasn't fit for rats! We organized a hunger strike. Then the guards took away our bathing privileges. Six weeks without a bath!" Fourth Honesty fingered the embroidery on the cuff of her *ao ba ba*, which was as white as her hair. "Our clothes rotted. Our hair fell out. Finally they let us wash, but in only one liter of water!"

The United States and Sai Gon governments had denied the existence of the tiger cages. But in July 1970 Tom Harkin, then a congressional aide and subsequently a senator from Iowa, and two congressmen, Augustus Hawkins and William Anderson, visited Con Son Island with Don Luce, a journalist working in Sai Gon. Released detainees had given Don a map of the prison. With Don as guide, the congressional delegation came out onto the catwalk on top of the cages.

Fourth Honesty pointed once again to the rafters. Her voice lightened. "We looked up through the catwalk—Americans! We were so surprised! They were talking in English to Tao in the next cage. They took pictures. We looked so terrible, filthy, our hair gone, we were bald—the lice. But within a week the guards moved us to a larger cell. The puppets claimed we were hardened criminals until we smuggled out a list of political prisoners."

Several years before I held that list in my hands during a visit with Tao, the woman who had spoken to the Americans in English. Tao had been eighteen and a senior at Sai Gon's prestigious Marie Curie School when she and her sister Tan, then fourteen, were arrested for taking part in a student demonstration.

When the Sai Gon and United States governments denied the prisoners' existence, Tao and Tan's mother secured a list of prisoners' names, ID numbers, parents' names and addresses. The list was written in compressed lines on a woman's underblouse worn by a released detainee when she left the prison. The fabric I held some fifteen years later was as frail as gossamer, but the inscribed names made the cloth feel as heavy as marble.

Fourth Honesty nodded toward Senior Uncle's calendar with the photograph of the Louvre. "They presented the list of our names at the Paris peace talks! The Americans and the puppets could no longer deny that we political prisoners existed. They had to release us in exchange for the American pilots."

"But why were you arrested?" I asked. I knew Fourth Honesty had been captured three times and had spent a total of sixteen years in prison.

"I was caught!"

"But three times?!"

Sixth Rice Field laughed. "You don't understand, Little One. Fourth Honesty did liaison work." He touched the sleeve of her white *ao ba ba*. "She put on the white blouse and crossed from our base here at Ban Long into puppet territory. She memorized messages, carried maps, gathered intelligence. For women like her, the chance of arrest was so great!" He ran his hand across



Photo: Ha Noi Women's Museum

Viet Cong women guerrillas in Quang Ngai province, the central Vietnamese province where I worked during the war, prepare booby traps for enemy soldiers.

the top of his head, ruffling his hair. For a moment he sat still, his forearm resting on top of his head.

"Good liaison work was essential," he added, "but so dangerous. Much more dangerous than combat."

... All the people who gathered at Senior Uncle's and whose houses I visited during the holiday had participated in the 1968 Tet Offensive, but they knew nothing of the plan for the offensive until the last minute, and even then, their knowledge was local. However, I wanted an overview so that I could understand how the Vietnamese had organized simultaneous attacks on a hundred province capitals and district towns with such secrecy the CIA never noticed.

During the American War, Last Gust had been president of the My Tho province People's Committee for the National Liberation Front ("Viet Cong"), precursor of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Viet Nam. At the end of 1992, Autumn and I made another trip, particularly to see him. I did not know it then, but that would be the last time I would see Uncle Last Gust. He died of heart failure shortly after Tet in 1993.

"Uncle Last Gust," I said as Autumn, Second Harvest, and I sat over tea in his house near Forever Silent Bridge, "did you know about the Tet Offensive before it happened?"

"Indeed I did!" Last Gust moved from the table to his chaise lounge made of rattan. He had a chiseled face, as craggy as the limestone karsts common in northern Viet Nam. But unlike other Viet Minh who fought against the French, Last Gust had not gone to the North in 1954 for Regrouping.

"I told you," he said, "how I went underground after I retrieved the dead from the 1940 Southern Uprising. In 1967, I was working at Central Headquarters at our Political Affairs Center in the jungle west of Sai Gon. Pham Hung was general secretary, I was deputy chief of cabinet. Our task was to prepare for the Tet Offensive."

"Political and military," Autumn said, lacing her fingers together so that her palms locked. "The two hands."

"Indeed!!" Last Gust said. "You know about our other uprisings, but this one was different. By 1967, we'd built a movement among



Photo: Ha Noi Women's Museum

During the American War, women did much of the heavy industrial work. Many factories were evacuated to the countryside to escape U.S. bombing.

the students in Sai Gon. We decided to try again, this time not just in one place but in many. Day and night—we didn't sleep. We prepared everything."

I had respect for the detail encompassed by Last Gust's sweeping statement. I once met a man from Sai Gon whom the Viet Cong had trained as a political organizer. For the two years of his training, he wore a cloth sack over his head even when eating, sleeping, and washing his face. He removed the sack only when changing it for a clean one. Keeping his identity anonymous would prevent any unraveling of the Viet Cong network in Sai Gon in the event of arrest and torture.

Last Gust coughed. "How could we fight in Sai Gon? I'm from Vinh Kim, from the countryside! I wouldn't know how to hide in a city. I'll tell you the secret of how we organized: Women. Some

women went to the North for Regrouping, but mostly men went. The women stayed behind. The 1960 Uprising showed the power of women— women soldiers, women cadre, women guerrillas! Women like Second Harvest, our Second Sense. No matter how great our force of arms,” Last Gust said, “if we hadn’t had women, there would have been no victory,”

“A body with blood vessels,” Autumn added, is worthless without blood.”

Last Gust gestured toward Roaring River, a patch of blue beyond his garden of orchids. “When it came time for the Tet Offensive, the women notified people hither and yon. The women told the people just what to do and where to go, told them the day, the hour. Ours was a guerrilla war! We had to slip around undercover amidst the enemy.

“From 1967, we began first to organize in Sai Gon and then later in the provincial and district capitals. Those towns were the centers of the system belonging to the Americans and President Thieu. Their power was so great that we had to be fierce organizers. You must have a huge number of people to rise up.”

“Ninety percent,” Autumn said to me.

“That’s what Khe Sanh was about! We attacked on January 21, 1968. Your General Westmoreland thought Khe Sanh was our attempt to have a victory over the Americans the way we had over the French at Dien Bien Phu. Ha! General Westmoreland was cocky. He thought his American soldiers were better than the French. He thought the Americans would win their Dien Bien Phu at Khe Sanh. But that’s not what Khe Sanh was about! We didn’t want that hill!!

“No, no, we just wanted to distract the Americans while we finished preparations for the Tet Offensive ten days later. We listened to the American radio! Your president was talking about Khe Sanh every day! A hundred thousand tons of bombs the United States poured on Khe Sanh. An armada of airplanes and helicopters. Plus all those American troops, and how many more supporting them behind the lines?? General Westmoreland thought he was fighting a traditional army. Ha!”

Uncle Last Gust’s voice turned light. “Westmoreland and

Johnson never did realize that they were fighting us, the Vietnamese people. They never understood they were fighting women!! So yes, the North Vietnamese Army distracted the Americans at Khe Sanh! Meanwhile, all over the country, women like Second Harvest and Fourth Honesty and Fifth Harmony and Third Pear were preparing for Tet. But they didn't know they were part of a great offensive. Secrecy! The web!"

I thought about Ninth Rose, whom I had first met in early 1987. Then, she had pretended coyness as she told me about donning an *ao dai* to ride in a jeep driven by an American soldier into Binh Duc, headquarters for the U.S. Ninth Infantry Division. She described how Viet Cong working inside Sai Gon-controlled territory divided themselves into units of three people each. Only one of the three reported to one person in a superior unit. Should a woman be arrested and tortured, she could give information about only four people in the vast web—the other two in her unit, the person reporting to her from below, and the one to whom she reported.

Ninth Rose had also described the spontaneous party celebrating liberation in My Tho on the night of April 30, 1975, and how she was surprised to find so many people there whom she hadn't known were part of the Resistance. The web in My Tho, she would often remind me, had been a tight one carried out largely through the Market Mouth.

Uncle Last Gust shifted in his chair. "We couldn't write out our orders—"

"Death!" Second Harvest said.

"How's that?" I asked.

"The courier might be arrested!" Autumn said.

"Everything had to go by mouth," Last Gust said. "The Market Mouth! In Sai Gon, women in the Special Task Force worked in the hotels where the Americans stayed. They worked in the American bases. They watched and listened. They were our eyes and ears. That's how we knew what the American officers thought. The women played coy and dumb. All the while, they kept an eye on the officers' maps, and they counted the newly arrived munitions."

*In the night rain, my dreams are cast
to the trembling glimmer of the lamp.
After war, the people you meet differ so
from former times.*

Nguyen Trai, 1380-1442

I found myself thinking back to wartime Quang Ngai, where one of my chores had been to pick up the Quaker Service mail at the American army compound. Since the Viet Cong controlled 90 percent of Quang Ngai province, I assumed that most Vietnamese I met, including those working inside the American base, were VC sympathizers.

I often chatted in Vietnamese with the women who cleaned the officers' quarters. They were straightforward with me since I was a woman and could talk, but with the officers they were flirtatious. I always assumed the women measured and counted as they swept and that no change in military activity escaped their notice. I used to watch with amusement as the military police searched the women's reed baskets when they left at the end of the day. It seemed never to occur to the MPs that whatever the women carried out of that American base resided inside their heads.

"Women were our spies!" Last Gust was saying. "And our guides! Brother Kiet, now our prime minister, talks about when he went to Sai Gon, how the women took him here and there. They knew every alley, they knew which Sai Gon police they could trust, which they couldn't. In all the war, Little One, this was the most dangerous work. The women were facile. They knew the paths, they knew where the enemy was camped.

"The children as well! The kids would play with the American soldiers. They knew your soldiers' routines. Some of the children even learned English. Wonderful, the kids were. Smart. Busy with their little fishing nets, their fish baskets. All the while, their ears alert.

“We had a web of secrecy. The people like Fourth Honesty who were liaison knew only a little bit of information. To this day they can’t tell you much. The chance of arrest for them was too great. This way, if they were tortured, what could they reveal? Not much because they knew only a tiny bit of the web.”

“We even had secrecy in the North,” Autumn said. “Nothing on paper and you wouldn’t tell anyone anything, not even your husband, not even your friend.”

“Just like here,” Second Harvest said. “We knew only one spot of reality. We had the three ‘No’s’. Whenever we were questioned, we would answer, ‘I didn’t see’, ‘I didn’t hear’, ‘I don’t know’.”

“During the bombing,” Autumn continued, “I taught in a school outside Ha Noi. Once, when my husband came to visit, he left Ha Noi at, eleven at night, first by train, then by bicycle. On the train he met a colleague of his. ‘Where are you going?’ Vigilance asked his colleague as they left the train. They started pedaling down the same road. ‘To visit my husband’, his colleague said. They kept biking and they kept making the same turns until



Photo: Ngo Vinh Long Collection

On 15 May 1975, two weeks after the fall of Sai Gon, there was a nationwide celebration of victory.

they turned into the same gate! Only then did Vigilance realize that his colleague's husband was a colleague of mine."

"Here's the result of secrecy," Last Gust said, laughing. "Just before Tet, we read Westmoreland's speeches. He said the war was almost over. There was a light at the end of the tunnel. Ha! The Tet Offensive of 1968, the Year of the Monkey, was the light at the end of the tunnel! Uprisings in one hundred cities and towns, but did your CIA know? No! We penetrated the American embassy! Where was the CIA? They never knew a thing! Secrecy, that's what did it. Secrecy and stamina. Look, I'll show you."

Last Gust went to the cabinet with the family altar on top and removed an old photo album, which he set in my hands. Mold had eaten its binding. He opened the book to its first page. "See this picture of me? Hardly more than a schoolboy! I went underground in 1940, changed my identity. For thirty-five years, I didn't exist. That schoolboy you see in the photo disappeared. No one heard of him because I took on a whole new identity. That's what secrecy means."

"Uncle Last Gust . . ." Second Harvest's tone carried expectation. She leaned forward, her eyebrows drawn together; she rubbed her thumb across her forefinger as if paging through papers. "Do you by chance have a photograph of my mother?"

Last Gust rubbed his chest. "Child," he said to Second Harvest, using the intimate address, "your mother was my dear sister. How I miss her! I wish I did have a picture of her."

"You could check," I said when I noticed Second Harvest examining every face in the photos in my lap.

The album gave off the musty smell of decay. Together we turned pages, searching through eroded snapshots that had survived the French and American wars but not the humidity of the tropics. When we had finished looking, there was nothing for Second Harvest to hold on to but the soft blue-grey powder of dried mold on her fingertips.

That evening in 1992, Second Harvest and I sat outside at the picnic table, a tiny American lamp throwing a flicker of light on her placid face. A generator across the narrow sluice by the outhouse

kicked on. From the side addition under the thatch roof came the laughter of teenagers— Vigor and Third Ability and neighbors. They were playing cards. Senior Uncle was folding away the red tablecloth for next Tet, the Year of the Monkey. Autumn, suffering from chronic bronchitis, had turned in early.

Second Harvest glanced at a passing *xuong* with a woman paddling in the stern. The sound of the paddle against the gunwale was but a murmur in the darkness. The woman's husband sat mid-canoe, their daughter in his lap. The girl, perhaps six, sang softly, her voice quavering.

"Our lives are like the river," Second Harvest said, watching the canoe disappear around the upstream bend. "Whenever I meet the elders who remember my mother, I come back home to this house my mother never knew, and I see her face. I remind myself that she's gone, but then I walk into another room and I see her face again. I can almost hear her voice.

"I have plenty of food now, and I live with the peaceful sounds of birds and cicadas. Still, the sadness never leaves. Can you understand, Little One?" She paused, gazing at the stream. "Our sorrow comes and goes like the river. Even at low tide, there is always a trickle."

... Second Harvest took the peanuts I offered her. Their aroma mixed with the tangy fragrance of jackfruit. The hammock made a creaking sound as we swung. I looked at Second Harvest, thinking that now I would broach the question I had longed to ask. "Older Sister," I said, touching her sleeve, "are you a Communist?"

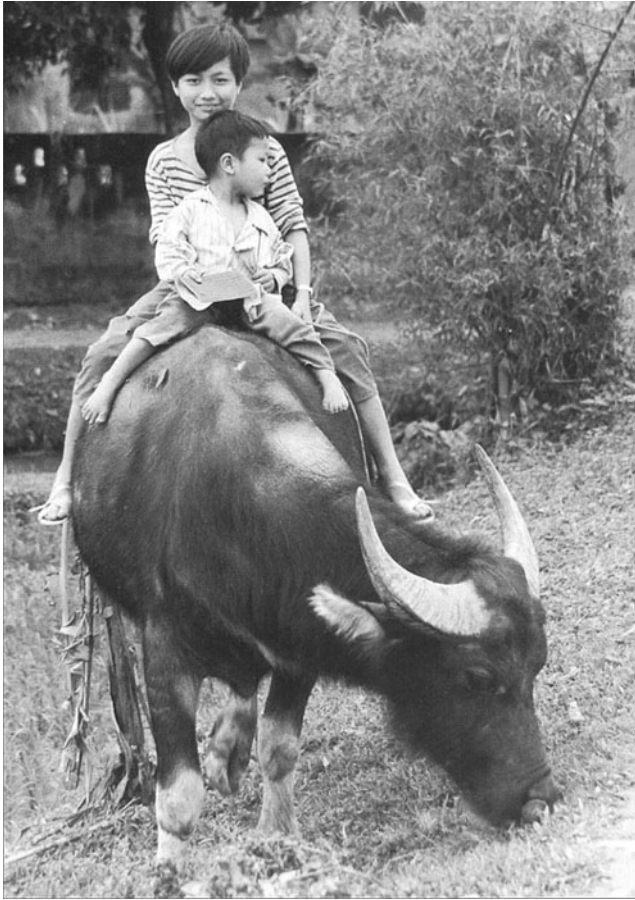
"Me?" she said, laughing. She shook her wrists, "No".

"And Senior Uncle?" I asked.

Once again she shook her wrists. "No. Only Uncle Last Gust. None of us you've spent time with here in Ban Long are members of the Communist Party."

A *xuong* passed, a woman paddling bow, a man in the stern. Between them, on a reed mat on the floor of the canoe, three little boys slept curled around each other like bananas from the same stalk. The cicadas buzzed; a tree frog chortled. Somewhere in the distance, an owl called *cu cu*, sounding its name in Vietnamese.

“Don’t you understand, Little One?” Second Harvest said, gesturing toward the creek and the house with its ladder of light lying on the fresh water urns under the thatch eaves. “This is all we wanted.”



*Uncle Dutiful’s grandsons at work
tending the family’s water buffalo.*