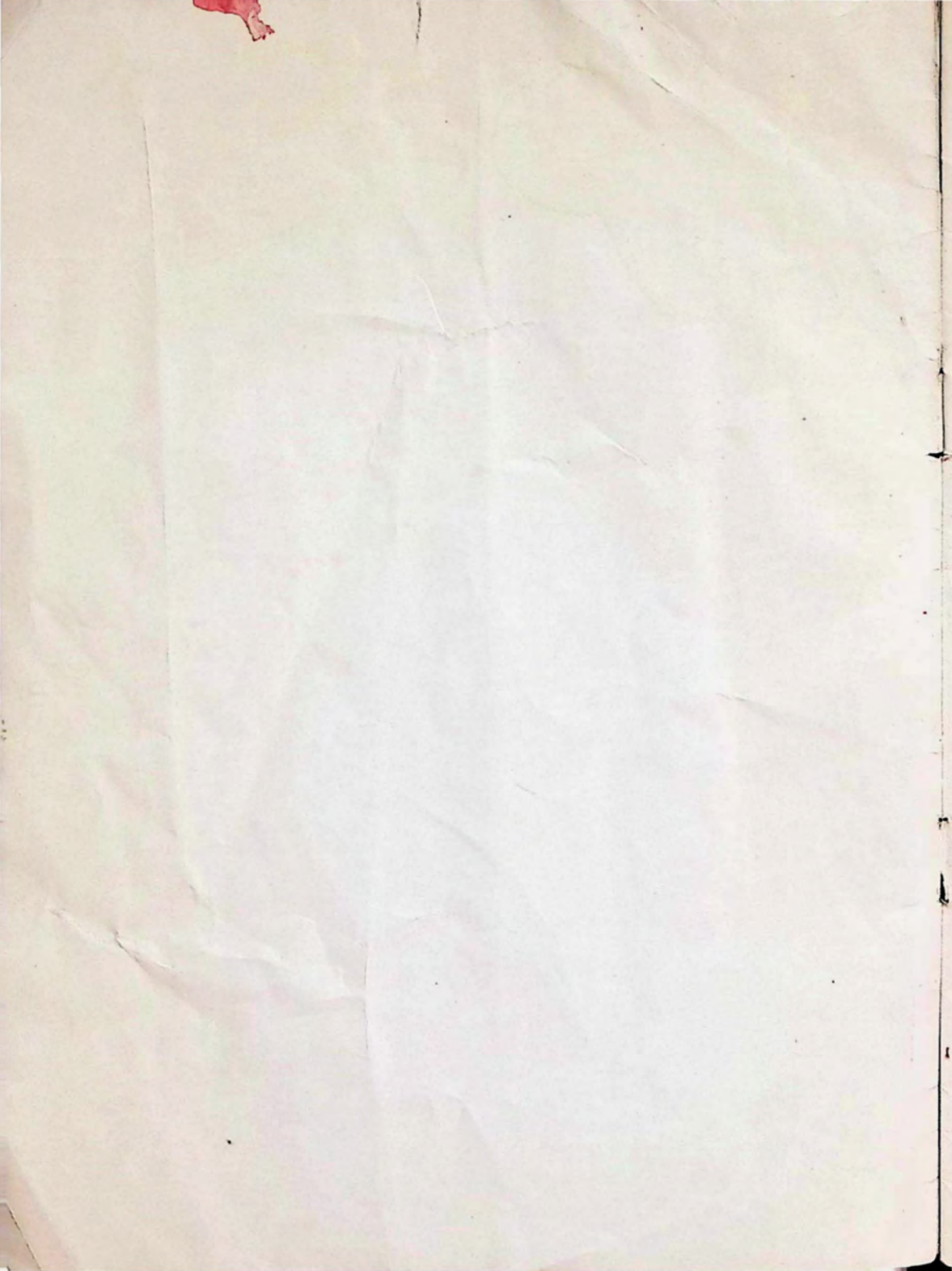


how i became a
liberation fighter

- trần hiếu minh
a short story



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a short story

a looking back publication
1972

Libertarian Fight
How I became a

from the
a short story

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a looking back publication
CFPI

by way of introduction ...

In the early morning hours of January 31, 1968, people in urban areas throughout southern Việt Nam were awakened by the beginning of the now-famous Tết offensive. It was the first time in the war that there had been any such sustained fighting in the urban areas. And as the Bến Tre solution--of destroying places and people to "deny" them to the liberation forces--was applied throughout the south, urban residents saw for themselves a face of the war that they had only heard of second-hand before then.

Many townspeople took part in the first wave of the offensive. In the provincial capital of Trà Vinh in the Mekong delta, for example, there was one squad made up of students from the local Sài-gòn government high school, led by one of their teachers. Others decided to join the liberation forces during the course of the offensive.

It is all too easy to imagine the motivations of those who joined the offensive in the tidy categories of political commentary. But real people and actual situations do not come in such neat packages. This story--translated from SÀI-GÒN TA ĐÓ!, a collection of stories and sketches by Trần Hiếu Minh published in 1971 by the NFL's Liberation Publishing House --tries to catch some of the complexity, the fuzziness, of how one young man joined, and some of the things he began to learn from his new comrades.

In the new wave of offensives up and down southern Việt Nam this year, more Vietnamese of all ages have found themselves caught up in equally unexpected situations and making similarly unanticipated decisions. Because they are real people and real situations, obviously they are not just like this story. But Trần Hiếu Minh helps put a bit of flesh on the dry bones offered by news reporters and political commentators.

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Dedicated to unit X, which in every wave since the Tết Mậu-thân (1968) offensive began has been in Sài-gon striking deep and staying inside the city many days each time.

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My family had already moved. In the empty house, I suddenly felt apprehensive. I wanted to run after them, but I still didn't feel like sitting up. I lay on my back in bed with my legs dangling down to the floor. After a while I stood up, went over to the window, and looked out at the blocks of houses along the big street, half afraid, half angry. I thought back over the way my mother had acted, what she had said not long ago when she was trying to convince me to go. I remembered the answer I had given everyone. "Anybody that wants to go, go on. I'm staying here."

I remembered how restless the little kids had been, happy like they were going out to play instead of fleeing from the enemy. I remembered how calm my big sister Hai had been, like when she told everyone, "OK. If you want to go, go. If you want to stay, stay."

I remembered what my father had said. "If you stay here, seeing that head of hair will be enough to make them toss a grenade in on you."

Dad wasn't threatening me, but he wasn't just scolding me either. It was always that way; Dad thought I was so spoiled that it was impossible to teach me anything, so even though he wasn't trying to scold me or threaten me, he was always jumping on me like that. Obviously I was "spoiled" like that because of the society around me, but it was partly because of my father, too. In this Sài-gon society, what good did it do to study hard? What good was it being good-natured and well-behaved? So far I'd never actually stolen anything or swindled anybody, but I was definitely not good-natured or well-behaved. I kept on going to school--sometimes

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passing, sometimes flunking--but old as I was I still hadn't got my Bac II certificate.¹ And I was so slow that even if I took the test again this year I still wasn't sure of passing!

Because what good did it do to pass? Take my sister, Hai. She studied a lot harder than I did, she was much better behaved, and not only did she have her Bac II, she had even passed all her exams in the Faculty of Letters. But still the only kind of job she could find was as a secretary at that USAID office. Lately Dad had run back and forth taking her to work at the "Việt Nam Paper Mill", but wasn't the "Việt Nam Paper Mill" as much an American business as USAID? Didn't it do its business in American money, even though it hired mostly Vietnamese?

And if I studied hard enough to pass, what would I do after I finished? I could join the army, or teach, or work for the Ministry of Health like my father did now, every day bending over his bicycle four times, morning and afternoon, from home to the office, from the office back home. The whole family saved up to join a hui,² and eventually were able to buy a Velo-solex³ for Hai. Sis was a woman already, and we didn't want her to seem "wilted". Still, if they had given the bike to me, I'd have turned it back over to Dad. I'd rather just pretend to relax wandering around the streets, unless I got a chance to ride around with my friends on somebody's Japanese motorcycle.

¹Bac II (Baccalaureate II): a certificate indicating a person has passed the comprehensive examination at the end of high school--thus, the equivalent of a high school diploma.

²Hui: a sort of rotating credit association. Any number of people form a group and contribute a set amount of money to a pool every month. Each month a different member of the group is chosen by lot to receive the money for that month, minus a percentage of "interest" divided equally among the members who have not yet taken the pooled money. A person who does not need money in a particular month need not take part in drawing the lots if there are others who want the money and have not yet had their turn. The average interest is relatively low, but those who take the money earliest--in other words, those who need it most--pay relatively high interest, while those who can afford to wait until the last few drawings actually earn interest.

³Velo-solex: a French rim-drive motorized bicycle.

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So obviously I was a spoiled kid. I lay around the house until I got tired of it, then went to school. When I was tired of school, I cut class and wandered around the streets. When I got tired of that, I went back home to sleep... Generally I lived the way I wanted to--or at least I didn't live the way my folks wanted me to. As far as Mom goes, I sometimes felt sorry for her and wanted to give in to her--eat and go to bed on time, study regularly. But I never felt like that for long--no more than three days, five days at a time, and then back to my old habits.

As for Dad, it wasn't that I didn't like him. I knew I made him sad, but even when I felt sorry for him I did just the opposite of what he wanted... Sometimes it was just because of him that I went a little far out. Like letting my hair grow out. At first I felt all right about it, but I didn't like it all that much. And then one time when I was too lazy to go to the barber, Dad saw my hair and called out, "Letting your hair grow out the way those hoods do, huh?"

So since then I'd worn my hair long.

It was the same way with the clothes I wore--my maroon jeans and dark gray "Montagut" shirt. I knew they really knocked Dad's eyes out, so I wore them more and more. I didn't do it because I didn't like Dad, or because I wanted to make him sad. It was really that I wanted to do the opposite of what people around us said was right, was good, and the representative of the "establishment" in my family was Dad.

And then these last few days the guns had started firing again, and especially since yesterday evening everybody had been getting more and more agitated because they heard the fighting coming in again toward Phú-lâm and Phú-dinh. The "Việt công" had come in at Tết, and then at the first of this month had mounted a second offensive, with fierce fighting right in Minh Phung Street near here. The people talked a lot about them. I didn't think of them as cruel and wicked--quite the opposite--but the idea of following them had never occurred to me. How on earth could I follow them? I couldn't even manage my father's--kind of common, every-day city life, so how could I possibly keep up with the exceptional way they lived? Not to mention my own life-style that, much as he loved me, always singed Dad's ears and knocked his eyes out, and

made him jump on me every time he opened his mouth. So how could they possibly put up with me? It was bound to be just like Dad had said. All they'd need would be to see my head of hair, and they'd dedicate a grenade to kicking me out along with the rest of the Americans' "free world".

So if it had been just Mom's coaxing, then probably I'd have gone along with my family to stay at my aunt's house in Ward III, near the "Commoners Hospital", even though I hadn't liked the idea of crowding in and imposing on them like that in the first place... But this time besides Mom coaxing me, there had been Dad pushing me and jumping on me. And there were the little kids happy and chattering as if they were going to the Cape,⁴ and Hai obediently getting everything packed and saying if you want to come, if you want to stay, stay. All that made me mad, nearly furious, the way I was furious at the kind of life people around us were living. So I answered everyone, "Whoever wants to go, go. I'm staying here."

So while everyone was bustling around getting things straightened up and ready to go, I came upstairs here, took off my pants, threw them on the bed post, and lay down on my back with my feet dangling down to the floor... But now that everybody was gone, I suddenly felt apprehensive. Well, if they come in here, what then? Out in the streets, in this neighborhood some of the families had moved away, but most of them were staying on. You could hear shooting up at the end of Hàu-giang Street. If they came straight here they'd make it tonight. But were they headed this way?

Maybe they'd turn off in the direction of Càu-tre, and Bình-thời, to go towards Minh Phụng, into Trần Quốc Toàn Street like before. Or maybe they'd turn down toward Rach-cát, Bình-tiên... like they had at Tết. I was hoping they wouldn't come through here. Besides, the place was crawling with our troops, and they'd have to cross Hàu-giang Street to get here, so they'd also have to pass the Phú-đinh crossroads and the Rờ-nô and Phú-lâm bridges... On the other hand, this time they were fighting everywhere: from Bà-chiều and Gia-đinh to the Đại-đông and Cao-đông-hung theaters, and in Wards I and II they had given the order to evacuate... so where could you go to get away from it?

⁴The Cape: Vũng Tàu, called Cap St Jacques by the French, on the coast east of Sai-gôn.

I was standing, gazing out the window at the blocks of houses beside the big street, calculating, hoping, thinking like this. To be honest about it, I was repeating to myself the things I'd heard people saying to each other the past few days, to overcome the fear and anxiety in my heart. But this reasoning, that argument... they still didn't help me throw off my fear, my anxiety... I couldn't go along with my family, because that would have meant giving in to my father, Hai, and all the little kids. I wondered if I should go out with my friends. But deep down I realized that if I had evacuated along with my family that would have been the right thing, the good thing to do. I couldn't make this right, good decision, even though staying behind like this I didn't know what might happen to me.

To get rid of these nagging thoughts I came back in away from the window and went downstairs to look for something to eat, because in the afternoon when the whole family was eating in a hurry so they could leave, I hadn't got back yet. When I got back, and everyone was packing, Mom called me to come down and eat, but I didn't. So now I'd go look for something to eat first, and then I'd decide what to do--whether to go out with my friends, or whether to go back upstairs and sleep...

But when I finished eating, I suddenly remembered that it was past curfew time already. Most days we thought it was nonsense to pay any attention to the curfew. Except for a few big streets, we could get around with no trouble at all, especially inside our neighborhoods. But today the guns were blasting away. In my pocket I had the draft exemption papers that were good until September so I could finish the Bac II exams--papers Dad had chased around after for a year. But in these circumstances, once I was out, if some bunch of soldiers grabbed me they wouldn't pay any attention to whether I had my papers. So I didn't have much choice but to close the doors and shutters, go back upstairs, lie down, close my eyes and try to sleep.

I kept tossing and turning, but finally I fell asleep for I don't know how long, until I woke up with a start and realized what had happened. They had come--the Việt công!... There was the sound of guns going off, of dogs barking--everything was in an uproar. Machine guns were firing insanely out in the big street. The troops on our side had all pulled out to there. But from their side,

the Việt công side, you could only hear them firing from maybe the Cây-gõ bridge. But inside the different neighborhoods, judging from the barking dogs, they were spreading out all around. They had come in faster than I could have imagined.

I got up, stepped out from under the mosquito net and tried to make out my watch in the glow of the night light. Past four-thirty. They must be making camp. Footsteps coming, a knock at some door echoing everywhere. A cheer, people calling out slogans--the people welcoming them. A shout echoing, a cry, a chase--they caught someone!...

I listened carefully. Footsteps, knocks at doors again and again from all four sides of my house. Eventually they'd get here. What should I do now?... But I didn't have time to be afraid any more. My mind was suddenly blank as if I'd forgotten how to think because I heard echoing up from downstairs the sound: klop! klop!...

And then, "Open up! Open up!"

I rushed over to the wardrobe at the head of the bed. I opened the door, climbed in, closed it again, and locked it from the inside. This was where I had hidden from the draft squads for more than a year, while Dad was still trying to get the exemption papers for me.

After they called once at the door and didn't get any answer, they left. But right away another group came. More knocks, more calling, then a loud clatter at the door, footsteps entering the house, and the sound of furniture being pushed around. They'd come into my house. A shouted question, an answer, laughing and joking together... My heart began to beat harder still, because along with all those sounds down below, I could hear the footsteps of someone beginning to come up the stairs... walking around on the floor. And then a voice.

"Hey, go over to the window. Check out those tall buildings!"

They'd come up. Two people. The one who'd just spoken moved over towards my bed, and around the wardrobe where I was hiding. The one over at the window turned back. They were talking together.

"From here you can get a good look at the tops of

those houses facing the street."

"We'll have to check everything out carefully."

"There's nothing around here. Just the two guns they're firing up there at the end of the street..."

So it was light already, they could keep a good lookout from here, and today they'd stay here... Before I'd had a chance to worry any more about my fate here in the wardrobe, I heard more footsteps on the stairs, and a question echoing up from the foot of the stairs.

"Anything up there?"

The one near me answered, "Nothing to report."

The one by the window went on, "The whole family must have evacuated."

The person who'd just come up walked to the middle of the room. "Looks like a government worker's house."

"Yea, but just an ordinary one." It was the person near me. He'd stepped over by my desk, and I heard him shout, "Would you look at that!... Look at that hair!"

I remembered the photo of me under the glass on the desk. The person by the window added, "A cowboy!"⁵

"Music, schoolbooks, newspapers, novels..."

That was the one by my desk again. The person who'd just come up had also gone over there, and must have been looking through my school books when he put in, "One of their students." And then, "Must be one of the children in the family. He's studying, but maybe his father's in the police, or a secret agent, or..." He stood up, then went on, "You two search the place again carefully, then one of you stay up here and keep a lookout at the window there. One of you come down to eat and get some rest. They'll probably come hunting for us today..."

As soon as he'd finished speaking, he turned around and went back to the head of the stairs. I guessed he was the commander. The other two sent an answer after him.

⁵Cowboy: derisive Sài-gòn slang for pseudo-hippie long-hairs.

"OK, you go on down, and when we've looked around again carefully one of us will come down."

The commander's footsteps sounded farther and farther down the stairs. Up here the person by the window said to the one inside, "Put the mosquito net up."

I remembered my bed with the mosquito net and blanket and pants all jumbled up together.

"Hey, look at these cowboy pants!"

"Put them on and see what you look like."

Snickering. They were joking about the jeans and the "Montagut" shirt I'd thrown on the bedpost yesterday afternoon. After that I heard them talking and realized that the one in the middle of the room had put my pants on. He came back in front of the wardrobe, looked into the mirror on the front, looked at himself, danced around, then turned around, opened his eyes wide and asked the one by the window, "Do I look like one?"

"You are one!"

"But what about my hair?"

"If we stay here another ten days, your hair will look just like his."

He had put on my pants and was sashaying back and forth in front of the mirror on the wardrobe. The two of them were roaring. Then suddenly the one in the middle of the room put one hand on his hip, pointed to his reflection in the mirror with the other, and said to the one by the window, "Do me a favor and put a bullet through that cowboy in the wardrobe. Get rid of the whole worthless lot of them!"

Sitting curled up inside the wardrobe I couldn't tell that they were joking. I couldn't tell that the one near me was pointing at his own reflection in the mirror and joking. I thought that he had realized I was hiding inside the wardrobe and was telling the other one to shoot me. I panicked and burst out through the wardrobe door.

"Ah!... Ah!..."

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I was grabbed and my arms held tight. I stammered out, "I... I..."

Then echoing up from downstairs, "What's going on?"

The person holding my arms answered from behind me, "This kid was hiding in the wardrobe."

"Turn him loose." The commander had looked at my face, then given the order. He had already reached the top of the stairs with maybe three or four others behind him, their guns ready. The commander walked over toward me slowly and asked, "Who are you? And why were you hiding in the wardrobe?..."

Well, that was the first time I had met any of the Liberation soldiers fighting in Sài-gòn! Before this I'd only seen their pictures on TV and in the books and papers in town.

They let go of my arms, and I told them everything--about myself, who my parents were, what they did. About Hai and all the younger kids. Where the family had gone and why I hadn't evacuated along with them. That day the only thing I said about that was I had stayed behind to watch the house, afraid that if everybody left some gang of soldiers and hoodlums would come and cart off all the furniture...

After that I followed all of them downstairs. Only one of them stayed upstairs to keep a lookout at the window. They were all very young, even the commander. From then on I called him Brother--Brother Năm.

Năm told me not to worry and to stay in the house with them. Today, when they realized they were in here, the Saigon troops out on the main street would come in to hunt for them, but there was another unit outside to cut them off. Still, we'd have to be ready in here. I shouldn't worry, just stay in the house with them, help them with anything I could, and then if I wanted to go along with them they would certainly welcome me. If not, I could just stay behind in the house.

Some of them were busily chipping a hole in the wall out toward the surrounding houses. The sound of their chipping echoed through the whole neighborhood, like cries and answers.

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Some of them were taking care of the food and water. I showed them where the rice, sauce, vegetables and meat were... Mom had left plenty of everything. I offered to cook the rice for them, but Nãm wouldn't let me. He pulled me down beside him on the divan and asked me all about the situation in the neighborhood, the other side's soldiers, security forces, police, the district and section and neighborhood chiefs... and on to all kinds of ordinary people. I told him what I knew.

He broke in to ask why I'd let my hair grow out so long. I answered that it was a Beatles hair style, so then I had to explain that they were an English music group and why they had that name. Then somebody asked, "What about respectable people--do any of them wear their hair like that?"

The question confused me, because before this I hadn't thought of anyone as "respectable"! As for me, obviously they didn't think I was respectable letting my hair grow like this.

When they saw me hesitate, they burst out laughing, and then changed the subject. They were really fun!

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It had only been one day, but I was like a new person.

That night, standing with them on the street outside my neighborhood waiting to cross the main street in front of us, I didn't even remember that my hair was still long. I didn't think about being my parents' son, Hai's kid brother, the big brother of all the little kids, or about being the spoiled child of the family!

Actually, I did happen to think about it once. That was when I was going along in their ranks out of the neighborhood and into the street. Then, in the silent column, I happened to think: Well, I'm going with them. Now what?... But the whole day before that I really hadn't thought about it yet. There'd been so many events that day--from the people in that part of town, to these men in my own house!

The people in that part of town seemed busy, merry, and there were lots of people on the streets that I didn't recognize, even though I had seen them nearly every day. Such a jubilant scene seemed really strange. But the thing that was most surprising of all to me was these men. They were all really natural, cheerful, close. If there was something they didn't know, they asked me right away; and I didn't hesitate to ask them or tell them anything. Even Năm, who I learned was a company commander, called me to go along with him every time he went around in the area. Those times, when I saw the people around there I really felt proud. I didn't have many friends around there, but I thought if only all my friends from the other streets could see me now!

Maybe that's why in the afternoon when Năm asked, "How about it? Going with us?" I nodded right away.

But until nightfall, moving along in this silent column through all the alleyways in the neighborhood, sometimes I suddenly stopped short: Am I really going with them? Shouldn't I ask to turn back? How can I possibly follow them? I felt a vague tingling like I was missing something, was afraid of losing something... Some shadowy something in my mind dogged every step I took through the alleyways until suddenly it fell strangely silent. Especially when we came out to the main street outside and, looking at the street before me, I thought that when that street was crossed I would have followed them into a new life, completely different, completely strange...

But I couldn't think about these things for long. I didn't get any chance to think about them for long. I had no way of knowing how many units we had, or what way we would go after we'd crossed the street, but in the alleys before me the ranks were swelling, and those thoughts in my mind scattered in the midst of the ceaseless tramping of their feet. When we came out on the main street, we heard that many had already got across. I was standing in the road at the head of our company, in back of Năm, and had just started to have second thoughts about going with them when suddenly, from up at the end of a block of tall houses, enemy bullets came raining down. Sparks flew from the pavement, and I was pushed back into the shelter of a wall at the end of the alley.

Năm turned and walked back down the line, sending

down the order to bring the guns up quickly, to open fire on the enemy troops in the tall building and cover the other units so they could get across. He had just finished speaking when I heard him ask, "Where are you going, Trang?"

"The battalion sent me up to see why we were stopping." The urgent voice of a woman. Following the shadows, she rushed up to where we were. I still couldn't get a good look at her face, but heard her ask, "How come you're just standing here instead of going across?"

She was standing right beside me, her warm breath brushing against my ear. Her voice was clear and sharp in the darkness, as if she were scolding our whole group. But somebody in the group spoke up to taunt her. "Don't you see the bullets they're shooting? What do you want, a body of brass and skin of iron?"

Before he'd finished speaking, she cut him short, her voice still more severe. "What brass and iron? Go on across when they stop firing a minute. How long are you planning to wait?"

Another man, speaking with a local accent, kept on teasing her. "You're out of your mind! If you're so smart, go on across!"

But she brushed him off, "What do you mean, out of my mind. Why not go?"

She grabbed my arm. She had nearly shrieked that last sentence over the deafening explosions of a volley that had just rained down. Sparks flashed up from the surface of the street. But as soon as the bullets stopped, she grabbed my arm, jerked me along, and streaked across the street. Behind us several others hurtled across as if they were sucked along.

Everything happened so fast that I didn't have a chance to look back, but I could hear them keep on firing behind us, sticking right to our heels. We quickly hunched down and ran after the units that had already crossed, and by that night everyone had got here to New Chơ-lơn. Everybody was repeating the story of how when our group had been pulled across the street by Sister Trang (that woman), then the ones behind had done the same thing, following her, group by group, dashing across every

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time they finished firing a burst. After that, the company brought up a gun and found a place they could shoot from to cover the rest of the company and the battalion, so they could all get across easier.



So, I had gone with them.

Here in New Chợ-lớn these days of the second wave terrified the enemy.

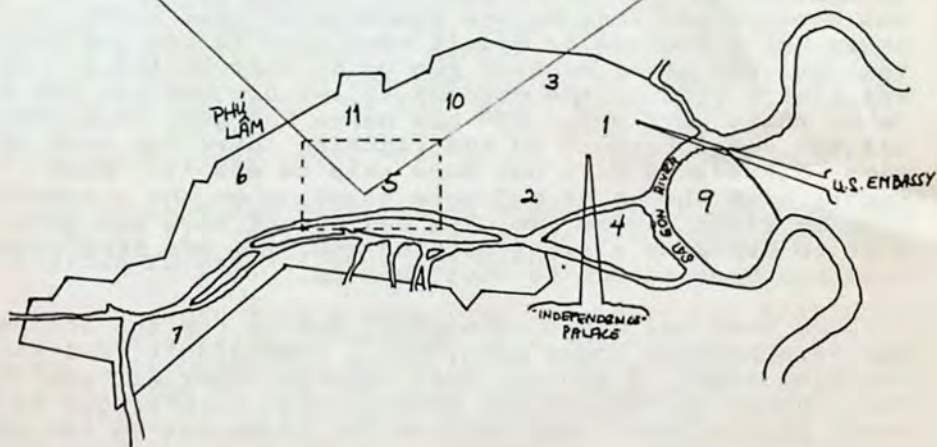
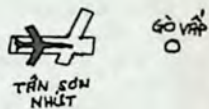
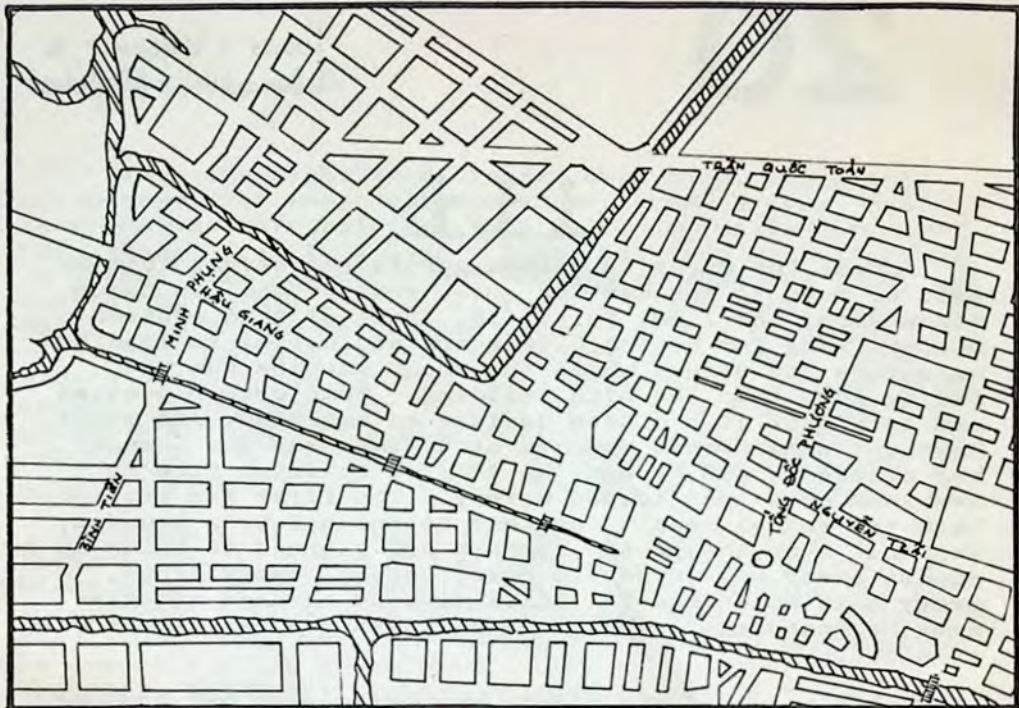
During Tết when these men had fought their way in, my friends and I had driven around on motorcycles to watch, from over toward Hàng-xanh around to the radio station, past Phú-nhuân and Go-vấp, back to the front of the US Embassy and "Independence" Palace... We went all around in Chợ Thiếc, Bàn-cờ, and around the Ấn-quang Pagoda, too... We had seen the fire and smoke, the bombs... some directional bombs falling from airplanes onto the roofs of houses, onto the tops of blocks of buildings, sometimes bullets whizzing just above our heads!

But this time I was right in the middle of the battlefield, involved in all the fighting. Really fierce. We were contesting every street, every corner, every house with them; fighting infantry, tanks, airplanes, and all their tear gas... Everybody said fighting inside the city was very different from fighting outside, and this wave was quite different from the one before. In this wave they'd come in units that weren't small, but often when they looked around they could only see a few of their brothers swallowed up in the maze of streets and alleys, and couldn't tell where they were themselves. Even to me these parts of town seemed completely foreign. The streets were deserted. Everyone had fled at the sound of approaching gunfire, afraid that the other guys would destroy everything as in the wave before. Around us there was nothing but smoke, fire, tear gas, and collapsing brick and plaster... there were many times I thought I'd be knocked out or buried in it!

There was nothing to be seen here but scenes of death and destruction, but for these men... life continued cheerfully. That was something I couldn't have imagined. They didn't act like they were fighting the enemy. Often on our end we were chipping holes in the walls to move down, while on the other end they were digging bricks out, too, to move up. The "chunk, chunk" echoed from the walls of all the houses to the enemy's ears like the sound of Death knocking at their door, but when they echoed back to where we were, our men were putting on a skit. They were acting out a scene of the enemy counter-attack against us the day before--some crouched down going up to the end of the street only to wait, then jump back, and the ones behind them turning tail to hide while the others trembled and quaked, trying to force a shout, "Forward! Forward!"... The way the men imitated them made everybody around clap their hands over their mouths to keep from bursting out laughing!

Those were things I could never have imagined. And I would never have dreamed of the scenes where the men who had come back from fighting the enemy--as soon as they'd put down their AK's, B-40's and B-41's... with muzzles still smoking--picked up plastic guns that some kids had left behind, to shoot at each other. They hid, crawling around the corners of houses, and it seemed like they had only now started the real fighting. Some of the others gathered around a wind-up car or tank and sent it running "r-r-r-r" around the floor. Then wherever it went, these men backed away from it hugging their anti-tank guns. These were guns whose names made the enemy's faces go pale, but still these guys hugged their guns and backed away as if they were completely terrified of the tiny cars...

I was attracted to these men, and what I liked best was when they gave me a gun. They had taken a lot of enemy guns, and that day Brother Càn, my unit commander, had picked out a brand new AR-15, with deep black steel, and handed it to me. But Nãm saw it and immediately told them to trade it for an AK. With three bandoliers of ammunition covering my chest, I looked quite impressive. From then on I, too, could hide, could shoot, could attack shouting, rush forward stabbing, slashing, killing the enemy along with the others. I was with them all the way!



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After the night we dashed across the street from my part of town to New Cho-lón here, some of the men had a discussion, and I got to sit in. Some of them praised Sister Trang for having been sharp and daring in leading us across the street while the enemy machine gun was firing down from the high building. Some others scowled and said that it had been useless adventurism, and might have got some people wounded at a time when the company had ordered a gun brought up to give covering fire so everyone could get across safely. The first men responded that the actual result was that no one had been wounded, and that even though the company had planned to bring up a gun to cover us, in battle every person, every group, every unit which had the initiative to advance quickly must be encouraged, and it hadn't been useless adventurism at all...

That day one of the people who had spoken out loudest to cut Trang down had been Càn, my unit leader, who carried a B-41. He called Trang "Madam Battalion". The night we crossed the street he had been standing beside me. He was the one who had told Trang, "You're out of your mind! If you're so smart, go on across!" But she had pushed him aside, taken my arm and pulled me across the street. So now when I heard him putting Trang down, I thought it wasn't out of pride or because he hated her, but because now that he was reminded of that night, he was angry again because he hadn't been able to use his B-41 to take out the enemy machine gun up in that building. He was always wanting the company to let him use his gun to "shut those guys up". But his hopes had gone unsatisfied all the same, because in the fighting there had been no time we needed a B-41 and were able to use it. That night, even though he had been standing on the sidewalk with me right beside Nãm, Nãm had turned back and said just to bring up a light machine gun, and the fire from that had been enough to shut them up.

So that was Càn's situation, and as for the others who were putting Trang down, well, they didn't feel that way deep down. I noticed that secretly they all admired her, though on the surface some of them didn't want to admit it, and were even looking for an excuse to cut her down!

Since the night we'd crossed over here, Trang had often come over where our company was, and I found out that she was the guide for this unit. I really respected her, though frankly I hadn't liked her very much at first. It seemed like all the other men around were the same, and that's why we had several discussions like that. Can called her "Madam Battalion" because he was naturally sarcastic, and not because he wanted to be cruel. The others often, just for fun, treated her like a "high-level cadre". Maybe that was because Trang always sounded very severe like somebody giving orders. She was always criticizing the men and reasoning with them, something I personally didn't like at all, especially in a woman.

Before this the enemy had had a lot to say about these folks--things that few people believed, especially since this Tết when everyone had a chance to find out for themselves, to see with their own eyes what these folks were like. But that didn't mean there was no apprehension in anyone's heart about them. Like my friends, for example. We always thought of them as people "with no emotions, who just live by reason". I had sometimes defended the idea that they were like that when I was talking with my friends. I said, too, that in order to live up to such high ideals they would have to "kill their emotions every day". They would turn into "iron and stone"... So I imagined that if I met them I would find them to be harsh and cold, but obviously that was not true. Ever since they had come into my house and up to my room, I had heard these guys joking together, and following them since then I had seen that they were perfectly friendly, cheerful people. Except for the time when they'd asked me in the beginning, it seemed like they had forgotten all about my long hair. They had promised to do me a favor and cut it off, but once when I'd reminded them, they said, "Let it be. What's the rush!"

And I could see myself that there wasn't any rush, in the midst of all these days when we were so busy fighting, and I often forgot all about it myself.

Still, every time I met Trang and heard her talking, arguing, criticizing, reasoning with the men... I felt uneasy. I thought that women, more than anyone, should be emotional. But if she was like this, what were the men really like? So it was only when they decided to push deeper into the city that I really began to understand about her and the men...

That day they decided that one way or another we ought to get out of this area, cross Tống đốc Phương Street, and push on further. This advance would really be hard, because if we could do that, even though we wouldn't yet hold Chợ-lớn it would seem like Chợ-lớn had fallen into our hands. The enemy would look for every possible way to keep us from doing it. The fighting would really be bitter, so what did the wounded fighters think? The ones who were lightly wounded insisted on going with the unit, but it would be impossible for the five who were seriously wounded to go. If we tried to take them with us it would not just be an obstacle to our fighting, but it might be dangerous for them, too. And as for taking them to the rear, we were having trouble getting in touch with the outside at the time. Under the circumstances all five of them asked that we just leave them there so our unit could use all its strength for the advance!

The meeting took place on the ground floor of a three story house that hadn't yet collapsed. Some of the wounded men were lying on the tile floor, and others were propping themselves up against the walls. The rest of us were standing and squatting in front of them... I had expected that the discussion would be lively and everyone would argue a lot at this meeting, but instead no one said much and they reached a decision quickly. That moved me deeply. We knew that if the seriously wounded men stayed here, the units behind us would make contact and get them out in spite of all the obstacles. And if not, then the city people, even though they'd evacuated and left the place deserted, would still return cautiously to look for them and take care of them, and then send them to the outside. In the Tết wave there had been many wounded men and women who had recovered and returned to their units that way.

All the same, fighting inside the city like this with the enemy still inside and out, there would be many things that would happen so suddenly that no one could get away, and looking at the men I couldn't shake my anxiety.

After the decision was made, everything was silent inside the house. The lightly wounded men propped themselves up on their guns, or leand against the furniture or the columns of the house, and made their way toward the uninjured, but they didn't pass up any chance to lean on their comrades. And the seriously wounded men,

in fresh white bandages, lay quietly on the floor or slumped against the walls... The scene outside was a town in ruins, the sounds of guns and bombs, of airplanes and tanks, columns of smoke, flames... After the meeting, that afternoon, that night, the next morning, all the lightly wounded men would be going past all of those things with the unit, driving deeper. And the other men would be staying in the midst of these scenes, and whatever else might await them!

For some reason I happened to think of my family. I remembered Dad, Mom, Hai and the little kids who'd evacuated to Ward III. As I had followed these men and listened to their conversations, I had found out that their struggle was directed toward more distant goals, but just now it was to liberate Sài-gòn, to liberate the people of Sài-gòn, including my family who were now in the middle of the city. They wanted my family to escape the shameful conditions of the past--my mother to be able to love her children confidently, my father to have a chance to be the head of the house, and not worry about his children or be ashamed of them. My big sister, Hai, to have the chance to live a wholesome youth, and the young children to get to grow up uninhibited and unblemished, not spoiled like me...

So what about these men in front of me, the ones about to move out into fierce battles, and the wounded who would stay behind in these scenes of destruction--were they doing this because of theory or because of feeling? What was something I hadn't had a chance to think about. I just felt more restless and excited than I ever had before.

Then, suddenly, I heard a voice. "Please let me stay here."

Everyone turned to look in Trang's direction. Until now she had sat alone off in a corner as if she had no place attending the meeting. And actually that was true, since she wasn't a member of this unit, but had been sent to from the city to lead the unit in.

She spoke up timidly, not at all like most days. Hearing everyone look at her, she hurried to explain. "I'll stay here to take care of these men. Besides, I'm familiar with the streets, and I'll find some way to get in touch with the outside and take them out, or

them in among the people if that's more convenient..."

Then I understood that she had only become timid because she was afraid what she said wouldn't be accepted, and the commander wouldn't agree to let her stay behind with the men. The battalion political officer was at this meeting. When she finished speaking, she didn't want to raise her head and look him in the eye, but stared down and rubbed the tips of her toes... But the political officer looked at her hair and nodded. "OK, Trang, you stay here..."

After that the meeting broke up. Trang went back to the battalion command post with the political officer before returning to stay with the badly wounded men. I couldn't get over the feeling when all the men looked after her with such a tremendous sense of regret and shame!

iv

When I learned about Trang, the most remarkable thing to me was that she had once been in an entertainment troupe. I asked her about it and she scolded me. "What's so strange about that? They needed me, so I went. Why not?"

But actually she hadn't just worked as an entertainer. Before that she had been a liaison agent for a hamlet, then a village, then a district, and then had been chosen to serve in the city. She had always liked the theater, so after that she had been chosen to go study in a class for entertainment troupes. When she returned she had given shows in the liberated zones, and also up near enemy outposts and in the outskirts of the towns. Sometimes she performed, and sometimes she took up her gun to go on operations, shoot down airplanes, or chase Rangers. The sound of her singing had mixed in with the sound of guns, and her dances had sometimes sparked the flames that burned down outposts, forts and strategic hamlets in many places...

And then when someone was needed to go to Sài-gòn, she asked to go and was accepted. Then her way had led to a hamlet on a branch of the Mekong River and on into Sài-gòn! I had always been fascinated by amazing lives,

and what could be more amazing than this period of less than twenty years in Trang's life. Surely she wasn't unemotional, and if her outward attitude made me misunderstand, maybe there were many things I hadn't been around her long enough to understand. There was something about me, too. Before this I had always thought that even though I was not so very old I was already sophisticated, and I was very tired of life. I had already learned a lot about life... So now when I'd heard just this part of the story of Trang's life, I suddenly realized that I hadn't learned anything at all yet. I still didn't understand anything about these men and women, about the lives they had lived!

When Trang had been chosen to go to Sài-gòn she had just turned seventeen. She knew something about Sài-gòn from before, and this time she had been assigned to an area and just told to go and find some way to feed herself, to make a living... She had gone there, found a place to live, a place to work, and every time she came back out to report it made all the men on the outside cry. One of them asked if she shouldn't stay there to work on the outside, because he was afraid she couldn't bear to return to such misery...

Wasn't it this time in Sài-gòn that had made Trang so mature and severe? Because during this time she didn't just have to worry about hiding from the security police and informers who were following her trying to capture her, but every day she had to endure so much shame at the hands of the people she worked for. I asked myself why in those years my family had never happened to hire her, and Dad, Mom, Hai, the little kids, all of us... why hadn't it been us who mistreated her the way others had?

I felt ashamed to hear the men recalling the suffering she'd had to endure, as if it had been me and my family, and no one else, who had brought it on her, on someone who wanted nothing but to liberate us!

But she hadn't thought about those things, and no matter how great the suffering and shame, she had asked to return to the city, to experience the hardships, to endure, to build the foundations for the revolution, to wipe out the thugs, to lead the struggle... She had done all of that!

Living inside Sài-gòn I couldn't help but know about

these activities. I had joined some of them, too, like the teach-ins, taking to the streets, all-nighters⁶... But I had joined in my own way, sometimes for fun, sometimes because it gave me a chance to cut up and make mischief, or because of the contagious atmosphere. I had never thought seriously about these activities, and I hadn't paid any attention to the people like Trang who were active in them, either.

But she had been there. And she had worked completely differently from me, to bring about things like the Tét "incident" that had just passed, or this second wave that had brought all these men into Sài-gòn. I remembered the leaflets, the banners, the flags, the demonstrations, and the jubilant, tumultuous scenes in my own part of town this time when these men had come in... I wasn't curious enough to ask where Trang had been in the city, but why couldn't all of these things that happened in my part of town have been her doing? Why couldn't she have been the very one to prepare all of these actions before she went out to guide the men in? Why couldn't she have been the one who told them to come to my house, even though there I was inside with my long hair and weird clothes?

Why couldn't it have been her?

I was more and more amazed at her, and tried to remember how many other people there were in the city I'd never paid any attention to before. People in my part of town, right on my own alley. Really, I didn't know anything about life at all!

Trang met us once more before we pushed deeper into the city.

After people had returned from that meeting we had before, during the afternoon and evening all the units decided to advance. That very night many sections moved out along Tổng đốc Phương Street, right in the heart of Chợ-lớn.

⁶All-nighters: During the urban political struggles of the mid-sixties, one custom that took hold was that instead of breaking up and going back home after demonstrations, students would meet together all night to discuss the problems confronting their country, and to plan future actions.

Our unit was the only one to run into any obstacles. The whole morning afterward we were blocked and kept back. One section of our company, including Năm, with my group following him, had two helicopters circling around right over our heads. That kept up, and then two heavy machine guns suddenly appeared up in a tall building, halting us in a small section of town.

Three of our men were wounded. Trang, who was not far away, ran to us. The two men who were just lightly wounded, as soon as they were bandaged up, asked to try to go along with us, but she had to carry the third man back with the other group. When she was finished, she came back with us. In the shattered city, obscured by heavy shelling and flames, those of us in each part of town tried to find out news about each other and hoped that we might meet. But as Trang ran back and forth to where we were, she wasn't hoping to see us still close to her. She was no less anxious than we were to see us get out of here and follow the units that had gone on ahead.

But the two heavy machine guns in that tall building about a hundred meters up the street continued to point our way and take turns firing down on the empty section of road in front of us. This stretch of road, its surface plowed up, lighted by fires and clouded by smoke, seemed about to burst into flame. Amid the smoke and flames, the three men who had just been wounded continued to bleed. And the enemy helicopters were closing in tighter with every circle, launching an unending stream of rockets and flying close to the roof of the house where we were hiding, sometimes fanning our hair up as we stood inside the house.

Năm, Càn, Trang and I were in the house. Several other men were peering out from under the eaves waiting to cross this empty stretch of road in front of us so they could take cover in the block of big buildings on the other side and follow the units which had gone on ahead...

Năm first looked out on the empty stretch of road, then followed the two helicopters overhead, and looked up at the two flames flaring one after the other from the window frame up in the tall building across the way. He knew that all of us inside the house and out under the eaves were waiting for him. And he could hear as clearly as we could the sound of the guns of the units ahead of us

gradually slipping away and getting lost over on the other side!

Suddenly he whirled around and looked at Càn--looked at the loaded B-41 in his hands. Until now, Càn had been hugging his gun to his side, fidgeting and looking up at Nãm. Nãm turned back. Càn quickly asked, "Can I shoot it?"

Nãm didn't answer, but turned to look out the window towards the right. There, beside the house where we were standing, was a house with a low attic. Càn looked in the same direction, and asked Nãm again, "Can I go over there?" He went on, "There's no place else."

It seemed like he'd said this to himself, but the words encouraged Nãm. He looked back and nodded. Càn turned at once and shot like an arrow across to the roof of the next house. He had gone out from the city to follow the revolution, and his old mother and younger brothers and sisters were living in Lăng Cha Cà. Before, his mother had had a thatched house, but it had been burned along with five hundred others when the enemy launched a sneak clear-and-destroy attack through the whole area, taking the land to put up tall buildings around Tân-son-nhut airfield. He was always saying that however many battles he might fight, he would still keep a few B-41 rounds back to shoot into those buildings. Everybody remembered the time in the Tết wave when he had fried more than thirty of the enemy with one shot.

When he flashed out hugging his gun, Nãm turned back and crossed to the middle of the room, then suddenly sighed! Today it was clear, not like the first day when I'd met him in my house, when I was so afraid. Before, we had thought of commanders as real "terrors" who knew only a "rule of iron", ordering troops and subordinates around in battle, and if anyone hesitated they would pull their gun and shoot them on the spot!

But Nãm wasn't like that. None of them were like that. I'll always remember Nãm for the time at the first when he was sitting talking with me, and called me to go around with him in my neighborhood, along with so many other things that had happened these past few days, like when he told the men to take back the AR-15 and give me an AK. He knew how much I liked that gun!

When Năm turned in away from the window, beside me Trang put out her hand and grasped my shoulder. I heard her hand clap down hard on my shoulder, and like her I turned to look after Cản. He was already lost in the attic of the house, and I couldn't see him any more. The only thing I could see was the old plaster wall and the dark gray roof over the attic. I knew he was climbing up to the attic and aiming his gun towards the tall building. Here, the enemy's two heavy machine guns were still taking turns firing crisply toward us, the sound searing our minds. A minute passed. Suddenly, "ka-wham!" I saw stars and my ears were ringing, but I also noticed the smoke billowing up from the tall building. The sound of their heavy machine guns stopped short. And then the voices of our comrades echoed up from outside. "Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Their shadows streaked across the empty road, and were lost among the buildings on the other side.

While that was going on, Trang had taken her hand off my shoulder and run back with Năm, over to the attic of the other house. I turned to look in that direction. The attic had collapsed. Brother Cản?... Quickly I ran after Năm and Trang.

In the attic the furniture, bricks and plaster, wood and tiles were all jumbled up together. I squinted, and looking carefully I could see Năm bent over amid the rubble. Trang was pulling away everything around him. She asked, "How is he?"

Năm didn't answer. He bent over, lifted Cản up and carried him out of the wreckage. Trang stood aside to let him pass. So did I, and then with her I followed Năm back inside the house where we had been.

Năm set Cản down on the divan right beside the entrance. Cản's face was covered with blood and dusted with plaster, and so was the rest of his body. Trang jumped toward him, knelt down and put her ear to his chest. After a minute her face brightened. "Nothing to worry about! He's just knocked out!"

She was talking with Năm. I felt giddy. I had been with the men for more than a week, in Cản's unit, and had learned how to fire the B-40 and B-41. Just now Năm had hesitated before giving the order to fire, and I had

realized that it was because this neighborhood was so crowded there was no opening where the B-41 could be fired toward the tall building the enemy were in. But when Năm had agreed to give the order, and Càn had streaked out with the gun, I had completely forgotten about the dangers there might be--that in such a narrow attic, when Càn fired the recoil from firing the round would be strong enough to make the attic collapse!

I hadn't thought about that, but Càn understood it very well. And yet his only hope was that Năm would give the order so he could take his gun up into the attic. Năm had understood, but still had to give the order, and then had turned back from the window and sighed. Trang had understood, too, and had clapped her hand down so hard on my shoulder.

Once again facing these men and women I didn't know if they were rational or emotional, I only knew that I was excited and restless. But I didn't have much time to be restless or excited, because as soon as he was laid down on the divan, Càn came to and insisted on following the other men across the street right away. He had been buried when the attic collapsed, bleeding from his mouth and nose, and even though Trang had washed him off, still there were swollen places, bruises and scrapes on his face and all over his body. Even though there was nothing serious that could be seen from the outside, how could we be sure he had the strength to stay conscious and go with the others? So Năm cut him off. "Let me see if there's anything wrong with you."

Trang was painting mercurochrome on all his wounds that were still oozing blood. She stopped what she was doing, too, looked up at him and said, "You can't go anywhere. Let me take you back with the others."

But Càn snapped up like a spring. He brushed Trang's hand away and stood up. "No! I can go." He put his arm around my neck. "Help me, friend!"

He pulled me along toward the door. There was nothing Năm could do but follow us.

Trang, bottle of medicine in one hand, wet red swab in the other, stepped out and stood looking after us. I went with them to the end of Tổng đốc Phương Street,

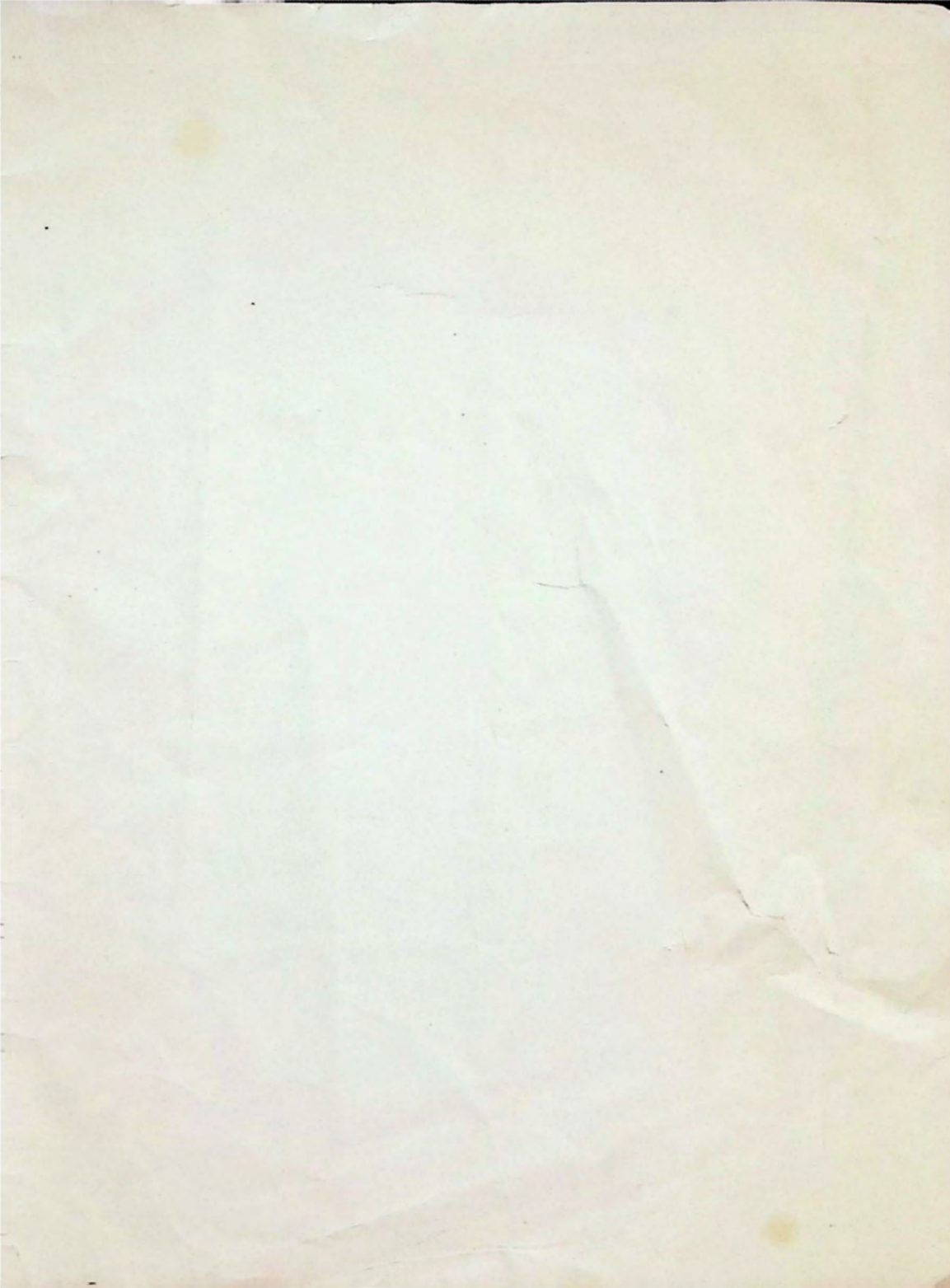
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turned toward Nguyễn Trãi Street, and plunged deep into the city... and I couldn't forget her look. I thought I would never be able to leave these men and women!

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