

A M E M O I R O F H O P E



KIM PHUC PHAN THI

FIRE ROAD

*The Napalm Girl's Journey through the Horrors
of War to Faith, Forgiveness & Peace*



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Fire Road: The Napalm Girl's Journey through the Horrors of War to Faith, Forgiveness, and Peace

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INTRODUCTION

War, and Peace

A NOTE TO READERS

I have been dreaming about this book for nearly a decade, perhaps even longer than that, if I include the literary longings I felt but reflexively pushed aside when my sons were still young children who demanded constant care. “When they are older, I shall pursue that dream,” I reasoned, an appropriate response to that season of life. My sons are older now.

Ms. Denise Chong wrote a book about my story titled *The Girl in the Picture*, a marvelous and detailed account of Vietnam’s civil war that affected me, most notably the famous picture that was taken of me as I fled a certain napalm attack. What a thorough job Ms. Chong did as it relates to history and to geography, to dropping of bombs and to victims of war. But there was a story beneath the story told there, a divine underpinning that for many decades even I could not detect, a set of spiritual stepping-stones that, unbeknownst to me, were paving a path to get me to God.

That is the story I wish to tell in these pages. I wish to tell of God’s faithfulness, when I was enveloped by mind-numbing fear. I wish to tell of his kind provision for me, when I was shelterless and hungry and cold. I wish to tell of his pursuit of me, when I was sure I would live the sum

of my days marginalized and unloved. But mostly, I wish to tell of his peace, the “peace of God, which passeth all understanding,”¹ the peace that shall keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. For what I desired more than healing for my wounds and hope for my heart was peace for my troubled soul. *Peace!* Yes, I must write about that peace.

I should say here that because I longed so deeply for peace and then—miracle of miracles—actually *encountered* peace, my approach to all of life centers on being *at peace*. I want to receive God’s gift of peace each day; I want to allow that peace to infiltrate my thoughts, my reactions, my work; I want to carry that peace with me wherever I go; and I want to share that peace with whomever I should meet.

What this means for you, my dear reader, is that if you came to this book in hopes of picking up weighty opinions on war, I fear I will disappoint you. I suppose there was a time when I did possess such opinions—and when we come to those bygone eras, I shall return briefly to that frame of mind—but across the nearly four decades that have elapsed since then, I have found peace a more captivating topic. My belief is that a careful study of peace will have a far greater unifying effect than even the most exhaustive excavation of the horrors of war. Living a life at peace, and being a people of peace, is how problems get solved.

My highest aim in writing down the words of this story? It is that you will fully know and fully live with the peace that I have found. If we shall meet at some point in the future, face-to-face, do you know how elated I would be to hear that my story pointed you to *peace*? There could be no greater compliment, I assure you!

A final duo of admissions before you begin. First, while I wish my memory were sharper for occasions now four decades old, perhaps it is God's grace in my life that at times, while working to recreate scenes and events for you, I pondered and strained and came up short. When possible, I consulted relevant parties, in an effort to present the most accurate picture of how things went, but I acknowledge openly that because my story has been told thousands of times by as many storytellers, some of the information I present in these chapters will surely fail to square with the other accounts that exist. I stand behind what I have written here.

Second, I have been told by my friends who are fluent in English that I speak in a very distinct manner, one that is not commonplace in the world today. "Oh, yes!" I say with a giggle, "I have heard this many times before!" As you might guess, I grew up speaking Vietnamese, which is still the tongue that comes easiest for me. Later on, my story took me to Cuba, which explains how I am also fairly well versed in Spanish, and then to Canada, though I still am woefully ignorant of French. While living in Toronto, one of the most diverse cities in all the world, I began to study English, and while I truly applied myself—"Come, now, Kim," I would exhort myself, "you must get this right!"—it is not a simple language to grasp. So many rules! So many exceptions! So many confusing conjugations to recall!

My writing partner, my editor, my publisher, and my agent all have assured me that my book indeed makes sense, but just in case a few stumbles and bumbles slip through our collective cracks, I ask you to forgive the mistakes as mine.

PROLOGUE

In Pursuit of Smooth Skin

FEBRUARY 2016

I do not think I will ever get used to this.

I should be welcoming this dramatic shift in weather. Florida is known for its warm winds, its temperate climate, its sunny and easygoing days. And yet as my husband, Toan, and I go through this process of leaving our residence in Canada again, zooming through the sky to Miami International Airport, where we are hit with an oven-like blast, the scars that have defined me these forty-four years scream out, enraged by humidity, by heat. Yes, my skin was tighter hours ago in Toronto's winterlike scene, but at least things were holding steady. I knew precisely what to expect. And so it is not merely Miami's warmth that harms me; it is that it is different from what I have left behind.

I spot the various reporters from news outlets waiting to cover my trip and muster courage to approach those microphones to greet them—all smiles, all peace. Following a brief press conference in the terminal, I am ushered toward a waiting vehicle that will transport me to the hotel where we always stay.

“How are you feeling today, Kim?” the reporters had asked. And, “Are these laser treatments really healing your scars?” During the twenty-minute commute to my destination, I reflect on the depth of those probes. How *am* I feeling? I wonder. Is this process helping at all? Truthfully, I am not sure. *I shall not assess until all seven treatments are complete*, I tell myself, aware that if I render an evaluation too early, I will need to concede that I am not where I had hoped I would be. “We keep going!” I had said with a confident fist pump to the pool of reporters back at the airport. “We keep trusting that my skin will be smooth!”

The following morning, Toan and I are transported to the clinic of Doctor Jill Waibel, the dermatologist conducting my treatments. I am welcomed by still more reporters, each of whom is eager to update their beat: How, exactly, would I characterize the progress that has been made so far? What will today’s treatments hope to improve? How long will I be “out” for the procedure? How much pain do I experience while Doctor Jill does her work?

To that last question, I force a grin and answer earnestly: “Even the best pain medicines can only cloak 30 percent of the pain. I feel the other 70 percent. It is as if I am placed on a barbecue grate and grilled to within inches of my life.”

The hard truth of these laser treatments is that in order to help heal my burn scars, Doctor Jill has to burn my skin all over again. During each lengthy procedure, thousands of microscopic holes are drilled into my scars, in hopes of promoting in those wounded areas blood flow that I have not known since I was a child.

“It is necessary, Kim,” Doctor Jill explained to me during

our first meeting nearly a year ago. “Pain with a purpose, you might say.”

Here in Miami for the fifth time in eight months, I try to ignore the lighthearted banter emerging from the clinic’s lobby as the reporters swap tales over crudités and sandwiches while they wait for me. I focus my attention on the task at hand: *Today will move you closer to wholeness and health, Kim. Pain with a purpose. There is great purpose in this pain.* I change into a hospital gown, I lie down on the cold, grey examination bed, I exhale the trepidation that seems always to come to me in these seconds before treatment begins, and I choose to take Doctor Jill at her word.

Part I

A BODY ABLAZE



CHAPTER 1

TRANG BANG, VIETNAM

WAR? WHAT WAR?

SPRINGTIME 1972

I am a girl of eight, skipping home at the end of a typical school day, having completed the kilometer-long trek with a few other village kids and, on occasion, my brother—Number 5. In large families such as ours, numbers are easier to remember than names. I am Number 6. We make our way along the dirt path that has been carved through the overgrown fields, our progress only interrupted by a heavy-burdened cow being driven by a farmer eager to get his bundles of fresh vegetables or grain to town, or by a rich man seated high atop a motorbike, eager to remind the rest of us of his wealth.

As I emerge from the dense canopy of trees and set foot onto the giant cement patio that my father poured with his own two hands, I marvel at how much of the ground

is covered. Such a thing is a rarity in my village and a not-so-subtle declaration that we, too, have found wealth. I am thinking nothing of weapons systems and strategic advances, of tactical zones and attempts to seize, of the Easter Offensive and waning United States support, anything even remotely related to war, save for my persisting curiosity over those distinctive tire-tread sandal prints my grandma points out some mornings. Viet Cong fighters have made yet another middle-of-the-night raid through my family's property, most likely in search of rations—bandages and medicines, I am told, or else rice or soap.

It was always at night that they came, creeping about the jungle in their black pajamas, silently avoiding South Vietnam's gaze. They would emerge from the elaborate tangle of underground tunnels they had dug in order to obtain supplies or to deliver verdicts to local villagers who had refused to comply with their demands. "We have a message for you to deliver," they would say to my eldest sibling, Loan (Number 2), on many an occasion. (There never is a "Number 1" in South Vietnamese families. We are a quirky bunch, I agree.) Loan—Hai, we called her—had been trained as a schoolteacher and was one of the few literates among most of the adults in our area, thus making her a prime puppet for the conveyance of dissident decrees. Her allegiance, of course, was to the South, but she knew better than to stand her ground. She valued life, as we all did. With resolve summoned, she would clear her throat and read the decree.

"You are hereby informed that, as penalty for failure to assist Viet Cong's efforts in this, our civil war, you shall suffer imminent death," she would be forced to say to one neighbor

or another. I cannot imagine having to choke those words out, but my sister did.

Because of the pavement surrounding our home, my brothers and sisters and I would head over to Grandpa's house, a five-minute walk away, to take in the fresh prints. She and Grandpa still had a dirt perimeter around their house, and oh, the imprints we could see. "Look! Look there!" my *ba ngoai* would implore us, pointing at the muddy, rutted ground.

My siblings and I—there were eight of us total, nine if you count dear Tai who died as a little baby—would *ooh* and *ahh* in wonder, the mythology ever expanding in our minds surrounding these warriors from our beloved South Vietnam homeland who had had the audacity to join forces with armies from the North. I imagined massive armies of soldiers having traipsed through in the dead of night, even though, in reality, it may have been a small band of eight or ten.

Of course, we kids were merely playing off of the adults' explanations and reactions to all goings-on related to war, for only my very oldest siblings Loan and Ngoc had any context for such things. Our enthusiasm for the discussion waned as quickly as it was stirred. After all, who had time for talk of battlefields and air strikes when there were games to play, books to read, and a tangle of guava trees to climb? How I miss those beloved trees.



During my growing-up years, to step onto my family's property was to enter a charming countryside paradise, a refuge brimming with sufficiency and splendor. Whenever my

closest friend, Hanh, walked home from school with me, I would drop my book bag at the gated entrance, scale like an energetic monkey one of the forty-two guava trees that outlined our home's perimeter, select two of the plumpest, ripest guavas from the citrine clusters dotting the limbs, and sink my teeth into the first while tossing the second down to Hanh. We both would giggle in satisfied delight as guava juice trickled down our chins. Literally, my name, Kim Phuc (pronounced "fook"), means "golden happiness," and that is exactly how life was—bright, cheerful, holding unparalleled value. I loved my days and my years. (The "Phan Thi" portion reflects my family's surname, and in my homeland, that "last" name actually comes "first." For years, I did indeed go by "Phan Thi Kim Phuc," eventually shifting to the current construction to simplify things for Western audiences.)

My parents—Nu and Tung are their names—raised more than one hundred pigs at a time, selling piglets off as they matured, and on any given afternoon, chickens, ducks, swans, dogs, and cats roamed the two-plus-acre grounds with those pigs, as though the lot of them owned the place. In addition to the guava trees, we grew bananas, and I distinctly remember multiple occasions when my siblings and I would gorge on an entire bunch as soon as they were ripe, for the simple reason that they were there and we were hungry. There were coconut trees and durian fruit trees, and the grapefruits we grew were as big as my head and sweeter than any I have tasted since. Nearly every night my mother brought us surplus vegetables, chicken, and rice from her noodle shop in town, served with a side of fresh fruit. We ate well every day, like the royalty I believed we were.

In actuality, “royalty” would not be a fitting description of the life my family and I lived, but relative to our surroundings, we were well off, indeed. I attribute our former status to the back-breaking labor of my ma. Even before my parents were married, my father could not help but notice Ma’s delicious noodle soup. In 1951, soon after their wedding, an idea was hatched.

“Your soup is so good that I believe people will pay you to eat it,” my father told my ma, who was all too eager to put his theory to the test. She quickly gathered her small mud oven and the necessary ingredients—pork and anchovies, spices and herbs, vegetables, noodles she made by hand—and squatted rent-free in front of a kind local storeowner’s shop, her vat of soup ready to dish out.

By the time my parents had saved up enough money to move out of my grandparents’ home and purchase a place for themselves, Ma was able to stop squatting in the market and rent a soup stall, complete with tables and stools. She had an official sign that hung above the modest structure: *Chao Long Thanh Tung*, it read, which referenced both her specialty—*chao long*, the pork-and-rice porridge Ma used as her soup’s base—and her husband, Tung. Business began to boom.

Within seven years, Ma was able to purchase not only her stall, but the two stalls that flanked hers. She increased seating capacity to eighty people, she replaced bamboo furniture with carved wood, and she capitalized on the era’s influx of American soldiers, all hungry, as it seemed, for good soup. To keep up with demand, my ma would rise long before dawn, often after only two or three hours’ sleep. She would silently slip out the back door, careful not to wake her snoring

children, and she would make her way by fire lamp to the market to purchase ingredients for the day's soup.

She would return home late in the afternoon or in the early-evening hours, tend to the chores of our farm, manage the business side of her shop, see to it that the family's laundry was done, and then put us children to bed. Indeed, Ma was busy every moment of every day, but even in the spare seconds of deep night, when she would allow me to cuddle into her side as she at last lay down for sleep, my emotional well would be filled to overflowing. She was safety and security for her adoring little girl.

My father was also a wonderful cook who prepared food on handmade barbecue grills he formed out of mud. He'd fuel them with charcoal and kindling, and then lay white fish that he had caught on top, searing them to absolute perfection. While the fish was sizzling, he would toss whatever vegetables were available into a stir-fry pan, making even our most meager meals possess a special flair. While my dad was a tender man and a gentle disciplinarian, my relationship with him lacked intimacy, owing to his prioritizing Ma's increasingly profitable noodle shop and the juggling of both Viet Cong and South Vietnamese soldiers' demands over frivolities such as playing with one's children. As a wealthy member of our village, warriors looked to him to supply even more of their needs, which was a daily burden for my dad. His goal for his family was survival, one which, miraculously, he achieved.

My great-uncle lived with our family and took care of us kids when Ma and Dad were gone. On sunny days, I would head for the book nook I had created in the trees, where I would devour pages from *Te Thien Dai Thanh*—in English,

The Monkey King. At mealtimes Great-Uncle would holler my nickname—*My*, meaning “beautiful,” which had been bestowed on me by my grandmother—in order to pull me away from my book and to the lunch table, where rice and grilled fish awaited. But rather than making my whereabouts known to him, I would just grin there in my secret reading spot, sinking deeper into the pages I held. When Ma came home from work, she would scold me for having refused food all afternoon long, even as, unbeknownst to her, I had made meals of fresh, delicious fruit most days in my treetop perch.

When I did leave my book nook, it was generally for mischief. Between the two houses that sat on the property—a large entertaining house, as well as my family’s smaller-structured residence—was a cement courtyard connecting them. It was a lovely, relaxing place, and often my great-uncle would doze off there in the hammock for an hour or two following lunch.

A favorite pastime of mine was waiting until he was deep in sleep, evidenced by his rhythmic snoring, and then sneaking up next to him with a pouch of salt and a spoon in hand. I would load up that spoon to overflowing, pour the entire sum into his open mouth, and then run off as fast as my legs could carry me, screaming delightedly with every step. “My! My!” he would holler behind me, his restful nap having been disrupted once again. “*Myyyyyy!*”

On especially sweltering days, Great-Uncle slept in the hammock without a shirt on. Number 5 and I would hunt down a tube, pour very cold water into it, and then slowly drip it into the sleeping man’s belly button. More shrieking. More chasing. More fun.

Eventually the heat would be tempered by violent rainstorms that were prone to erupting without notice, and each time those welcome drops fell, my siblings and friends and I would rush to the cement courtyard in our bare feet, wait for the slab to be completely wet, and then hydroplane around and around and around, laughing hysterically with each lap. My childhood was everything a childhood should be: care-free, cherished, whimsical, provisioned, enjoyable, abundant, *alive*. I could not possibly have known that all of that would change, and in the blink of an eye.



As spring gave way to summer in 1972, the war in Vietnam regained some of the momentum it had lost following the Tet Offensive, a major military turning point four years prior. Back then, in the spring of 1968, communist forces had attacked the American embassy in our capital city of Saigon, which enraged both US and South Vietnamese leaders alike. I was only five years old at the time and did not know that these events had unfolded or what they meant for my family and me. The significance of Tet would reveal itself years later, when retribution was leveled in my hometown. For now, in my protective bubble, the war was “over there,” far, far away from here, and thus far away from me.

If I had been paying closer attention, I would have recognized that my family was beginning to receive more and more guests across those late-winter and early-spring months. I called our visitors “forest people,” for they always arrived from the heavily treed area to the northeast of our village, the mountain region that was proving to be a perfect

hideout for Viet Cong rebels. I had never seen the forest people's villages myself, but as I got older I would come to understand that as the war stretched farther toward the Cambodian border, additional families were being forced on the run as refugees, their homes having been destroyed by bombs.

As a young child, I did not know the reason these people were surfacing; I knew only that my ma and dad would take them in, give them small plots of land on our property to call their own, serve them home-cooked meals of pork and cassava, of sweet potatoes and organic fruit. Our guests were provided a sturdy stepping-stone for a time—weeks, or sometimes months—on their journey toward wherever they were headed next.

The cause of the forest people's heartache was a military initiative called the Easter Offensive, which occurred in March 1972 and saw communism advance to within one hundred kilometers of Saigon. They were *serious* about unifying Vietnam under their political system, and regardless of how many troops it cost them to reach their goal, they were prepared to pay that price. "You will kill ten of our men, and we will kill one of yours, and in the end it will be you who tire of it," revolutionary communist leader Ho Chi Minh had said to his opponents nearly three decades prior—a battle cry that rebel fighters still embraced.

I did not understand these things at the time, but my parents certainly did. Did they know that there would be fire and terror, agony and death to suffer? They did not. But they knew that trouble was brewing. And they feared that it was coming for us.



The morning of June 6, 1972, I woke while it was still dark outside to my ma's voice urgently whispering my name. "My! My!" she said. "Come, we must leave."

That's strange. Ma is always gone by now to tend her noodle shop. "Why have you not gone already?" I asked her through the fog of unfinished sleep, to which she said, "Shh, My! Quiet. You must ask nothing, child."

I would later learn that the Viet Cong had been at my house all night. Their troops, malnourished and disheveled though they were, had arrived just after midnight, intent on occupying my family's home for the purpose of digging further tunnels that would position them closer to the main road. At the sight of them en masse, no longer a stray band of rebels here or there, my ma knew that our village was now unsafe. But where to take her family? Immediately, she thought of our temple, just on the outskirts of the village. It was close enough to allow her access to our home, in the event that she could return to care for our animals or gather up additional possessions, but far enough away to hopefully ensure safety until the war passed.

Standing with feet firmly planted and gaze fixed on the rebel commander who was barking out his demands, my ma said quietly, "I will allow you to enter, but may I first take my family from here?"

"No!" the commander spat at her. "If you leave now, the South will know where we are."

There were always eyes on everyone, belonging both to Viet Cong and South Vietnamese. These troops needed us

to be still so that they could complete their work undetected by the enemy they intended to rout.

“Three, four hours,” he shouted at my ma. “We build our tunnel, and *then* you go.”

The truth was that my great-uncle was suffering a terrible stomach ailment, and my ma feared he would not survive the night. This added stress and upheaval would do nothing to help him out. Had she known she had access to a listening God that night, I know she would have called out in prayer. As it was, she did the only thing she could do: She settled in for a four-hour wait.

It was after she had been given the signal to go that my ma woke me, and together we collected my brothers and sisters and as many of our belongings as our arms could carry. We then took our caravan outside, which is when I noticed that our home no longer had any doors—the Viet Cong had removed them hours before. Peeking around a corner, I saw a man in those unmistakable Viet Cong black pajamas, and behind him, more pajama-clad men standing beside a haphazard mound of guns.

“Oh, Ma!” I cried, frightened of all that would surely unfold, but she only shushed me more passionately and tightened her grip on my hand as we rushed into the night.

Within moments, my family had relocated to the comfort and familiarity of our local temple, where we had attended ceremonies my entire life. It was a logical choice for a hideout, given the significance it held for our village. Not only did its imposing architecture make it the largest structure for miles, but it was also sacred. Set apart. Surely the safest place on earth.

As my siblings and I barreled through the temple doors on that Tuesday morning, the terror of the day's early hours was tempered some by the surroundings I had come to love. There above me was the brightly painted arched ceiling. Before me were the ornate pillars, festooned in giant molded dragons of fuchsia, orange, turquoise, and gold. Below my feet were the hand-laid marble tiles, arranged in a dizzying pattern of white and wheat that stretched from one end of the room clear to the other. Sometimes during worship ceremonies, I would attempt to count those tiles, always failing to get them all in. How grateful I was in this moment for their sturdiness in holding us up when the entire world seemed to be falling away.

Trang Bang's temple of CaoDai—we pronounce it “cow-die,” with emphasis on the second syllable, though its meaning relates neither to cattle nor to their death—represented more than mere religious symbolism for my family. My grandparents—my ma's mother and father—had originally donated the large plot of land to CaoDai elders from other villages who wanted to expand to Trang Bang, and it was on that land that the temple was built. Both my grandma and my grandpa were very important leaders within the religion and as such drew enormous respect from our entire community. Following in their footsteps, my parents, who had grown up knowing no religion except CaoDai, also devoted themselves to temple service. Yes, they were extraordinarily busy people, but on high holy days, which occurred twice monthly and then on three or four additional days each year, they pushed aside every other obligation in order to spend hours upon hours in worship.

CaoDai's official position regarding its beliefs states that as a universal faith, it recognizes all religions as having "one same divine origin, which is God, or Allah, or the Tao, or the Nothingness," (or Macrocosm, or Yahweh, or Ahura Mazda, or Monad, or the mountain gods, or the gods of nature, or our own long-since-deceased ancestors . . . or all of the above), and sees all religions as different manifestations of "one same Truth."³

You might say that we were equal-opportunity worshippers, giving any and every God/god a shot. In terms of practical application for us Caodaists, this wide tolerance equated to three goals: first, to prize love and justice above all other things; second, to honor all religious leaders as equals; and third, to apply ourselves to the practice of what they called "self-purification," which from what I could tell meant we needed to do good; not do evil; and avoid eating meat during specified periods of time, lest you render yourself defiant and risk returning someday in a reincarnated state to whatever animal you had harmed and consumed. "You are god, and god is you"—this is a mantra that was ingrained in us, which was quite empowering to a young person, I must admit. But as I cultivated eyes to see the truth of that matter, which centered on evildoers being summarily dismissed from our fellowship, never to return again, I grew leery of declaring myself my own god. What if I failed in my pursuit of self-purifying, do-good perfection? What would life look like for me then? I would find out, soon enough.

On those "special" days when my parents forsook all other plans in order to spend the day at temple, we honored the legacies of the founders of the world's five major

religions, as well as the first female cardinal of CaoDai and the French novelist His Eminence Victor Hugo, the author of such works as *Les Misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. To us, he was much more than a famous writer; he was a highly influential spiritist who held to our same religious beliefs—that morality was the ticket to a successful spiritual life and that there is no need to offend *any* of the gods. After all, what if you should need their intervention someday?

Looking back, I see my family's religion as something of a charm bracelet slung 'round my wrist, each dangling bauble yet another god. When troubles came along—and every day, it seemed, they did—I was encouraged to rub those charms in sequence: the Jade Emperor, Dipankara Buddha, Taishang Laojun, Confucius, Jesus Christ . . . and do not forget Victor Hugo, little My, while crossing my fingers that help would arrive. It would take me years and years to realize the futility of such an approach. At the time, I was an eager adherent, grooming myself to be the best Caodaist there possibly could be. I would out-devote the most devoted in our midst; eventually, that would be me.

But I was not there quite yet. As a young child, I wrestled to keep my attention focused on such lofty goals—understandable, given the aesthetics of a typical worship service. The lush décor; the intricate patterns; the welcome chill of the marble floor; the stark-white pants and tunics of the worshipers set against the vibrancy of the inner sanctum—oh, how marvelous it all appeared. Some followers of CaoDai—those who had been elevated to the level of priest—achieved special status and were allowed to don temple robes of bright yellow, green, or red, colors that really draw a person's eye and

beckon the onlooker's attention to stay put. Throughout the ninety-minute services, when I was supposed to be focused on the sections of the Holy Word we were being asked to recite, I would study the priests instead, marveling at their reverence; their righteousness; their deep and sincere bows, which I took to reflect a deep and sincere faith. Their apparent holiness was magnetic to my young, impressionable soul, even as I had no idea quite yet what the concept of "soul" even meant.

I would have guessed that the splendor and veneration characterizing CaoDai gatherings would elicit from all onlookers the sense of awe and allegiance I experienced time and time again, but my siblings were living, breathing proof that one can call himself or herself religious while having no use whatsoever for the religion being espoused. Yes, my brothers and sisters would make an appearance on the holy days; yes, they would recite the Five Pledges—May CaoDai be proclaimed widely, may salvation be granted to all, may God bless with forgiveness all his disciples, may peace be granted for all mankind, may security be delivered for our temple—yes, they would feign interest as the leader presented his or her sermon and congregational announcements were made; yes, they would move their lips in unison as songs of praise were raised.

But I? I knew the truth. I was far more devoted than they. Or I was *preparing* for grand devotion, anyway.

I was in the temple chorus, for example, which meant I would stay after service to practice religious songs. Eventually, I would be attending service not a handful of times each year, but rather a handful of times each *day*, including a worship

gathering that began at the stroke of midnight, an occasion that for a time I rarely, if ever, missed.

Certainly, during my growing-up years that laid the foundation for that ensuing devotion, I did not fully grasp all that it meant to be Caodaist. I knew only that my grandparents loved CaoDai. My parents loved CaoDai. My siblings at least *pretended* to love CaoDai. All of my neighbors and friends and fellow villagers loved CaoDai. And so I, young Kim Phuc, would choose to love CaoDai too. I would love it with all my heart.

As Ma led us through the worship area to the outbuildings situated on the back of the temple grounds, we encountered two smaller structures that housed the temple's caretakers. This pair of servants was very important to our assembly, as they were responsible for preparing post-ceremony meals and serving them in the dining area that adjoined their two homes. The sight of that stocked kitchen was a real encouragement to me, for my family and I loved to eat. *We will be well-fed here. We will be safe. Things will work out okay.*

The rear perimeter of the temple grounds was lined with a thick stand of tall bamboo stalks flanked by lush guava and jackfruit trees. The well for fresh water sat in the center of the vegetation, and the sight of so much life was a welcomed hint of hope. Inside of our new home away from home, as Tuesday morning slipped into Tuesday afternoon, bellies began to grumble. Cobbling together rice, vegetables, crackers, and any bits of protein they could find, the women assembled lunch, made sure that everyone had a bowlful, and then urged us kids to run and play.

Given the lack of real toys in our village, the games that my friends and I played were heavily reliant on an active imagination. We played “prince and princess,” using dwarf cobs of corn as the husband and wife, still smaller cobs as their passel of children, and bamboo stalks, banana leaves, and stray tree branches to build dollhouses they could call their own. We chased blackbirds all over the place, pretending they had magical powers or that we, too, could fly.

To be sure, there was a certain intensity in the air due to the adults’ well-founded fears over what was underway outside those temple walls. But for us kids, as soon as we could no longer see with our own two eyes the Viet Cong rebels, we forgot to feel afraid. All that we knew for sure was that there were a whole lot of children in one space, there was a whole lot of time to be spent together, and our parents kept exhorting us to play. *What an adventure!* I thought. It would be the closest thing to summer camp I would ever know.

Of special interest to me was my three-year-old cousin Danh, my ma’s sister Anh’s little boy and a treasured friend to me. He was the cutest, chubbiest child I had ever seen, and at some point along the way, I took him in as one of my own siblings, teaching him to form his letters, his numbers, his first smiley face.

“Ma!” he had identified that first face, gripping the pencil tighter and adding to the scene. He then drew dozens more smileys, representing his father, his siblings, his grandparents, his cousins, his aunties, his uncles, his life. I loved nothing more than creating art with Danh. Or eating with Danh—“Danh! Eat this,” I would cheer, as I offered him something, only to see the finicky eater scrunch up his face.

“Ewww!” he would squeal. “I do not like it, My!” Or playing chase with Danh and making him giggle so intensely that everyone within earshot would fall into waves of laughter too. Danh was innocent, loving, and perfect—a delightful boy to call *friend* and a joyous distraction for me there at the temple.

The older boys in the group played “war,” which took little imagination, given the dozen or so actual soldiers armed with serious-looking weaponry that flanked us all throughout the space. Those military men had been deployed from a nearby South Vietnamese unit for the purpose of protecting our village’s citizens and took their role very seriously, informing the moms and dads at every turn of the goings-on near and far. I would later learn that each time a bomb was dropped in the region, the soldiers would alert my ma and the other adults, explaining what had been hit and where.

The bombs were dropped always in pairs—two over this particular section of forest, two over that small village. While the damage they caused was significant, we as a group were never once ushered into any of the bomb shelters that undergirded the temple grounds. When I focus on what I remember of that stay in the temple—for three days, we would stay tucked inside—I distinctly recall the sounds and smells of burning: burning fields, burning houses, burning trees. Perhaps I should have been alarmed, but I was not. We were in a holy, protected place.

By Thursday, the eighth of June, I was missing home. It was summertime, my favorite season of the year, and I longed for the security of my favorite tree—not just any tree, but *my* tree. I missed evening dinners, just my family and me, and

my father's cooking, which I deeply loved. I also missed my dad. He had not been with us for three full days now, and whenever I noticed his absence, I was reminded that all was not well.

For many weeks, my father had been residing with a family friend who lived in Trang Bang proper, several kilometers from the area encompassing both the temple and our family home. Dad had tried to stay with us in order to keep the family together, but Viet Cong soldiers looked to him to supply an exorbitant amount of their goods. With their needs on the rise, my dad feared that if he stayed put, he would be abused and even killed, should he ever decide to refuse the rebels' request. And so each day, as sunlight waned and dusk emerged, he would take off, leaving my ma to care for the homestead—the trees, the pigs, the chickens, the ducks, and a large collection of energetic kids.

That arrangement had been difficult enough for us all, but then came the intensified military action closer to home, which meant major parts of the main road leading into Trang Bang had been cut off to all forms of transportation, foot traffic included. Now, not only was my father missing at night, but also during the three days when we needed him most. Still, I distinctly recall receiving the explanation for his absence plainly, with mature understanding. In the same way that people who live in rural settings know better than to allow their pets to wander too far from home during nighttime hours, for fear of those small dogs and cats becoming dinner for a hungry predator, we in South Vietnam knew that the night belonged to the Viet Cong. They were ravaging beasts on a mission, willing to devour anyone or anything

that got in their way. We never saw them during daylight, but as night fell, we made our way inside. They would always surface, come dark. My dad was wise to stay put.

In the years that have passed since that unexpected temple stay, I have been asked why the Viet Cong did not treat my ma with the same forcefulness and greed, to which I always point to a cultural norm: In the Vietnam I grew up in, the highest position in a home belonged to the man, and all dealings had to pass through his hands. In the end, of course, rebel fighters did come to my ma, they did lay out wild demands, and they did occupy our home. But from my father's perspective, his absence significantly delayed that inevitable turn of events.

From *my* perspective, those Viet Cong must have known how brave and fierce my ma could be, choosing to come to her only as a last resort. They must have known how determined she was to protect her family; how committed she was to seeing her children thrive; how resilient she was, even in the face of the awful circumstances that always accompany war.

By way of example, mere months before my family was pushed from our home, my ma had been working in her noodle shop when a wedding party of nineteen people stopped in for soup. Their mood was joyous and celebratory as they found seats and settled in for their meal, but within moments of their arrival, the scene turned from glorious to gruesome. Inexplicably, Viet Cong in the area parked a bicycle packed with explosives outside, and when the dynamite went off, every last guest was killed. My poor ma had watched the entire situation unfold, right before her eyes. What a terrible thing to witness!

Still worse was what happened later, after the scene had

been cleaned up. South Vietnamese leaders came and arrested Ma, shouting, “You are Viet Cong! You are with the Viet Cong!” They put her in jail for a full month, an outright travesty, given the flimsy claims. Still, she waited patiently for things to sort themselves out. She nodded politely when both the mayor and the senior-most official from the police bureau of Trang Bang, tipped off to the false arrest by one of my dad’s good friends who worked for the government, came to her holding area and said, “We have been alerted to a misunderstanding.” She calmly returned to her noodle shop, which had been shut down for thirty-one days’ time, and began turning a profit again.

Ma’s fortitude was my fortress there at the temple. If Dad had to be away for now, I had the best possible alternative at hand: In the shadow of my ma, I knew I would be fine.

For much of the morning, heavy rains and an uptick in increasingly closer bombings kept the thirty or so of us who were living at the temple hunkered down inside. I could see on the adults’ faces the growing concern for our safety. With each passing day, I noticed more and more occasions when the air was pierced by the heart-stopping sounds of explosions. Following those sounds were sights that are difficult to explain: a blood-red sky, a wall of flames licking the heavens, the landscape being overwhelmed by smoke. This did not feel fun or adventuresome anymore. I wanted to go home. I wanted the sights and sounds to stop. And yet that is not at all what happened. On the eighth of June, what I wanted, I would not get.

An hour or so after lunch, a military plane descended

overhead and swooped down abruptly to within feet, it seemed, of the outbuilding where we were. In its wake, a smoke grenade detonated, coating the scene in bright purple and gold. It was a signal to the South Vietnamese pilot who was trailing behind: Drop your bombs on this very spot.

A color-mark made within the temple grounds? This had to be an error. Why would our country's troops be attacking their own?

Sensing a shift in the room's energy, I glanced up from my play to study a nearby soldier's expression. As he took in the emerging situation through the glass of a small, painted-frame window, his eyes widened and his lips formed around not a name but a curse: "Jesus Christ."