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The Fall of Saigon

James Fenton

In the summer of 1973 I had a dream in which, to my great distress, I died. I was alone in a friend's house at the time and, not knowing what to do, I hid the body in her deep freeze. When everyone returned, I explained to them what had taken place: 'Something terrible happened when you were out. I – I died.'

My friends were very sympathetic. 'But what did you do with the body?' they asked.

I was ashamed to tell them. 'I don't know where it is,' I said, and we all set out to search the house for my corpse. Upstairs and downstairs we looked, until finally, unable to bear the deception any longer, I took my hostess aside and confessed. 'There wasn't anything else in the compartment,' I said, 'and I just didn't know what to do.' We went to the deep freeze and opened it. As the curled and frozen shape was revealed, I woke up.

I was glad to be going off on a journey. I had been awarded a bursary for the purpose of travelling and writing poetry; I intended to stay out of England a long time. Looking at what the world had to offer, I thought either Africa or Indochina would be the place to go. I chose Indochina partly on a whim, and partly because, after the Paris Peace Accords in January of that same year, it looked as if it was in for some very big changes. The essence of the agreement was that it removed American military personnel from Indochina and stopped the B-52 bombing raids. The question was how long could the American-backed regime last without that accustomed support. I wanted to see Vietnam for myself. I wanted to see a war, and I wanted to see a communist victory, which I presumed to be inevitable. I wanted to see the fall of a city.

I wanted to see a communist victory because, in common with many people, I believed that the Americans had not the slightest justification for their interference in Indochina. I admired the Vietcong and, by extension, the Khmer Rouge, but I subscribed to a philosophy that prided itself on taking a cool, critical look at the liberation movements of the Third World. I, and many others like me, supported these movements against the ambitions of American foreign policy. We supported them as nationalist movements. We did not support their political character, which we perceived as Stalinist in the case of the Vietnamese, and in the case of the Cambodians . . . I don't know. The theory was, and is, that when a genuine movement of national liberation was fighting against imperialism it received our unconditional support. When such a movement had won, then it might well take its place among the governments we execrated – those who ruled by sophisticated tyranny in the name of socialism.

There was also an argument that Stalinism was not a simple equivalent of Fascism, that it contained what was called a partial negation of capitalism. Further, under certain conditions it might even lay down the foundations of a socialist organisation of society. In the Third World, Stalinism might do the job which the bourgeois revolutions had done in Europe. Even Stalinism had its progressive features.

Our attitudes may have looked cynical in the extreme. In fact they were the formulation of a dilemma. After all, we had not invented the Indochina War, and it was not for us to conjure out of thin air a movement that would match up to our own aspirations for Britain. To remain neutral

over Vietnam was to support the Americans. To argue for an end to all US involvement, and leave the matter at that, was to ignore the consequences of one's own argument. If there was a conflict on which one had to choose sides, then it was only right to choose sides honestly, and say: 'Stalinists they may be, but we support them.' The slogans of the Vietnam movement were crude stuff indeed – 'One side right, one side wrong, victory to . . . Vi-et-cong!' – but the justice of the cause was deeply felt.

This feeling was shared by many people who were not socialists or communists by any stretch of the imagination, and who did not have any other political axe to grind. Such people had merely to look at what was being done to Vietnam in the name of the Free World to know that the Free World was in the wrong. The broadest support for the anti-war movement was engendered by a disgust at what the Americans were doing. In Britain, the Communist Party made precious few gains in this period. The tradition to which the students looked was broadly or narrowly Trotskyist, a fact that no doubt intrigued the Vietnamese communists, who had taken care to bump off their own Trotskyists a long time before. But the Trotskyist emphasis, like the general emphasis, was again in opposition to American imperialism. Very few people idolised the Vietcong, or the North Vietnamese, or Uncle Ho, in quite the same way that, for instance, the French Left did. Indeed, it might be fairly said that the Left in Britain was not terribly curious about or enamoured of the Vietnamese movement it was supporting.

By the time I was about to go to Indochina, the issue had fallen from prominence. When the Indochina Solidarity Conference was held in London that year, my own group, the International Socialists, did not bother to send a delegation. There were other, more important campaigns: against the Tories, against the Industrial Relations Act, against racism. Our movement had grown up: it was to be working class in character; it had graduated from what it thought of as student issues. It had not abandoned Vietnam, but it had other fish to fry. At the conference itself, I remember two speeches of interest. One was by I.F. Stone, who was hissed by the audience (which included an unusually large number of Maoists) when he attacked Chairman Mao for shaking hands with a murderer like Nixon. The other was by Noam Chomsky, who warned against the assumption that the war was over, and that direct US intervention in Vietnam would cease. Chomsky argued that the Left were wrong to dismiss the 'Domino Theory' out of hand. As stated by the Cold Warriors it might not measure up to the facts, but there was another formulation which did indeed make sense; it was US foreign policy, rather than Russian expansionism, which knocked over the dominoes: countries might be forced into positions where the only alternative to accepting American domination was to go over to the opposite camp and would thus be drawn into the power struggle whether they liked it or not.

I mention such arguments because I do not wish to give the impression that I was completely wide-eyed about the Vietnamese communists when I set out. I considered myself a revolutionary socialist, of the kind who believes in no Fatherland of the Revolution, and has no cult hero. My political beliefs were fairly broadly based and instinctively grasped, but they were not, I hope, religiously held.

But I wanted very much to see a communist victory. Although I had a few journalist commissions, I was not going primarily as a journalist. I wanted to see a war and the fall of a city because – because I wanted to see what such things were like. I had once seen a man dying, from

natural causes, and my first reaction, as I realised what was taking place, was that I was glad to be there. This is what happens, I thought, so watch it carefully, don't miss a detail. The first time I saw a surgical operation (it was in Cambodia) I experienced the same sensation, and no doubt when I see a child born it will be even more powerful. The point is simply in being there and seeing it. The experience has no essential value beyond itself.

I spent a long time on my preparations and, as my dream of dying might indicate, I had developed some fairly morbid apprehensions. The journey itself was to be utterly selfish. I was going to do exactly as I pleased. As far as political beliefs were concerned, they were going to remain 'on the table'. Everything was negotiable. But the fear of death, which had begun for the first time to enter my calculations, followed me on my journey. As I went through the passport check at Heathrow, I glanced at the Sunday papers and saw that the poet I most admired, W.H. Auden, had just died in Vienna. People were talking about him in the passenger lounge, or rather they weren't talking about him, they were talking about his face.

I kept seeing the face, on the plane, in the transit lounges, on the empty seat next to mine, and I kept remembering Auden. From the start he had willed himself into old age, and it was not surprising that he had not lived longer. He had courted death, cultivated first eccentricity and then what looked to the world very much like senility. It was not senility, but it was a useful cover for his despair of living, the deep unhappiness which he kept concealed. He had held the world very much at arm's length, and had paid a heavy price for doing so.

Between sleeping and reading, I found myself passing through a depression compounded of one part loneliness, one part uneager anticipation, one part fright and two parts obscure self-pity. In Bombay the depression began to lift: I slept all morning at the Sea Palace Hotel, then, surrendering to the good offices of a driver and guide, set off to see the sights. The evening light was first a muddy yellow; next it turned green. On the Malabar Hill, I paid my respects to the spectacular view, the vultures picking the bones on the Parsee tower, the lights along the waterfront ('Queen Victoria's Necklace') and the couples sitting on the lawns of the Hanging Gardens, in attitudes reminiscent of a Mogul miniature. The most impressive sight was a vast open-air laundry, a yard full of boiling vats between which, through the dark and steam, one could scarcely make out the moving figures of the workers. There was a steamy warmth everywhere, which I liked immediately. Waking the next morning, I looked down on a wide meandering river, either the Salween or the Irrawaddy, whose muddy waters spread out for miles into the sea. Seen from the plane, the landscape of the Far East was dazzling, silver and blue. You could tell you had arrived in Indochina when you saw the rows and rows of yellow circles, where muddy water had filled the bomb craters.

Fear of Madness: November 1973

'I know not whether others share my feelings on this point,' wrote De Quincey, 'but I have often thought that if I were compelled to forego England, and to live in China, and among Chinese manners and modes of life and scenery, I should go mad.' I read this sentence the other day, for the first time, and as I came to the last clause I was struck once again with the full nausea of my first trip to Vietnam. 'The causes of my horror lie deep,' De Quincey went on. But he set them forth beautifully:

> No man can pretend that the wild, barbarous, and capricious superstitions of Africa, or of savage tribes elsewhere, affect him in the way that he is affected by the ancient, monumental, cruel, and elaborate religions of Indostan, etc. The mere antiquity of Asiatic things, of their institutions, histories, modes of faith, &c. is so impressive, that to me the vast age of the race and name overpowers the sense of youth in the individual. A young Chinese seems to me an antediluvian renewed . . . Man is a weed in those regions.

I was impressed, overawed, by the scale and age of the subject: a war that had been going on for longer than I had been alive, a people about whose history and traditions I knew so little. I had read some books in preparation, but the effect of doing so was only to make the country recede further. So much had been written about Vietnam. I hadn't even had the application to finish Frances FitzGerald's Fire in the Lake. The purpose of the book seemed to be to warn you off the subject.

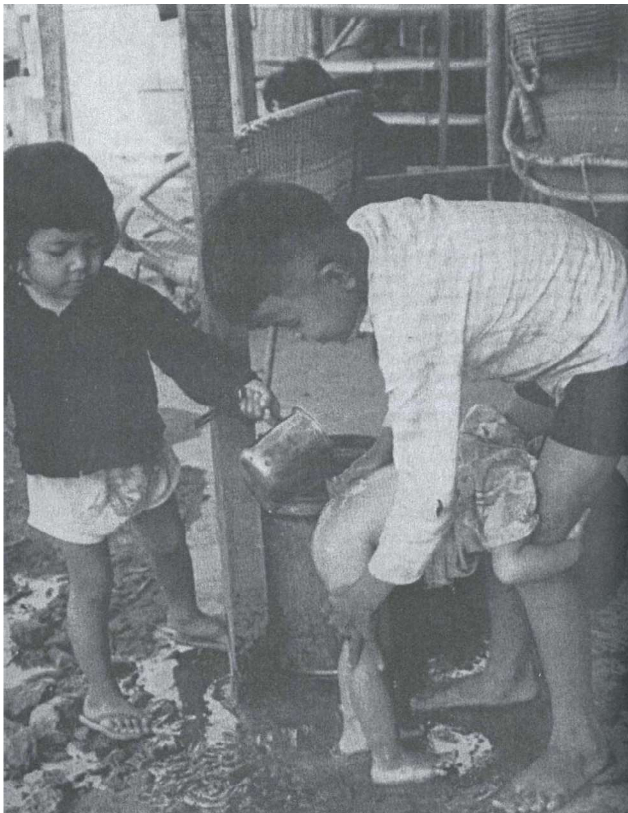
I could well have believed that somebody was trying to tell me something when I came out of my room on the first morning in Saigon and stepped over the decapitated corpse of a rat. I was staying, as most British journalists did, in the Hotel Royale, but even there I felt something of an intruder. I had to find work, I had to sell some stories, but I was afraid of trespassing on somebody else's patch. There was an epidemic of infectious neurosis at the time: as soon as one journalist had shaken it off, another would succumb. It would attack without warning – in the middle of an otherwise amiable meal, in the bars, in your room. And it could be recurrent, like malaria.

The reason for the neurosis was not far to seek; indeed it sought you out, and pursued you throughout the day: Saigon was an addicted city, and we were the drug; the corruption of children, the mutilation of young men, the prostitution of women, the humiliation of the old, the division of the family, the division of the country – it had all been done in our name. People looked back to the French Saigon with a sentimental warmth, as if the problem had begun with the Americans. But the French city, the 'Saigon of the piastre' as Lucien Bodard called it, had represented the opium stage of the addiction. With the Americans had begun the heroin phase, and what I was seeing now was the first symptoms of withdrawal. There was a desperate edge to life. It was impossible to relax for a moment. The last of the American troops had left at the end of March, six months before I arrived, and what I saw now was what they left behind: a vast service industry clamouring for the attention of a dwindling number of customers: Hey, you! American! Change money, buy Time magazine, give me back Time magazine I sell you yesterday, buy Stars and Stripes, give me back Stars and Stripes, you number one, you number ten, you number ten thousand Yankee, you want number one fuck, you want Quiet American, you want Ugly American, you give me money I shine shoes, number one, no sweat . . . on and on, the passionate pursuit of money.

The bar at the Royale was half-open to the street. The coffee at breakfast tasted of diarrhoea. You washed it down with Bireley's orangeade ('Refreshing . . . and no carbonation!'). Through the windows peered the shoeshine boys – Hey! You! It was starting up again. One morning I was ignoring a particularly revolting specimen when he picked up a handful of sand which he pretended to eat: 'You! You no give me money, you want I eat shit!' His expression, as he brought the dirt to his mouth, was most horrible. It was impossible to imagine how a boy of that age had acquired such features: he was about ten, but his face contained at least thirty years of degeneration and misery. A few days later I did give him my boots to clean. He sat down in the corner of the bar and set to work, first with a matchstick and a little water, meticulously

removing all the mud and dust from the welt, then with the polish. The whole process took about half an hour, and the barman and I watched him throughout, in fascination. He was determined to show his superiority to all other contestants in the trade. I was amused, and gave him a large sum. He was furious; it wasn't nearly enough. We haggled for a while, but I finally gave in. I gave him about a pound. The next day, at the same time, he came into the bar; his eyes were rolling back in their sockets and he staggered helplessly around the tables and chairs. I do not know what he had taken, but I knew how he had bought it.

Of all the ingenious and desperate forms of raising money, the practice of drugging your baby and laying the thing on the pavement in front of the visitor seemed to me the most repulsive. It did not take long to see that none of these children was ever awake during the day, or that, if asleep, something was amiss. Among the foreigners, stories circulated about the same baby being seen in the arms of five different mothers in one week, but the beggar who regularly sat outside the Royale always had the same child, a girl of eighteen months or so. I never gave any money either to the girl and her 'mother', or to any of the other teams.



One day, however, I was returning from a good lunch when I saw that a crowd had formed around the old woman, who was wailing and gesticulating. The child was more than usually grey, and there were traces of vomit around her face. People were turning her over, slapping her, trying to force her eyes open. At one point she and the old woman were bundled into a taxi. Then they were taken out again and the slapping was repeated. I went into the hotel and told the girl at reception to call a doctor.

'No,' she replied.

'But the child is sick.'

'If baby go to hospital or doctor' – and here she imitated an injection – 'then baby die.'

'No,' I replied, 'if baby don't go to hospital maybe baby die.'

'No.'

I took the girl out into the street, where the scene had become grotesque. All the beggars I had ever seen in Saigon seemed to have gathered, and from their filthy garments they were producing pins and sticking them under the child's toenails. 'You see,' I said to the girl, 'no good, number ten. Baby need number one hospital.'

'No, my grandmother had same-same thing. She need this – number one.' And the receptionist produced a small phial of eucalyptus oil.

'That's not number one,' I said, 'that's number ten. Number ten thousand,' I added for emphasis. But it was no good insisting or appealing to other members of the crowd. Everybody was adamant that if the child was taken to hospital, the doctor would kill it with an injection. While I correspondingly became convinced that a moment's delay would cost the child's life.

Finally, after a long eucalyptus massage and repeated pricking of the fingers and toes had produced no visible results, I seemed to win. If I would pay for taxi and hospital, the woman would come. I pushed my way through the crowd and dragged her towards the taxi – a battered old Renault tied together with string. The baby was wrapped in tarpaulin and her face covered with a red handkerchief. Every time I tried to remove the handkerchief, from which came the most ominous dry gaspings, the woman replaced it. I directed the taxi-man to take us to number one hospital and we set off.

From the start everything went wrong. Within a hundred yards we had to stop for petrol. Then a van stalled in front of us, trapping the taxi. Next, to my amazement, we came to what must have been, I thought, the only level crossing in Saigon, where as it happened a train was expected in the near future. And around here we were hit by the side effects of Typhoon Sarah, which at the time was causing havoc in the northern provinces. We also split a tyre, though this was not noticed till later. Driving on through the cloudburst, the taxi-man seemed strangely unwilling to hurry. So I sat in the back seat keeping one hand on the horn and with the other attempting to ease the baby's breathing by loosening the tarpaulin around her neck. I also recall from time to time producing a third arm with which to comfort the old woman, and I remember that her shoulder, when my hand rested on it, was very small and very hard. Everything, I said, was going to be number one, OK: number one hospital, number one doctor, baby-san OK. We were travelling through Cholon, the Chinese quarter, on an errand of Western mercy.

All things considered, it took a long time for it to dawn on me that we were not going to a hospital at all. We even passed a first-aid post without the taxi-man giving it a glance. In my

mind there was an image of the sort of thing required: a large cool building dating from French times, recently refurbished by American aid and charity, with some of the best equipment in the East. I could even imagine the sententious plaques on the walls. Perhaps there would be a ward named after the former US Ambassador. It would be called the Bunker Ward.

It was when the old woman began giving directions that I saw I had been duped. We were threading our way through some modern slums, which looked like the Chinese equivalent of the Isle of Dogs. 'Where is the hospital? This is no hospital,' I said.

'Yes, yes,' the taxi-man replied, 'we are going to hospital, number one doctor.'

We stopped by a row of shops and the taxi-man got out. I jumped from the car and seized him by the arm, shouting: 'I said number one hospital. You lie. You cheap charlie. You number ten thousand Saigon.' We were surrounded by children, in the pouring rain, the taxi-man tugging himself free, and me gripping him by the arm. It was left to the woman, carrying the little bundle of tarpaulin, to find out exactly where the doctor lived. Finally I gave in, and followed her up some steps, then along an open corridor lined with tailors and merchants. At least, I thought, when the baby dies I can't be blamed. And once I had had that thought, it turned into a wish: a little cough would have done it, a pathetic gurgle, then silence, and my point about Western medicine would have been proved to my own satisfaction. I should have behaved very well, and would have paid for the funeral.

In retrospect it was easy to see how the establishment would command confidence: the dark main room with its traditional furnishings, the walls lined with photographs of ancestors in traditional Vietnamese robes, a framed jigsaw of the Italian lakes. And in the back room (it would, of course, have to be a back room) a plump, middle-aged lady was massaging the back of another plump, middle-aged lady. They paid hardly any attention when we came in. There was not the slightest element of drama. Indeed, I began to see that I was now the only person who was panicking. When she had finished the massage, the doctor turned her attention to the baby. First she took some ointment from a dirty bowl at her elbow, and rubbed it all over the little grey body. Then from another bowl she produced some pink substance resembling Euthymol toothpaste, with which she proceeded to line the mouth. In a matter of minutes, the child was slightly sick, began to cry, and recovered. I had never been more furious in my life. To complete my humiliation, the doctor refused any payment. She provided the old woman with a prescription wrapped in newspaper, and we left.

We drove to the miserable shelter in which the old woman lived.

'Sit down,' she said, indicating the wooden bed which was the only feature of her home apart from the roof (there were no walls).

In any other mood I might have been moved by the fact that the only English she knew beyond the terrible pidgin currency of the beggars was a phrase of hospitality. But I so deeply hated her at that moment that I could only give her a couple of pounds, plus some useless advice about keeping the baby warm and off the pavements, and go.

I left the taxi-man at a garage not far from the Royale, where I also gave him some money towards repairing the split tyre.

'You number one, Saigon,' he said, with a slight note of terror in his voice.

The weather had cleared up, and I left him, strolling along past the market stalls. Here, you could buy US Army foot powder in bulk, K-rations, lurp-rations (for Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols), souvenir Zippo lighters (engraved yea though i walk through the valley of the shadow of death i shall fear no evil, for i am the evilest sonofabitch in the valley), khaki toothbrushes and flannels, and model helicopters constructed out of used hypodermics. You could also buy jackets brightly embroidered with the words when i die i shall go to heaven, for i have spent my time in hell – saigon, and a collection of GI cartoons and jokes called Sorry 'bout that, Vietnam. Five years ago, there had been over 500,000 American GIs. Now there were none.

As I approached the hotel people began asking how the baby was, and smiling when I replied, 'OK.' I began to think: Supposing they were all in it together? Suppose the old woman, the taxi driver, the man whose van stalled, the engine driver – suppose they were all now dividing the proceeds and having a good laugh at my expense, congratulating the child on the way it had played its role? That evening I would be telling the story to some old Saigon hand when a strange pitying smile would come over his face. 'You went to Cholon, did you? Describe the doctor . . . uh-huh . . . Was there a jigsaw puzzle of the Italian Lakes? Well, well, well. So they even used the toothpaste trick. Funny how the oldest gags are still the best . . .'

Indeed I did have rather that conversation a few days later, with an American girl, a weaver. It began: 'You realise, of course, first of all that the taxi driver was the husband of the old woman . . .' But I do not think there was a conspiracy. Worse, I should rather conclude that the principals involved were quite right not to trust the hospital doctors with a beggar's child. It was for this reason that the hotel receptionist had countermanded my orders to the taxi-man, I learned afterwards, and many people agreed with her.

When the old woman came back on the streets, I hardly recognised either her or the child, who for the first time looked conscious and well. 'Baby-san OK now, no sick,' she said, gazing at me with an awful adoring expression, though the hand was not stretched out for money. And when I didn't reply she turned to the child and told it something in the same unctuous tones. This performance went on for the rest of my stay: whenever I was around the child would be made to look at the kind foreigner who had saved its life. I had indeed wanted to save the child's life, but not in that way, not on the old woman's terms.

I was disgusted, not just at what I saw around me, but at what I saw in myself. I saw how perilously thin was the line between the charitable and the murderous impulse, how strong the force of righteous indignation. I could well imagine that most of those who came to Vietnam to fight were not the evilest sons-of-bitches in the valley. It was just that, beyond the bright circle illuminated by their intelligence, in which everything was under their control and every person a compliant object, they came across a second person – a being or a nation with a will of its own, with its own medicine, whether Fishing Pills or pink toothpaste, and its own ideas for the future. And in the ensuing encounter everything had turned to justifiable ashes. It was impossible in Saigon to be the passive observer. Saigon cast you, inevitably, into the role of the American.

Elsewhere it was possible to breathe more freely, but I was conscious always of following in somebody else's footsteps. On a trip to Quang Tri, the northernmost city in South Vietnam, I asked my driver how far away was the town. 'This is the main street,' he said, indicating the overgrown rubble. We stopped and walked to the edge of the river, looking across to the liberated zone and the still figures of the soldiers on the Other Side. I had heard endless stories of

people's exploits in Quang Tri, but it meant nothing to me. There was no point in my being there. I was more at ease in Hué. I walked around the Imperial City in the rain, through the beautiful, shabby grounds that looked like the vegetable gardens of an English country house. But I was nothing more than a tourist. Once, I thought I was actually going to meet someone important when a Vietnamese took me to see a woman. But the woman was his girlfriend, whom he was hoping to marry. She worked in a chemist's shop, and when we arrived the drill was simply that I should go in, buy some aspirin or something, look at her, and tell her boyfriend what I thought. He waited outside for my opinion. I gave the girl a warm recommendation.

I went also to Dalat, a village in the Highlands that, because it was once a resort, had been spared from attack. I walked through the forests where the tall poinsettias were in flower: the Vietnamese called them the Man of Genius Tree. In my hotel room, there were poems scrawled in ballpoint on the walls:

I am a fairy from the moon.

You are my happiness. When the sun sets

The river will be without water

And the rocks will scrape.

Our promises will be forever.

There was a war going on, but the nearest I got to it was in Gia Nghia, a former American base in the Quang Duc region. It had been a great feat of engineering: the wide roads of red earth cut through the jungle, the vast clearing. There were little signs of America everywhere, the half-caste children, even the dogs of the area were mongrels from the American trackers. There was a dog's footprint on a concrete floor, with the words 'Our Mascot (MACV)' scratched beside it.

There were drunken Montagnards wandering round, and in the marketplace, which sported two billiard saloons, a soldier was smoking marijuana through a waterpipe made out of an anti-tank shell. There was music and the sound of motorbikes from the Wall of Death, but when we went in the evening and asked them to open it up we found the family asleep on the track.

The USAID compound had a commanding view of the town. A Montagnard soldier, with huge stretched earlobes, stood on guard outside. Inside, leaning over a short-wave radio, was Ed Sprague, the local USAID official and the only American I ever met in the field. He was marking positions on a map. There was a rifle propped against the wall and a neatly polished revolver on the table. The rest of the room was magnificently equipped, with photos, souvenirs, stereo tape-recorder, cocktail bar, Montagnard girl, soft furnishings. Above the bar, engraved on copper and nicely framed, were the sayings of Sprague himself:

> The Special Forces have done so much for nothing for so long that now we are expected to do everything for nothing for ever.

And:

> If you kick me once in the back when I'm not looking I'll kick you twice in the face when you are looking.
>
> – Sprague '71

He was very polite, but the USAID compound had no room to put us up, so we went to the local hotel in town. The South Vietnamese helicopter pilots were billeted there, and I spent the evening playing Co Tuong ('Kill the General'), the Chinese and Vietnamese version of chess. The round wooden pieces were engraved with Chinese characters, and the board was made of paper. A river flowed down the middle of the board, separating the two rows of GIs, who had to move forward, one square at a time, until they crossed the river, after which they might move in any direction. Just behind the GIs lay the two artillery pieces, which might fire in straight lines at any of the pieces, as long as there was some single obstruction in between. The horses made knights' moves, and could cross the river, as could the tanks, which were the equivalent of rooks. But the elephants, which always moved two squares at a time, diagonally, were unable to cross the river and were reserved for the defence. The general was protected by his officer escort. He lived in a compound of four squares. The red general must never 'see' the black general – that is, there must always be something in between.

'This is the black general,' said my teacher. 'He is Ho Chi Minh. This is the red general. He is Thieu.'

'But Ho Chi Minh is dead.'

'I know. I killed him in the last game.'

I also spent some time in the billiard saloons, collecting Vietnamese jokes from the pilots. The jokes were different in character from Cambodian jokes, which were all about sex. Here is a typical Cambodian joke. A mosquito is caught in a storm and takes shelter in an elephant's cunt. (Roars of laughter.) After the storm, the mosquito meets a friend.

'Did you know what that was you were sheltering in just then?' says the second mosquito.

'What?'

'It was an elephant's cunt.' (Further roars of laughter, particularly from the women.)

'Oh,' says the first mosquito, flexing his muscles, 'a pity I didn't know that. If I'd realized it was an elephant's cunt I might have done something about it!' (Hysterical laughter, old men clutch their sides, tears course down the faces of the women, food and wine are produced and the teller of the joke is asked for more.)

Vietnamese jokes were all about tactics. This is one: during the Tet Offensive in 1968, the Vietcong blew up the central span of the main bridge over the Perfume River, and for some time afterwards planks were put across, and the bridge was very dangerous. A young and beautiful girl was walking home from the school in which she taught (nods of interest, audience leans forward and is very quiet) when she fell into the water (smiles), which was most unfortunate because she could not swim (smiles disappear). So she started calling out, 'Help me, help me,' and a large crowd gathered on the river bank, but none of the young men wanted to help her (expressions completely disappear). So the girl called out: 'If anybody jumps in and saves me, I will marry him.' (Smiles.) At this point all the young men rushed forward, but every time one of them reached the edge of the water (smiles) another man pulled him back, because every one wanted to marry the young girl (smiles disappear, anxiety expressed on faces of young men). And so the girl was very near to drowning, when an old man succeeded in getting into the water and saving the girl.

At the wedding, he was asked by the press: 'How come a weak and ugly old man like you managed to win the girl, when all the young men were trying?'

And the old man replied: 'Every time a young man tried to get in, he was pulled back by another. But when an old and ugly man like me appeared on the scene, they didn't bother to pull me back. In fact they pushed me in.' (End of joke. Heads nod. There is a little laughter.)

Later when I was in the city Hué, I tried this joke out, and the effect at the end of the story was striking. First, there was a silence. Then I was asked to repeat the punchline. Then all hell broke loose, and I thought for a moment that I might be chucked into the Perfume River myself. After several minutes of animated conversation the company turned back to me. They had two comments: Primo, the young men were right in the first place not to jump in – after all, they might have been killed. Secundo, the story was not true.

While not collecting jokes or playing Chinese chess I was trying to find out about the war. This was difficult. Some of the small outposts that now represented the division between North and South and that were dotted around the mountains – they had names like Bu Prang and Bu Bong – were under attack. The helicopter squadron with which I was staying was here to give support to these outposts. There was a low-level campaign on the part of the Vietcong to wipe out these little impediments, which were used by the South Vietnamese as listening posts along the region of the Ho Chi Minh trail, and which had been set up largely by the Special Forces in which Sprague had served. Now the campaign was under the aegis of Saigon, and these outposts were beginning to fall. At one point my chess-master produced a hand-drawn map and started to show me what was happening, but he didn't get far before somebody came into the room, and he shoved the map quickly into his pocket.

We slept seven or eight to a room, and in the middle of the night I awoke to the sound of rifle fire. There was an extraordinary noise going on, and I suddenly thought – Good God! They're attacking Gia Nghia. They're coming into the camp and blowing whistles. Why are they all blowing whistles? They're blowing whistles in order to tell each other where they are, perhaps to create a panic in the camp . . . Panic!

I got up and went to the window. One of the soldiers burst out laughing. There was no gunfire any more: a soldier had shot at a shadow, perhaps. The noise of whistles, though it continued, was nothing more than the noise of the jungle. Go back to bed, you idiot.

During this period, moving from one outpost to another, I often suffered from nightmares. It was as if some great spade was digging through my mind, turning over deep clods of loam. If Saigon was a nightmare by day, it was to Phnom Penh that my thoughts returned at night. In Saigon, I was shown some photographs that had come in from Cambodia, which Associated Press had decided were too horrible to use. In one, a smiling soldier was shown eating the liver of a Khmer Rouge, whom he had just killed; from the expression on his face, he could have been eating anything – the liver was obviously delicious. In the next photograph, a human head was being lowered by the hair into a pot of boiling water – but it was not going to be eaten. In the third photograph, decapitated corpses were being dragged along the road behind an armoured patrol carrier.

My nightmares were about war and torture and death. I remember one particularly vividly. We were standing, myself and a friend who was a poet, at the edge of a battle. The landscape was hilly, but belonged neither to Cambodia nor to Vietnam; it seemed to be northern European. The soldiers had taken several prisoners, and there were wounded and dead lying all around. Their features were Cambodian. As the prisoners were brought in, it became obvious that they were about to be beaten up and killed. The soldiers gathered round them. The poet began to shout out: 'No, no, this isn't happening. I'm not here, I'm not here.' When the beatings began, all the bodies of the dead and wounded rose into the air, and began to travel around the sky above the hill.

'Look,' I said, pointing to the hill, 'isn't that interesting? Those figures. They look just like the shepherds in that van der Goes altarpiece in the Uffizi.'

'I say,' said a journalist at my elbow, 'that's a rather good image. But I suppose you'll be using it in your story.'

'Oh no,' I replied, 'have it by all means. I'm not filing on this one.' Here the dream ended.

After a month, I returned to Saigon. I was due to go to Laos, and my visa was coming to an end. I paid up at my hotel, and by the time I was through immigration at the airport I had no currency left. I was badly in need of a coffee, and I was absolutely terrified that the plane would not come. Suppose I had to stay in Saigon any longer? The neurosis came back alarmingly. I got talking to a Chinese businessman, whom I had helped with his luggage. He bought me a coffee and began a lengthy chat about the virtues of South Vietnam as a source of raw materials. Raw materials were very much needed in Hong Kong. He dealt in anything he could find – here was his card – in timber, scrap iron, swatches . . .

'What are swatches?' I asked.

'Rags,' he said, 'like these,' and indicated my clothes. Then he left for Hong Kong.

I just did not believe that my plane would go. As it taxied along the runway, a cockroach scuttled along the floor in front of me. I thought, This plane is hopeless, it'll never make the journey. We flew for some way along the Mekong, and the neurosis subsided. Then suddenly I looked out and – what! We were flying over the sea! Something's gone wrong, I thought, the pilot's got lost, he's going to turn back and go to Saigon. It's all going to happen over again. But then I looked down and saw that the sea effect was a mirage. We were indeed flying over Laos, and we were beginning to lose height.

South Vietnam as It Was: December 1974

'Ask him why he paints his little fingernails.' And it wasn't just the fingernails. It was the little toenails as well – carefully pedicured and varnished a deep shade of red. This seemed most inappropriate in a professional soldier. What would his officers say on parade? In the British army, I reflected patriotically, the offending nails would have been ceremonially torn out.

As the question was asked, I watched his face. A slow and secret smile came over it. He looked down at the table and mumbled inaudibly. The face was like a baby's, quite unmarked by the experience of war. It went, in a way, with the painted nails, but not with the Ranger's uniform. In any event, he didn't want to answer, so I asked him what he thought of the war.

We were sitting in a cafe in Go Da Hau, a small town near the Cambodian border, on the Saigon-Phnom Penh road. He desperately wanted to talk, but found it difficult. Finally, he said that the war was like a guttering candle. Occasionally it would flare up, but before long it would be entirely extinguished.

And what did he think of that?

There was nothing now that he could do. He would become a monk, he said. He would never marry. There was no job he could do, and little possibility of earning money except by soldiering. If the war ended, that was that.

He was an orphan. His father had died in Dien Bien Phu, and his mother soon afterwards. He had been educated at military school and served in the army ever since. No wonder he was still prepared to fight. No wonder, despite what people said, the Saigon army was still prepared to fight. For many of the soldiers there was simply nothing else they could do.

The Ranger talked sadly until late into the night. For the most part, he did not know how to express himself. His features strained with the burden of something very important that he wanted to say. Finally, a couple of Vietcong were sighted just outside town. Gunfire burst out all around us. The family who ran the cafe gave us shelter in the back. The Ranger straightened himself up, put on the look of a professional soldier, and disappeared into the blackness of the street.

Conversations in the dark, sad rambling discussions which always led back to the war, shy officers who told you one thing by night but begged you not to remember it the next day. Conducted to the accompaniment of Chinese chess, the tongues loosened by Vietnamese alcohol, which tasted like meths and probably was. Click, click went the chess-pieces, as the dead GIs

lined up on either side of the board, the tanks crossed the river, and the officer escort moved around the compound – always diagonally – to protect the general. I developed a theory of journalism, on which I hoped to build a school. It was to be called the Crepuscular School and the rules were simple: believe nothing that you are told before dusk. Instead of diplomatic sources, or high-ranking sources, or 'usually reliable sources', the crepuscular journalists would refer to 'sources interviewed last night', 'sources at midnight', or best of all 'sources contacted a few hours before dawn'. It would be considered unprofessional to interview the general on the morning of the battle. You would wait till the evening, when he was reviewing the cost. Crepuscular stories would cut out the bravado. Their predominant colourings would be melancholy and gloom. In this they would reflect more accurately the mood of the times.

For the war was not guttering out yet by any means. It was a year since I had been in Vietnam, and, if anything, military activities had increased. In a matter of three weeks the equivalent of the population of a small town was killed or wounded, or went missing. District towns fell, remote outposts fell, enormous enemy losses were claimed – little of it was ever seen. If things were going badly, the military did not want you around. If well, no interest was shown. It was, again, difficult to locate the war, difficult to get to it. Indeed most of the journalists in Saigon had given up trying. The same editor who would have insisted on maximum-risk reporting when the Americans were fighting now considered such journalism a matter of minority interest. And so the idea grew up that ARVN, the Saigon army, was simply not fighting; an idea that as far as I know was never tested against the reality of the time, although later it received a sort of retrospective justification.

I really wanted to meet the Provisional Revolutionary Government, the PRG, but I was beginning to think that the chances of 'going across' into the areas it occupied were rather slim. The problem was simply the transition: in 'going across' you were likely to be fired at by the South Vietnamese troops both when you tried to go in and, of course, when you came out. The problem was not to locate the Vietcong areas. It was simply a question of accreditation and opportunity. In the end, I took a long short cut.

I had returned to Saigon where I was introduced to a man by the name of Jean-Claude. Jean-Claude had been to Vietcong areas several times before, spoke a bit of Vietnamese and was a sort of Vietcong groupie. He had been educated, he said, at an English borstal – and much admired the film of The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner – had been active in 1968 in les événements, was now a member of the French Communist Party and lived as a freelance photographer-cum-reporter-cum-entrepreneur. The emphasis was very much on the entrepreneur. I never knew how much of what he said was sheer fantasy and how much was true, but the fact remains that when he finally left Saigon it was in an official limousine provided by the People's Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam. He 'made things happen'.

Our intention was to hire a car and travel from Saigon to Quang Tri, taking in en route every major town and covering a large part of the Central Highlands. At points along the way, we were bound to come across the PRG; indeed we intended to go through areas they controlled, and to drop in on them as the occasion arose.

We left Saigon with great relief: the city was in a festive mood; the loudspeakers were blaring 'Angels from the Realms of Glory'; there were toy Christmas trees, Stars of Bethlehem, tanks and machine-guns on sale, and the street-vendors were being very insistent about the merits of the most hideous Christmas greetings cards.

The first village of interest we encountered was on the main road that had been napalmed a couple of days before. The Vietcong had come into the village to cut off the road, and had been trapped there along with many of the villagers by the Saigon troops. The village had then been destroyed by a force obviously capable of creating enormous heat. I noticed a pile of bananas that had been charred right through, although they preserved their original shape. They looked like something discovered and preserved in Pompeii.

We went on through landscapes as varied as their inhabitants – the coffee plantations near Djiring, for instance, which were worked by a Montagnard race whose language sounded curiously like Italian. We stayed the first night as the guest of an Italian missionary, who had married a Montagnard and was working in agriculture. He told us of the Montagnard resistance movement, Fulro – how it was growing, and how it maintained an uneasy, informal liaison with the Vietcong. We met a French planter, whose factor was Vietcong (there was an 'arrangement' as in all rural areas). And we gave a lift to a Frenchman known as Raquin, the Shark, who made his living by selling his own brands of French cheeses and Pernod, which he concocted in a small shack next door to the American Embassy in Saigon. Raquin was on the road distributing his wares to the various Frenchmen dotted around the country, so we dropped in with him to share a rum punch with an old Martiniquan soldier living just south of Dalat.

At Dalat, much less than halfway between Saigon and our destination, we hit the edge of a typhoon. Mist and pouring rain accompanied us as far as the coast and the seaside resort of Nha Trang, where we spent a gloomy Christmas Eve. It would be nice, would it not, to get to the PRG on Christmas Day?

'You know, my friend,' Jean-Claude would say, crossing his legs as he drove, steering with one hand, lighting a cigarette with the other, and giving me what appeared to be the full benefit of his attention, 'you know, my friend, we're going to see some great things, for sure. For sure. Yes, man.' And occasionally, looking out across the paddy-fields of the coastal strip, he would say, Yes, we were getting warm, and then, No, we were getting cold.

At one point we came upon what had been a large military base, one of those that disappeared overnight when the Americans left, torn down by a thousand tiny hands and carted away for building materials. There were large roads and runways beside the dunes, and at the edge of the sea a single standing arch marked 'Das Schloss'.Beside it stood a village, surrounded by a thorn hedge, where our arrival caused something of a stir. 'This is it, my friend,' said Jean-Claude, 'they're here, for sure, I know it.' But of the group of elders who came out to meet us nobody seemed willing to talk, and they said there was no food to be had in the village. There were no government soldiers, no Vietcong to be seen, and no flags of any kind. The only notice in the village had come from the military base, and now formed the wall of a house: 'Rabies Suspected – No Unauthorized Personnel.' We left disappointed.

And continued up the coast, and through a steep valley which had been almost entirely defoliated. The mountains were strewn with huge boulders, and the white stumps of the dead trees pointed up out of the returning scrub. Several of the rocks had been decorated with the skull

and crossbones, and under these sat groups of Saigon soldiers sheltering from the rain, high up the hillside. We drove until evening, when the light began to fade, and we were determined to get to Bong Son that night or fail in the attempt: a failure meaning that we would thus have come across a Vietcong checkpoint. But no such luck. We passed through several astonished and frightened groups of Saigon soldiers, bivouacked by the bridges, and the road was just closing up altogether for the night when we entered Bong Son. An officer in his jeep, en tenue libre for the evening, was chatting up the girls in the main street. He asked us what we were doing, explained there was no hotel and invited us to spend the night at his headquarters. He turned out to be the District Chief, a certain Major Bang.

The major, as his name so painfully suggests, was very keen on artillery. He explained to us at supper – shouting over the sound of his own weaponry outside – how scrupulously he was adhering to the Paris Peace Agreement: he was firing only defensively, and only at known targets. I concluded, by the end of an ear-splitting night, that he must have been very much on the defensive, and that his deuxième bureau must have been working round the clock to provide him with new coordinates for the known targets. Either that or, as in the majority of such camps meant to guard strategic bridges and bases, the tactic was simply to fire enough ordnance to give an impression of strength. We ourselves were not fired at once during the night. Major Bang also told us that the people of the area, after their experience of the Vietcong, loathed and despised the communists. We had an opportunity to check up on this statement the next day.

The soldiers told us that three bridges had been destroyed just up the road, and that the flood waters from the typhoon had rendered repairs impossible for some days. This meant that our plan of driving to Quang Tri – or indeed to Danang or Hué or anywhere else in the northern provinces – was spoiled. It was therefore in a mood of some frustration that we drove up to the first bridge to check the damage for ourselves.

There had been a small battle the night before between the Vietcong and the guards beside the bridge, and one of the Vietcong had been killed. His body lay there. The face had been completely stoved in and the whole corpse lacked blood. It looked as though it had been dragged through the water; round its waist there was still a length of rope. As we stood there, a battalion of soldiers arrived by truck, dismounted and began to climb along the broken bridge. They were about to begin an operation to flush out the Vietcong from the area, and they were in a rather bloodthirsty, hysterical mood. There was tension too among the large crowd of local villagers and travellers who had assembled by the bridge. One of the soldiers took a stick and prised open the mouth of the dead man. ‘We go kill too many VC,’ the soldier said. There was in the soldiers’ manner a mixture of satisfaction and fright.

Jean-Claude was angry enough at the reversal in our plans, but the scene by the bridge roused him to furious action. ‘You know, my friend,’ he said, ‘the VC are all around here, that’s for sure.’ If we weren’t going to get as far north as Quang Tri, we might as well ‘go across’ at the earliest opportunity. We drove a little way back down the road, and came to a pathway where we could leave the car fairly inconspicuously. Then we simply started walking across the fields. We met a peasant, and Jean-Claude asked him the way to the ‘Giai Phong’ (liberators). He gave a vague indication with his hand. When we had crossed a couple of small fields, and were still only about a hundred yards from the road, we came to a small stream and a broken bridge. I was

just wondering why the bridge had not been repaired when, looking up, I saw a soldier in green peering over the hedge. He beckoned to us to come quickly and pointed to the part where the stream was shallowest. We waded through, and found that we had crossed into the liberated zone.

The soldier carried an American M-79 grenade-launcher, and wore an American jacket with pouches for the grenades. From his lack of insignia or helmet we took him to be Vietcong, but there was no particular way of telling. He had a transistor radio slung from his belt. Behind where he stood there was a large pond, and beyond the pond another hedgerow. Behind the hedgerow, looking to see what on earth was happening, was a row of green pith helmets. The first soldier indicated that we should be careful as we could still be seen from the road. We hurried through the pond, avoiding the bomb craters that he pointed out to us, and emerged, dripping with mud and sweat and trembling with excitement, where the group in the pith helmets were waiting. During the whole process, nobody had pointed a gun at us and, although we had dropped in unannounced, nobody seemed at a loss as to what to do. They took us into a small hut and gave us a couple of coconuts to drink.

'Fuck me,' said Jean-Claude, 'we've made it, didn't I tell you we'd make it, my friend?'

It dawned on us that, although we had got so far, we were now in a considerable quandary. After all, we were only about a mile from where the operation to flush out the Vietcong was supposed to begin, and only about two miles or so from Major Bang.

'You know what, my friend,' said Jean-Claude, 'we're going to have to leave that car. They'll see it on the road in no time. But you know what, I don't care, man, I don't fucking care. If we have to walk to Hanoi I don't mind. We can't go back to Saigon now, my friend, that's for sure.' I was too elated by having actually got across to be much worried by this talk. It was as if we had just stepped through the looking-glass.

The first thing I noticed, with slight dismay, was how well-dressed and clean everyone was. Their clothes were for the most part of Chinese cloth, rather well-cut. Their watches came from Japan and were set to Hanoi time. The Northerners among them wore pith helmets and Ho Chi Minh badges, but otherwise they were in mufti. Most carried the regulation guerrilla rifle, the AK-47, but one had an American M-16. One man unzipped the embroidered pouch in which he kept his transistor, and turned on Radio Hanoi. A solemn voice, which I afterwards learned belonged to Miss Elizabeth Hodgkin, said: 'I'm a teacher. I – apostrophe – M. A. T-E-A-C-H-E-R. You're a student; Y-O-U – apostrophe . . . ' But the thing that struck me most was the number of ballpoint pens they wore.

I mention the ballpoint pens because they seemed a rather important part of everyday life. When they conversed with us, either in English or in Vietnamese (there were no French-speakers among them), they seemed much happier when committing their thoughts to paper. Jean-Claude said that the Vietnamese they wrote was highly elegant and classical. My conversation was rather less satisfactory. It showed, I thought, that their conception of education, or perhaps Miss Hodgkin's conception, might lean a little far on the rigid side. It went like this. First the soldier wrote: 'HOW ARE YOU?'

Then I wrote: 'VERY HAPPY TO BE HERE.'

The soldier looked mistrustfully at this for some time. He almost crossed it out, but then he wrote underneath: 'FINE THANKS, AND YOU?'

Clearly, as an English-speaker, I had failed at the first hurdle.

While we were thus conversing, a meal of chicken and rice was brought by the villagers, who crowded round to watch us eat. There was intense curiosity, but very little noise. Authority seemed to come very easily to the older soldiers, and the children responded to them at once. Several of those who had been at the bridge came back to tell the soldiers what was happening. One boy of about sixteen seemed particularly moved by what he had seen. He sat on the floor and talked about it for some time in a low voice. Everybody spoke quietly, almost as if they might be heard by the Saigon soldiers on the road. Apart from the odd rifle shot, the only noise was that of the military traffic going up to the bridge. One might have been lulled, by the confidence in everybody's manner, into a sense of total security, had not the political officer politely told us after lunch that it would be dangerous to stay any longer.

Thinking of Major Bang's pronouncement the night before, that the people of the area loathed the communists, I wondered whether I could be completely mistaken in thinking that it was quite false. Two things stayed in my mind. First, the Saigon troops that we had seen that morning were clearly frightened, conscious perhaps that they were in hostile territory. The second was the sight of a small child among the villagers who had crowded round us: he wore the uniform of the local school from where we had just come. Every day he must have had to cross the lines and would have been imbued with Saigon propaganda. Crossing the lines was obviously no problem, but did it not argue a certain political confidence on the part of the People's Revolutionary Government that the child was allowed to do so?

A little girl showed us an easy path back to the road and we made towards where we had left the car. There, to our horror, stood a couple of Saigon soldiers. We walked up as calmly as possible.

'You,' said one of the soldiers, 'why you not obey me? You go see VC.'

We had our excuses prepared. We had wandered innocently into the paddy to take photographs, we said, and we had been stopped by the VC. 'Beaucoup VC,' we said, spiritedly, 'with guns, same-same you.'

'I no VC.'

'No,' we said hurriedly, 'you no VC. Hey, we very scared. VC take us, not let us go. We have to talk, many hours.'

One of the soldiers, a warrant officer, was particularly angry because he had apparently been shouting at us, telling us not to go. Finally we said to him, would he and his friend like a beer? Yes, he said angrily, so we took him to the nearest village, where he made a great scene about buying the drink. Then we took him and the beer back to his friend. I put some money in his hand.

'What's this?' he said.

'English custom,' I said, 'It's called Boxing Day, give beaucoup money to friends. Look, if you tell Major Bang we go VC, beaucoup trouble for us, maybe trouble for you. You no say nothing, OK?' And we left him standing by the roadside, suspiciously eyeing the money and the beer.

Driving as fast as we dared back towards Bong Son, we came again upon the body of the dead Vietcong. It had been dragged down the road and dumped near a small market, no doubt as a warning to the local populace. The rope was still around its waist, but the arms, which previously had been stretched out, were now bent into an embrace. I was surprised. I hadn't thought you

could do that to a corpse once it was cold. Jean-Claude brought the car to a near-halt. 'For Christ's sake,' I said, 'let's just get out of here as quickly as possible.' Above all, I did not want to meet Major Bang again, after we had so shamefully abused his hospitality.

Doubling back on our tracks, we drove south and inland, up into the Central Highlands to Kontum – still almost 275 miles north of Saigon. The road was permanently blocked a few miles north. We stood on the hillside looking down into the valley, where a couple of burned-out trucks across the road indicated the front line. On our right was a strangely pleasant camp that looked like a fortified Club Méditerranée. There were straw huts and wooden tables and chairs set in the shade, and you hardly noticed the ingenious system of trenches and foxholes leading to the officers' bunkers. Painted faces with plucked eyebrows emerged from the trenches, while from the bunkers came the sound of female laughter and one or two other things. It was widely feared at the time that the Vietcong might attack Kontum. This camp would be their first obstacle.

'You must spend the night with us,' said the medical officer, 'in order to share something of the life of the soldier.' We were happy to accept.

Most of the officers had 'wives'. The major's wife prepared a meal, after which another one of the wives sang a mournful song. Then we all sang songs apart from the major, who produced a cassette radio and played us a medley of dreadful Vietnamese tangos. As it grew dark, the soldiers gathered round to watch us, from a respectable distance. You could see their cigarette ends glowing through the trees. Sometimes, as they began to get drunk on rice spirit, the soldiers would abruptly disappear from sight, falling into foxholes or disappearing into trenches. When the officers retired underground with their wives, we were invited to drink with the other ranks.

Their drunkenness had an edge of desperation. They shouted a lot and staggered blindly outside the perimeter fence, saying that they were about to go off on an ambush. Then they leaned forward and were quietly sick. On one occasion a gun went off by mistake, which didn't frighten me nearly so much as the thought that all this noise must be perfectly audible to the Vietcong in the valley below – the shouts, the laughter, the songs, my fearful rendition of The Water is Wide (in the Britten arrangement). Having been on the other side only the day before, I was more conscious than ever of the forces patiently biding their time. Suppose they suddenly decided that the time was ripe? Supposing they came down, or rather up, the mountain like a wolf on the fold – what would one, as it were, do?

The soldiers were also conscious of enormous preparations being made on the other side. On most nights, they said, they could hear the tanks and Molotova trucks of the North Vietnamese Army manoeuvring on the road that was being built in the mountains, the road that would link the Ho Chi Minh trail with the coast. But there were other things that made them depressed. Some of them had not seen their families for two years. They didn't get any leave. They didn't find it easy to live on twenty dollars a month. They didn't like having to go out on patrols, from which their comrades often did not return. They didn't like the fact that the local version of malaria can kill a man in two months, and they didn't like the bitterly cold nights. They slept in makeshift bivouacs, with a sack of rice as a pillow, protecting their food from the numerous rats. In contrast to the officers, they were not allowed 'wives', even if they could have afforded them at the going rate of three dollars a night.

The guard on the north gate was a Cambodian from the Delta. He had very much liked serving under the American officers in the Special Forces, but said that with the South Vietnamese Army everything was a fuck-up. I sat up with him most of the night, hoping to hear the movement of the tanks and trucks. From time to time an old man, also Cambodian, came round with a stick to make sure that the guard was awake. This man was in a good mood: in two weeks, after a service of twenty-five years, he was due to retire. As it happened, he came from one of the villages near Wat Champa, which I had visited on my earlier trip. So I was able to tell him that his home was now in a contested area and very likely to be taken over by the Vietcong. He didn't seem at all worried or surprised by this. He was going to retire – and that was that.

But the guard on the north gate was young and had no option to retire. He wanted to leave the army. There were so many things he wanted to do, he said, if only he wasn't a soldier. When I asked him exactly what it was he wanted to do, he was at a loss to say. We sat and shivered and talked. The quiet landscape was brilliantly lit by the moon. To our left we could see the mountains through which the Ho Chi Minh trail used to run, and ahead of us the site of the new road. Although there was no noise of tanks or trucks, there was no particular comfort from the silence.

'Sometimes,' said the guard, 'I think I will go AWOL – I did it before but the military police arrested me.'

I told him that I thought it would be a very good idea to go AWOL. Some days later, when I was leaving Saigon, I received a visit from him in my hotel room. I was packing. The guard had come to Saigon because he was about to be moved on to some new operation. He didn't know where he was going, and he asked if I had any civilian clothes to spare.

'I want you to write,' said the director of the Open Arms programme whom I saw the next morning in Kontum, 'that the people of Kontum are not afraid of attack by the VC.' The idea of an attack was very much in the air. In Saigon it was feared that the coming dry season – January to May – would see a renewal of hostilities in the Central Highlands, and that Kontum, a well-known city, difficult to defend, would be a tempting target. It is surrounded by mountains and forests. 'You see that mountain,' said the director, as we drove aimlessly around the city, 'you see that mountain? It belongs to us.' But precious little else in Kontum belonged to Saigon.

We drove on south from Kontum through Pleiku to Ban Me Thuot, on a road that was alive with possibilities: we were told to expect bandits, Vietcong, the North Vietnamese Army, Montagnard guerrillas or the South Vietnamese. As the road deteriorated, it rose through thick forests to a clearing that commanded a panoramic view of Laos and Cambodia, and the fields where the Montagnards cultivated their rice. The road was quite free of traffic except at one point when a military convoy of empty trucks appeared, guarded by a helicopter. We were at pains to keep our distance, not wishing to be ambushed. First we overtook it, then we had a puncture and it passed us by. By the time the wheel was changed, we were quite alone.

We were alone, but it did not feel as if we were. At regular intervals along the road there were checkpoints, but none of them, on this day, seemed to be manned. Who had built the checkpoints

was a matter for conjecture, and it gave one an eerie feeling, to say the least, to wait around at each, in order to make sure it was possible to pass. The checkpoints were beautifully constructed bowers, woven out of the tall grasses that grew on the edge of the road, and the ground showed clearly that they had only recently been made and only recently abandoned. At one point, outside the checkpoint, a gleaming new B-41 rocket stood on its tripod. This suggested the presence of Vietcong – and yet it was uncharacteristic to leave good ammunition behind. Were they simply unwilling to show their faces? At another point, three stuffed mannikins of Saigon troops, with GI helmets, lay overturned on the road. This suggested magic, some terrible Montagnard curse perhaps.

'Fuck me, my friend,' said Jean-Claude, 'they're here somewhere, you know, that's for sure.' Sometimes, when it looked as if a checkpoint was very recent indeed, we would stop the car, get out and call into the forest – in French, in English, in Vietnamese. If the convoy had frightened them off, surely the convoy was now past. If they were listening in the bushes, they must have thought our behaviour was most singular.

Towards Ban Me Thuot – where some of the most recent battles had been fought – the road gradually improved. The sun began to sink and the villagers were returning from the fields in long columns, carrying sacks of rice on their shoulders. We saw one soldier marching in a column, but when he saw us he jumped off the road and scurried behind a hedge. Further on, we came to a Montagnard graveyard and stopped the car. On the other side of a small valley, there was a large fortified settlement. The cattle were being brought in for the night, and we could hear them lowing in the distance. It was a beautiful sight, in the sunset. One of the villagers recognized Jean-Claude from a year before, when he had been in military hospital. He told us that after being wounded, and after the South Vietnamese had disbanded the Montagnard units, he had decided to get out. We asked him whether we could spend the night in his settlement. He said no, it was not possible. He was a little shifty about his reasons, but I thought I understood them well enough.

Everything we had seen, everything we had been told, should have made it clear to us that something was about to happen. That night, in Ban Me Thuot itself we met an officer from the deuxième bureau who told us of the latest military disasters in Phuoc Long province. He said that he thought Ban Me Thuot would be attacked next, and that it might last at most three weeks. In Pleiku that morning, we had been told at length how reduced the ability of the South Vietnamese Army was, and how they would be unable to withstand any concerted attack. We were sceptical. We knew that South Vietnam was calling out urgently to America for more funds, and that it was therefore convenient to paint as gloomy a picture as possible. It also seemed highly improbable that with all those soldiers and all that material – the fourth largest air force in the world, the tanks, the trucks, the convoys we had seen, all that expensive equipment – well, it just seemed impossible that the whole show would be over in such a short space of time. In the end, yes – but if someone had come up to us and said, 'The Saigon regime has exactly four months left,' we should never have believed him.

As a matter of fact, someone did tell us just that, almost, on New Year's Eve, the last night of our journey together.

‘Man proposes, God disposes,’ he said, by way of opening the conversation. We were slightly taken aback. He was a cyclo-driver in Nha Trang, whom we had invited to join us at dinner to celebrate the New Year. ‘Yes,’ he had said, accepting our invitation, ‘if you have the goodness,’ and he took out his long trousers from under the seat, where, as was customary, they were kept ready pressed by the weight of customers. As he put on his trousers and joined us at the table, he seemed to grow in stature before our eyes. The servility left him, and he became garrulous in excellent French. It was as if everything he had ever learned during his French education and his period as a government employee in Tonkin had swelled up inside him and was now bursting out. He had a store of proverbs to meet every situation. When we asked him whether he resented being a cyclopousse after having been a fonctionnaire, he told us that every man must work in order to repay his debt to society, and that there was no such thing as stupid work, only stupid people.

The evening passed. He recited a poem about the poor in winter, and some verses about a princess weeping under a tree. After every line, he would give us a perfect paraphrase, in case the slightest shade of meaning had escaped us. Then he declaimed a poem by Lamartine, whom I vowed at once never to read. He sang a Boy Scout song (he was a keen Boy Scout, or had been) about the life of the matelot and its attendant dangers. Finally, with terrific flourish and style – you could almost hear the piano accompaniment – he sang a song called ‘Tant qu’ily aura des étoiles’: though we are only beggars, the song went, and although our life is utterly wretched, as long as there are the stars, we shall be blissfully content with our lot. He seemed at this point to be the paragon of supine virtues. And he had, of course, a thing or two to say about communism: violence, deception and lying are the methods employed, he said, by those who wish to attain a classless society. When we asked him, however, what he thought about the possibility of a classless society, he affected not to understand. Finally, using a phrase of Ho Chi Minh’s which had become a password for Vietnamese communism, Jean-Claude asked him: ‘Don’t you think that nothing is more precious than independence and liberty?’

At this point he underwent his second transformation of the evening. He looked down at the tablecloth and paused dramatically. Then, as he began to speak, his mouth twisted into the most extraordinary snarl. ‘I think that Vietnam has been a prey,’ he said, ‘a prey to foreigners. We could not do anything about it in the past because we were too weak and feeble. But things are changing now. The future, the future will show you’ – and here he raised his voice to the climax: ‘L’avenir vous montrera. Je ne peux pas dire plus que ça.’

The Fall of Saigon: April 1975

On my return to Saigon from this trip, I learned that the Khmer Rouge had launched their New Year offensive against Phnom Penh. Cambodia was my chief interest, and I went immediaely to report on the death-throes of the Lon Nol regime. During this time, the situation in Vietnam changed very fast. Ban Me Thuot was overrun by the North Vietnamese, and President Thieu decided to abandon the Central Highlands. His troops were decimated as they retreated, and the general collapse of the southern regime soon became inevitable. President Ford attempted to secure funds for both Vietnam and Cambodia, but in the end even he had to write off the Phnom

Penh regime. The American Embassy left Phnom Penh the day after Ford made the announcement in which this was implied. The majority of the press corps went with them. We were helicoptered to the USS Okinawa in the Gulf of Siam, and from there I made my way to Bangkok. I was angry with myself for having left Cambodia, and wondered what to do next. The question was – whether or not to go to Saigon? I knew that if I went I would not want to be evacuated by the Americans yet again. I would want to see this story through. So I took all the advice I could, and then decided I would go to Saigon and stay.

On 24 April 1975, the day before my twenty-sixth birthday, I boarded the plane for Saigon. In the seat next to me was a man named Garth W. Hunt, the Field Secretary for Asia of Living Bibles International, who was on his way to get his team out of Vietnam. His team was a 'hard core' of ten to fifteen translators who produced the Vietnamese Living Bible, plus a 'broad base' of theological and stylistic reviewers. Then there were the consultants ('men of stature, recognized in their own field') including literary consultants, exegetical consultants, theological consultants, technical consultants and editorial consultants. Each of these had a family and dependants and most of them wanted out.

Living Bibles International is an evangelical organization with strong, unmistakeable political leanings. 'God loves the sinner but he hates the sin,' said Mr Hunt, and in this case the sin was communism, which God certainly despised. So did Living Bibles International: at the present moment, their powerful transmitters were broadcasting the Chinese translation of the Living Bible at dictation speed into the People's Republic. 'International boundaries,' said Garth W. Hunt, 'can't keep out God's message.'

They'd had no luck in North Vietnam, although they had asked to work there. But in the south they had always had tremendous cooperation from the government. A translation of The Gospel According to Saint Mark, the only thing this vast organization had so far completed, had already sold 120,000 copies. It had been broadcast over the radio, and was distributed in camps and refugee centres. An earlier book, produced by a sister organization, had been distributed to every psychological warfare officer in the country, and also to every Vietnamese embassy and consulate throughout the world. 'This book,' said Mr Hunt, 'became the most influential book in Vietnam, apart from the word of God himself.' It was called God Still Performs Miracles.

My reading-matter for the journey, in addition to my complimentary copy of The Living Bible, was Time and Newsweek. Newsweek contained a story describing Khieu Samphan as he entered Phnom Penh: 'When he returned to Phnom Penh last week, Khieu Sampan [sic] was dressed in a simple black pajamas suit and krama. No one would have guessed from his peasant look that he had spent the last eight years plotting – and carrying out – the overthrow of the Cambodian government.' The story was written by Fay Willey in New York with Newsweek's reporter-in-the-field, 'Paul Brinkley Rogers in Hong Kong', who may have written the footnote explaining that Samphan's krama was a 'traditional Cambodian cotton scarf that can be worn as a turban, a towel to protect the neck or as a loin cloth.' The thing that puzzled me was where this story came from. No correspondent or news agency had reported seeing Khieu Samphan entering the city, and there was no evidence that he was even there. But somebody in New York must have assumed that he had been, looked up his photo, and written up the story nevertheless. This was an unusually vivid example of a tendency in American magazine journalism to embellish . . .

ever so slightly. I think it was six weeks before that Newsweek described the Khmer Rouge as prowling through the humid jungles around Phnom Penh. There are no jungles around Phnom Penh. It is likely that, if there had been jungles, they would have been humid, and it is possible that the Khmer Rouge, if anybody had been able to watch them, would have been prowling. So, given the jungles, everything else followed, more or less. Without the jungles, things were a little different.

The two magazines were run in a manner similar to that adopted by Living Bibles International: by committee. There was an army of researchers and rewrite men, the key figures, who stayed in the office. And given the fact that each magazine had its own journalists on the spot, it was surprising how often the stories originated in New York. Each week, someone in the office would read all the papers and wire services, and each week he would send out long lists of questions to the reporters and stringers. Steve Heder, the Phnom Penh Time stringer, once received a questionnaire for that week's story which included the thoughtful query: 'Do the homeless, poor, maimed etc. of Phnom Penh huddle under flimsy straw lean-tos. Know they have these in Saigon, but are they also in Phnom Penh?' You could see the idea forming in the guy's mind, and, being a scrupulous journalist, he wanted to make quite sure that there were some flimsy lean-tos for his homeless, poor, maimed etc. to huddle under. He was guarding against error, but he'd overlooked one point. The weather was very hot, and no one huddles under a lean-to when it is very hot.

Newsweek now makes it perfectly clear that the man on the spot is only helping someone in the office, whose name comes first. Occasionally, if a reporter does something rather spectacular, he is allowed to tell the story as he saw it. But this is a great honour. There was one such story in this same copy of Newsweek. It was about the fall of Xuan Loc, and pretty nasty stuff it was too. But the author, Nick Proffitt, told me that evening that even that story was touched up. He had had a pair of crutches lying in the road. Somebody in New York had decided it would read better as a forlorn pair of crutches. The chances that the crutches might have been anything other than forlorn – hilarious, for instance – were remote.

We landed in Saigon, and I got my tourist visa without any trouble – they seemed to be giving the things away. But the customs man confiscated my Time and Newsweek: it was at last impossible to allow too many Saigonese to see the wretched things. One of the covers had a photo of a Saigon soldier with a target drawn over his heart. It was headlined 'Target Saigon'. The customs man asked, 'Do you think . . . ?' and made a sign as if to slit his throat. I told him not to worry. Everything was going to be OK, no sweat.

I checked in at the small hotel near the market where I had stayed before, and went off to dinner at the Continental. The garden was crowded – tout le monde was there. Le Monde was there. The famous Dr Hunter S. Thompson was there, surrounded by admirers, and was rumoured to have bought a gun. All the Indochina hands were back for the last act, which to the Americans meant the evacuation. The Washington Post staff had now been ordered, under pain of dismissal, to leave with the Embassy. The New York Times had also ordered its journalists not to say behind, and the American networks were planning to evacuate. Everyone was talking about the secret password, which would be broadcast when the time came: an announcement that the temperature

was 105 and rising, followed by the song 'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas'. It was all very jolly: I had a good meal, and sloughed off some of the misery of Bangkok.

I was woken the next morning by a sharp rap on the door. In came a rather beautiful Vietnamese girl, who plunged, without preliminaries, into a passionate speech: She had been a nightclub dancer, and now she simply must leave Saigon, and I must help her. It was early in the morning and I was rather gruff. She redoubled her efforts. 'How can I live with the communists?' she wailed. 'I can't spend my money and I can't wear my clothes. I have to wear Vietcong clothes.' Then she kneeled on the floor beside my bed and pretended to cry – or gave what was, at best, a terrible imitation. 'Please help me,' she whined, 'please help me leave Saigon.' She was offering 300,000 piastres – a large sum for her, but with the soaring black market rate it amounted only to forty pounds. To earn this money I had only to say that she was my sister, then the Americans would give her papers. She would go to Hawaii, where she would automatically be given a US passport. She had a house in Singapore, which she could sell for $100,000. In addition, she already had $1,500 in greenbacks. The last figure she mouthed with respect and wonder. I decided that the house in Singapore was probably a fiction, and pointed out that the greenbacks would not last very long in the United States. But she had it worked out. She would live in Hawaii and set up a Vietnamese restaurant. There were so many Vietnamese going to Hawaii. She would be able to sell spring rolls and things like that. President Ford had said that two million Vietnamese could go to America. They could go this month, but after that it would be too late. I avoided giving her a definite answer, and she left the room in great distress.

300,000 piastres? people said scornfully. Oh we've been offered far more than that. Wherever you went, Saigon was using its most ingenious methods either to get out or to make money out of those who were leaving. It was said that the Americans were also running the rackets. Hopeful young girls would be relieved of their savings and then left stranded. The bars of Tu Do Street had been combed by the talent-spotters of the Phillipines. An enormous number of people were caught up in a craze for leaving. In a friend's hotel, I met a youth of about twenty rushing around asking for help. He had suddenly remembered something his father had given him – the torn end-paper of a book on which was written an American name and address. In his other hand, he carried the wording of a cable: 'Please send a cable to American Embassy Saigon accepting responsibility for . . . ' It seemed highly unlikely that the addressee would have any recollection of either father or son. Nevertheless we told the boy to send the cable with that wording. He didn't know how to send a cable. He did not know why he wanted to go; he knew only that he had to. He confessed that his head was in a spin. From his manner it seemed as if he had about five minutes to get out, or face the firing-squad.

This mad dash for the planes had begun about a week before when it was noticed that the Embassy had started rounding up the people they believed to be in danger when the communists took over. The calls had been carefully conducted under cover of darkness, in the manner of a Stalinist arrest. The criterion was broad. As one of the embassy personnel put it, ‘The kind of people who know us are the kind of people who would be in trouble.’ The Embassy was clearing out everyone in its address book, but to do so they also had to take their wives and families, and the families got larger and larger. The rich Vietnamese also wanted to take their maids. Sometimes this would be challenged at the airport: it was not customary in America to have maids. So the rich Vietnamese would then turn round and dismiss their maids with a wave of the hand. Then there was a flood of letters to the Embassy from Americans and Vietnamese living in America . . . Discreet diplomats would pad up the stairs, knock quietly so as not to arouse the neighbours, and deliver the message: ‘Your son-in-law says you must leave. Can you be ready this time tomorrow night?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t got a suitcase.’

‘Couldn’t you buy a suitcase?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘All right then?’

‘What shall I wear?’ And so on.

Sometimes these visits must have been welcome. At other times they shattered a few illusions. A man, living not far from my hotel, was a member of the local defence force. I sat up late one night with him and the other members of the force, drinking Vietnamese spirit and chatting about what was going to happen. They were clear about one thing: they would not lift a finger to defend the area from the Vietcong. They had seen the writing on the wall; when the Vietcong arrived, their duties ended. They all talked with admiration for the other side, and there was not a trace of the usual intransigence or panic of Saigon.

The exodus was continuing at a rate of about 10,000 a day. It was estimated at the time that out of each day's departures, 3,000 had Embassy connections, 1,000 were relatives of Americans and 1,000 were friends or contacts of Americans. What about all the rest? When I went to Tan Son Nhuot airport to watch the processing of the evacuees, I found very few who had a clear notion of why they were leaving. Some were North Vietnamese refugees from the 1950s, others were going because they had once worked in PX stores or as ancillary staff on American bases. One woman just did not know why she was going. Her husband had left the north as a young student. Her sister was married to an American, who had insisted that the family should leave. She did not want to do so at all. She was leaving so much behind. For instance, she had saved up for five years in order to buy her son a piano. It had only just arrived. Another man did know. He claimed to have led the National Revolutionary Movement in the days of Diem. 'Obviously,' he

said, ‘as a journalist you will know what it means to live under communism. No? Then you should not in that case be a journalist.’

There were snack stands at the entrace to Tan Son Nhuot, set up to cater for the waiting crowd of refugees, many of whom slipped past the guards without any papers. Processing was done in the Defence Attache’s Office Compound, one of the last bits of pure America left in Vietnam. The last hurdle was in the gymnasium, under the basketball net. There were old notices reminding you not to bring in your pets, and not to put your hands on the walls. The forms were filled in by sour-looking GIs in olive drab, with daggers hanging from their belts. The prevailing atmosphere was of general menace.

While the American evacuation accelerated, the Vietcong, we later discovered, were filling the place up with their own troops. The operation was haphazard. The soldiers came in wearing Saigon uniforms, in military trucks that had been acquired during the last few months, as the Southern army had retreated in disarray. But the soldiers had no identity cards and must have lived continually on the verge of discovery. They took up positions near important installations, in order to take control swiftly when the time came. The students’ groups were also working out what to do in order to help in the takeover, and the Chinese, the shrewdest businessmen in Saigon, were already manufacturing the three-coloured flags of the National Liberation Front, in readiness for a quick sale. There must have been a tremendous run on the haberdashers. When red, blue and yellow cloth ran out, they used coloured plastic.

One night I was awakened by the sound of three large crashes, and I realized that the rocketing had begun. I went up to the top floor of my hotel (once a bar and billiard room for GIs) where I had a good view over the roofs. Already there was a large fire, fuelled no doubt by the petrol kept in the houses of the poor. Soon a whole block was ablaze, and the fire was spreading. I watched it with mixed feelings: the Vietcong had announced their proximity – the fire, though distant, spelled an immediate danger; nevertheless a city fire, far enough away, has a terrible splendour. The fire attracted me. The next day I walked around the burnt-out area, a huddled group of makeshift shacks built on an old Catholic graveyard. The fire brigade had refused to put out the blaze until massive bribes had been produced, and a large number of poor people's homes had consequently been destroyed. All this I might have guessed at the time, and yet I was excited by the fire. It seemed to be the curtain-raiser for the last act.

The next morning, 28 April, began dramatically enough. I went out to the edge of the city at about six-thirty, where I found that the Vietcong had come to the very outskirts of Saigon and had closed the road on the other side of the bridge. There were, it turned out, only a few of them, but they served their purpose, calling down a massive amount of firepower where they were ensconced. Saigon brought out all its weapons, and the helicopter gunships blasted away all day.

It was not until evening that the road was cleared of a few brave men. After watching this scene for a time, I went back to my room and was reading a book when, without warning, the city became ablaze with rifle fire. I thought: that's it. The insurrection has begun.

Once again, I went up to the top floor, but this time there was nothing to see. There was simply a noise, a massive, unvaried, unstinting noise. It was too uniform. There was meant to be grenades, machine-guns, more variety. I asked a member of the hotel staff. Perhaps a coup d'état, he said, shrugging. That, again, was possible. But then, as suddenly as it had started, the firing ceased. I walked out into the deserted street. No dead bodies. Nobody much around. On the corner I met a soldier, and gave him a quizzical look. 'Sorry about that,' he said, and turned away.

President Minh, at this time, would have just finished his speech, calling on the Americans to leave, and on the other side to negotiate. The other side would have been answering that this was not enough – there had to be total unconditional surrender. For it was at the same time, for the first and last time in the war, that the Vietcong air force was brought into play. It had been a masterly piece of timing. These planes had been picked up in the previous months, having been left behind as the provinces north of Saigon had fallen in swift succession and in such disarray. Now these same South Vietnamese planes were used to bomb the Saigon air force. There was no other way in which the Vietcong could ever have used an air force except against an air base. To have done so at that moment was to announce imminent victory, and to make sure that the victory cost them as little blood as possible. As for the firing I heard outside my hotel, the troops had been told of enemy planes on the attack, but they were confused. The plane they were firing at was in fact civilian. It got away.

The incident unnerved people. It was a foretaste, we thought. From now on, anything could happen, and happen swiftly. And when something did happen, there would be nothing we could do about it.

The next morning I was woken by the ancient doorman of the hotel, who walked straight into my room carrying one loaf of French bread, two large chunks of palm sugar and a bottle of Coca-Cola. He returned a little later with ice, and insisted I get up and eat. I gathered from a rather complicated conversation that there was still a curfew, and that these were the siege rations. The bread was wrapped in what appeared to be an American Embassy report. As I attempted to eat the sugar and the bread, there was another knock. A young man came in, looking for an American who had promised to get him out of the country. He had been planning to leave from New Port the night before, but the place had been under attack. Now his father, a captain in the army, was waiting outside. We talked for a while. The young man had an infinitely sad face. He was not pushing. He probably knew already that he had missed his last chance. Anyway, he was unclear about why he wanted to leave Vietnam. I told him that he should not leave, since this was his country, and if he left it now he would never get back. He said wistfully, 'I like going to the country. My family always goes to the country for holidays. We go to Rach Gia and Ha Tien.' I said that Ha Tien was now in the hands of the Vietcong. He said: 'Do you think people are happy in Ha Tien?' I said I thought so. We discussed what would happen to his father, and I tried to reassure him. But he left as sadly as he had come in.

The curfew did not seem to be very strict, so I set out to find the other journalists and see what was happening. Saigon looked beautiful that morning, with its deserted streets. Everyone was

smiling. There were families standing in the doorways, smiling. A group of soldiers passed, smiling. A beggar girl in a tattered silk blouse, to whom I gave some money, ran laughing along beside me. She was young, with an idiot look and no teeth. Clearly the curfew did not apply to idiots. There was a Sunday morning atmosphere. I felt very happy, as if I were in some English town, setting out to buy the Sunday papers. On the way I met one of my friends from the local defence force, who told me that the airport had been attacked during the night. I appeared to have slept through everything.

At the Continental all the journalists were talking about the previous night's fighting at the airport. They had seen planes shot down with Strela missiles and this, coupled with the previous day's panic when the airport had been bombed, convinced several people that they should leave. Others who had not intended to stay on were having difficulty making up their minds. I felt very excited, but did not consider going. The same principle that had taken me from Phnom Penh would keep me in Saigon. I had made my decision in advance. But I can't deny that I felt a certain superiority to those rushing around, paying their bills, gathering their stuff together, or dithering.

There was a strong move that all the British journalists remaining behind, one of whom was keen to acquire a gun, should stick together. The main worry for those staying on was that the 'friendlies' might get nasty. One of the calculations of those leaving was that the Vietcong would certainly be nasty. As a Beaverbrook reporter said to me, 'I wouldn't like to be interrogated by them. You know, they have methods . . . '

'I doubt if it would come to that,' I said.

'Have you ever done any work with the Americans?' he asked.

'No, I was never here with the Americans.'

'Well, I can think of things I've done, places I've been and so on, that I'd find very difficult to explain away.'

I never found out exactly what he meant. As the hotel emptied I looked at the garden and was reminded of Coleridge: 'Well, they are gone and here I must remain, This Lime-tree bower my prison.' I said: 'Won't it be nice to have the place to ourselves.' This remark was considered incredibly irritating.

I had to get my possessions and bring them to the Continental. As I walked along the street people asked me why I had not left yet. 'Are you French or Australian?' they asked. One small restaurant was open, in which a group of lieutenants were sitting eating Chinese chicken and drinking Johnnie Walker Black Label. They invited me to join them, which I did with some diffidence since they were obviously out to get drunk, and might therefore become aggressive. They began by explaining that they would sit there until they were killed. I tried to say that I thought they were wrong, but when I explained why, I saw at once that I had gone too far. Ice formed over the conversation. 'How long did you spend with the communists?' they asked. I said I hadn't been with the communists. Hitherto we had been talking in English. Then we switched to French. They were amused, they said, that when I started speaking in French I began to tremble.

I was afraid that I had fallen into the hands of precisely those 'friendlies' who were supposed to turn nasty. I reached out for a piece of chicken and nonchalantly picked up the head. It was not the part I had had in mind, but I bit into the eyeballs with great gusto, and sucked out the brains.

The ice was finally broken when one of the officers asked in Cambodian whether I spoke Khmer. A little, I said, and we exchanged a few phrases. These men belonged to a breed that was just on the verge of extinction – the nattily dressed, well-groomed, gun-toting, sunglass-wearing, American-style, narcissistic junior officer. The weight of their impending extinction bore down upon them.

Inevitably, the conversation returned to the impending takeover. I asked them why they were afraid. They were well aware, they said, that in Phnom Penh the people had greeted the Khmer Rouge with open arms. But they said that that was just for appearances. Afterwards there would be a settling of accounts. They insisted again that they were going to die. I bade them farewell. They repeated that they were going to sit there drinking all day, until they died.

Some people get rich on others' misfortunes, and it appeared that I was one of them. I became, during the course of the day, acting bureau chief of the Washington Post. I had a bureau! The keys were waiting for me in the office, together with a charming farewell note from the staff. I had a pleasant young Vietnamese assistant, who was good enough to show me how to open the drawer to get at the office petty cash. The office was well equipped; I could have moved in to live. Nice bathroom, plenty of books, fridge, bottle of Polish vodka in the fridge. I settled down to work, assuming that the evacuation had begun, since there was now a fairly large amount of helicopter activity over the city. I had also assumed that the operation would be conducted as quickly as it had been in Phnom Penh. But this was not so. A few moments later I got a phone call from the Washington Post's former Bureau Chief, David Greenway. He was at the US Embassy. They were stuck. Nobody had come yet, and Embassy staff were getting nervous that the place might be shelled. Oh, and did I want the car keys? They had left the Volkswagen by the Embassy gate.

I went round to the Embassy. The crowd outside had grown, but it had not yet reached the alarming proportions of later in the day. There were shady Koreans, a few stranded Americans and several hundred Vietnamese waiting around or attempting to argue with the Marines on the gate. South Vietnamese Army Officers in mufti would come up and, producing an Embassy visiting card, say, 'Excuse me, I'm a good friend of Mr So-and-so. Do you think I could get in?' Greenway appeared on one of the Embassy's turrets and threw down the Washington Post car keys. He had the look of a man convinced that he was about to be shelled, but was far too polite to mention the fact. I went to the car, and found that I lacked the knack of turning the key in the ignition. It had always been troublesome, and I had never driven the thing before. In fact, I had never, I remembered suddenly, learned how to drive. As I tried to start it I became nervous at being so close to the Embassy. There was a sound of rifle-fire nearby, and around the Embassy the police would occasionally shoot in the air when some angry man became too importunate. I decided to abandon the car.

Before too long the large helicopters, the Jolly Green Giants, began to appear, and as they did so the mood of the city suffered a terrible change. There was no way of disguising this evacuation by sleight-of-hand, or, it appeared, of getting it over quickly. The noise of the vast helicopters, as they corkscrewed out of the sky, was a fearful incentive to panic. The weather turned bad. It began to rain. And as the evening grew darker, it seemed as if the helicopters themselves were blotting out the light. It seemed as if the light had gone forever. All the conditions conspired

against calm. All over Saigon there were people who had been promised an escape. There were others, like the officers of the morning, who thought that they would definitely die. And there were others still who for no definite reason went into a flat spin. Always the beating of the helicopter blades reminded them of what was happening. The accumulated weight of the years of propaganda came crashing down upon a terrified city.

The crowd around the Embassy swelled and its desperation increased. It became dangerous to go out on the streets. The looters were out and the cowboys were on their Hondas: who knew what grudge might be worked out on the white face of a passer-by? The first major looting took place at the Brinks building, which had served as a billet for American officers from the earliest days of US involvement in Indochina. It proved a rich source of booty. To add to the confusion of the city, the electricity cut out at around seven in the evening. It was then that I had to make my second move of the day, from the Continental to the Caravelle Hotel across the square, where it had finally been decided that we should all stay together for however long it took for order to be restored. A mere matter of lugging a few cases across a small square – but I remember finding it an arduous and frightening task, as the Honda boys drove by shouting 'Yankee, go home!' I cursed the Embassy for its bungled withdrawal, and began for the first time to admire John Gunther Dean, the American Ambassador in Phnom Penh who had evacuated at such speed. But here: always the sound of the helicopters, stirring the panic, making things worse.

Indoors it was all right. Finishing my work in my new office that evening, I came across a note from my nice Vietnamese assistant. It informed me that the office was most likely to be looted by the soldiers, and that the assistant had therefore taken home the petty cash. This was the last time I saw the man. Well, easy come, easy go, I thought. I went to the fridge, and broached the Polish vodka. It turned out to be water.

The power cut turned out to be a godsend, since by the time light was restored the majority of the crowd had gone home and the police had regained control of the streets. As the lights went on in the Caravelle Hotel, they found our gallant press corps in the best of spirits. We didn't know how long we would be holed up in the hotel, or in what manner the city would fall. Most people I think were envisaging a rather slow and bloody takeover, but this did not spoil the brave mood of the evening. We had a distant view of the war. Towards the airport it appeared that an ammunition dump was exploding. Great flames rose up and slowly subsided. It went on for hours, like some hellish furnace from Hieronymus Bosch. If you went up on to the roof itself you could hear the war from every direction. But the city centre had calmed down.

I had one more story to send out. In the foyer of the hotel I found a policeman in mufti, and arranged to walk with him to the Reuters office. It was OK at first, but as we approached the dark area around the cathedral we both became more and more apprehensive. Turning left, we walked down the middle of the road, hand in hand, to keep up each other's spirits. We exhibited all the heroism of children in the dark. To any Vietcong agent, watching us from the top branches of the trees, I should say we must have looked too touching to kill.

Early on the morning of 30 April, I went out of my hotel room to be greeted by a group of hysterical Koreans. 'The Americans have called off the evacuation!' said one. The group had been unable to get into the Embassy, had waited the whole night and had now given up. Of all the nationalities to fear being stranded in Saigon, the Koreans had most reason. I went up to breakfast in the top-floor restaurant, and saw that there were still a few Jolly Green Giants landing on the Embassy, but that the group on the Alliance Franchise building appeared to have been abandoned. They were still standing there on the roof, packed tight on a set of steps. Looking up at the sky, they seemed to be taking part in some kind of religious ritual, waiting for a sign. In the Brinks Building, the looting continued. A lone mattress fell silently from a top floor balcony.

There was one other group at breakfast – an eccentric Frenchman with some Vietnamese children. The Frenchman was explaining to the waiter that there had been some binoculars available the night before, and he wanted to use them again. The waiter explained that the binoculars belonged to one of the hotel guests.

'That doesn't matter,' said the Frenchman, 'bring them to me.'

The waiter explained that the binoculars were probably in the guest's room.

'Well go and get them then!' said the Frenchman. It seemed extraordinary that the Frenchman could be so adamant, and the waiter so patient, under the circumstances. I had orange juice and coffee, and noted that the croissants were not fresh.

Then I went to the American Embassy, where the looting had just begun. The typewriters were already on the streets outside, there was a stink of urine from where the crowd had spent the night, and several cars had been ripped apart. I did not bother to check what had happened to mine, but went straight into the Embassy with the looters.

The place was packed, and in chaos. Papers, files, brochures and reports were strewn around. I picked up one letter of application from a young Vietnamese student, who wished to become an Embassy interpreter. Some people gave me suspicious looks, as if I might be a member of the Embassy staff – I was, after all, the only one there with a white face – so I began to do a little looting myself, to show that I was entering into the spirit of the thing. Somebody had found a package of razor blades, and removed them all from their plastic wrappers. One man called me over to a wall-safe, and seemed to be asking if I knew the number of the combination. Another was hacking away at an air-conditioner, another dismantling a fridge.

On the first floor there was more room to move, and it was here I came across the Embassy library. I collected the following items: one copy of Peace is not at Hand by Sir Robert Thompson, one of the many available copies of The Road from War by Robert Shaplen, Barrington Moore's Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy (I had been meaning to read it for some time), a copy of a pacification report from 1972 and some Embassy notepaper. Two things I could not take (by now I was not just pretending to loot – I had become quite involved): a reproduction of an 1873 map of Hanoi, and a framed quotation from Lawrence of Arabia, which read, 'Better to let them do it imperfectly than to do it perfectly yourself, for it is their country, their way, and your time is short.' Nearby I found a smashed portrait of President Ford, and a Stars and Stripes, mangled in the dirt.

I found one room which had not yet been touched. There were white chairs around a white table, and on the table the ashtrays were full. I was just thinking how eerie it looked, how recently vacated, when the lights went out. At once, a set of emergency lights, photo-sensitively operated, turned themselves on above each doorway. The building was still partly working; even while it was being torn to pieces, it had a few reflexes left.

From this room, I turned into a small kitchen, where a group of old crones were helping themselves to jars of Pream powdered milk. When they looked up and saw me, they panicked, dropped the powdered milk and ran. I decided that it would be better to leave the building. It was filling up so much that it might soon become impossible to get out. I did not know that there were still some marines on the roof. As I forced my way out of the building, they threw tear-gas down on the crowd, and I found myself running hard, in floods of tears.

Although the last helicopter was just now leaving, people still thought there were other chances of getting out. One man came up to me and asked confidentially if I knew of the alternative evacuation site. He had several plausible reasons why he was entitled to leave. Another man, I remember, could only shout, 'I'm a professor, I'm a professor, I'm a professor,' as if the fact of his academic status would cause the Jolly Green Giants to swoop down out of the sky and whisk him away.

There was by now a good deal of activity on the streets. Military trucks went to and fro across town, bearing loads of rice, and family groups trudged along, bearing their possessions. As I finished writing my Embassy story, the sirens wailed three times, indicating that the city itself was under attack. I returned to the hotel roof to see what was happening. The group on the Alliance Française building was still there, still waiting for its sign. Across the river, but not far away, you could see the artillery firing, and the battle lines coming closer. Then two flares went up, one red, one white. Somebody said that the white flare was for surrender. In the restaurant, the waiters sat by the radio. I asked them what was happening. 'The war is finished,' said one.

I looked down into the square. Almost at once, a waiter emerged from the Continental and began to hoist a French tricolour on the flagpole. There were groups of soldiers, apparently front-line troops, sitting down. From the battlefield across the river, the white flares began to go up in great numbers. Big Minh's broadcast had been heard – offering unconditional surrender – and in a matter of minutes the war would be well and truly over.

Under such circumstances, what does one do? For the poor of Saigon, the first reaction was to loot as much as possible. For most of the soldiers, it was to give in as quickly as possible, and make oneself scarce. For the victorious troops, for the students and Vietcong sympathizers within the city, it was a question of taking control as quickly as possible. For the reporter, there was a choice: go out and see what was happening, or write about it. It was a cruel choice, but it was clear that the lines would soon either be jammed or go down altogether. For a stringer, the burden of the choice is even greater, since it is during such moments that he earns the fat off which he has to live during the lean years. The first two laws of stringing are: the more you file the more you earn; and, the more you file the less you learn. I mention this because, throughout the remainder of the day and in the days that followed, all my reactions were underscored by a worry about getting the thing written up, and not just written up but sent out. Whereas all my instincts were not to write at all. In the end the instincts won, hands down.

I took a lift with Brian Barron of the BBC along with his small crew, who had remained after their American counterparts had already left. We went out towards the Newport Bridge, in a small car driven by a Vietnamese. The Union Jack was flying from the aerial, and the BBC sign was clearly displayed. As we drove along past the lines of anxious faces, it became clear to me that I had come with the wrong crew. The soldiers whom we tried to film thought that the BBC

had been on the side of the Vietcong. It had been denounced by Thieu, and now, in the moment of defeat, was no time to be flying the Union Jack. There was a large amount of military activity on the roads: truckloads of soldiers returning from the front. There was one bulldozer racing back from the bridge, with a whole platoon sitting in the scoop. The tanks were waiting by the tank-traps, many of them with their crew still in position. As we stopped to film them, I noticed one soldier fingering a grenade, weighing it thoughtfully in his hand. In the doors of houses, families waited nervously. By Newport Bridge itself, the looting of the American stores was still going on, a desperate last-minute effort which would hold up, in parts of the city, the advance of the victorious troops. The first thing the North Vietnamese and Vietcong saw as they came into Saigon was crowds of looters dragging sacks of rice and cartons of luxury goods. It must have justified their view of the degeneracy of the city.

But they had not yet arrived. Walking up to the top of the bridge, we wondered whether to go on to meet them, or retrace our steps. Then we were called back to the car by the Governor of Gia Dinh.

He looked exceedingly angry and unpleasant – he and one of his officers laden down with pistols and grenades, ready perhaps to make their last stand against the encroaching communists. They were fat men, with twisted faces, gripped no doubt by the bitterness of betrayal.

Where had we been?

To the top of the bridge.

No, they said, we had come from the Vietcong.

We replied that we had been to the bridge because we wanted to film.

‘I don’t want to hear any more,’ said the Governor, ‘how much did they pay you? How much did the Vietcong pay you?’

‘Look,’ said Brian Barron, ‘I’m not Vietcong. I’m afraid of the Vietcong. When the Vietcong start shooting, I lie down.’

‘Why do you lie to me?’ said the Governor of Gia Dinh.

I thought, ‘This is it. He’s going to kill us.’ And apart from the fear of death itself, there seemed to be something particularly bitter and unfair in being killed as a traitor after the defeat. But instead of killing us, the Governor told me to remove the Union Jack from the car, and ordered one of the film crew to take the BBC label off his camera. The Union Jack was stuck to the aerial with Elastoplast and I remember wondering whether my trembling hands would ever get the thing off. The Governor then ordered us to push our car between two tank-traps, where it was later found, completely squashed by a tank.

I wanted to get back to the city centre as quickly as possible – we were now going to have to walk – and I couldn’t understand why Barron was taking such a long time. He seemed to be looking for something in the car, and later he told me what it was. A few days before, he had been reading Ho Chi Minh’s works, and had shoved them under the back seat, out of sight. Now he was afraid that they would suddenly find the book, and shoot us on the spot. He therefore decided to get the thing out and shove it under his shirt. He went back to the car, put his hand under the seat, and discovered that the book was gone.

By now there was chaos on the streets. The trucks which had passed us in one direction as we were coming out of Saigon appeared to have returned. Clearly nobody knew where to go. There was gunfire at the crossroads just ahead, and I think that we all felt, having lost our car, in great danger. We were saved by a taxi-man who dumped a load of customers and offered to take us back for four thousand piastres. I would have paid whatever I had. We got into the car, put our heads down, and sped back to the city centre.

In the Reuters office I was writing an account of what I had just seen when Barron came in again.

'I don't know what's happening,' he said, 'I've just seen a tank with the flag of the National Liberation Front.' I went to the door and looked out to the left, in the direction of Thieu's palace, and saw the tank. Without thinking, I ran after it and flagged it down just as it turned towards the palace gates. The tank slowed down and a North Vietnamese soldier in green jumped off the back and went at me with his gun, as if to hit me. In my confusion, I couldn't remember the NLF salute, or how to explain to the soldier that I wanted a ride. I tried everything – a salute, another salute, a clenched fist, a hitch-hiker's thumb. Finally (after, that is, a few extremely nervous seconds) I held out my hand to shake his. He took my hand abruptly and indicated the back of the tank. I remember worrying, as I climbed on, that I might touch something very hot. Then, as the soldiers told me to keep my head down, I idiotically produced my passport, which they dismissed scornfully. The tank speeded up, and rammed the left side of the palace gate. Wrought iron flew into the air, but the whole structure refused to give. I nearly fell off. The tank backed again, and I observed a man with a nervous smile opening the centre portion of the gate. We drove into the grounds of the palace, and fired a salute.

I had taken a ride on the first tank to reach the palace, but it was not until several weeks later that I realized this was the case: looking up from my crouching position at the back, I saw another vehicle in the grounds (which turned out to be a South Vietnamese tank). Damn, I thought, I was on the second; still, never mind. I wondered whether I was under arrest. I tried to talk to the soldiers, but I did not notice that some of them were captured troops of the South Vietnamese Army who had been co-opted in order to show the way. On the top of the tank was an open carton of Winston cigarettes, which struck me as odd. No doubt it had been thrown up from the looting crowd. I also remember noticing that another tank was passing behind us on the lawn. Its tracks crushed the verge of a flower bed, and I remember thinking: that was unnecessary. Also, I noticed an extraordinary number of dragonflies in the air.

I was very, very excited. The weight of the moment, the privilege of being a witness, impressed itself at once. Over and above my self-consciousness, and the trivial details which were made all the more interesting by the extraordinary nature of the event, there was the historical grandeur of the scene. Events in history are not supposed to look historical: no eye perceived a battlefield at a glance, no dying leader composed his followers around him in the neo-classical manner; many war photographs, even some of the great ones, are said to have been rearranged. The victors write, rewrite, or retouch their history. Indeed in one western account of these events, I noticed that the tank I have just described was meant to have knocked the palace gate to the ground 'like a wooden twig'. The man who opened the gate, a civilian guard, has in this account been subbed out. The guards themselves have fled. Nothing is allowed to interfere with the symmetry of the scene, or interrupt the conquest with wild, flailing arms.

And yet the North Vietnamese do not merely touch-up history. They also enact it in the heroic manner. This was the first time I had seen their genius for imposing their style upon events, for acting in the manner of their propaganda. The spectacle was tremendous and, as one of their officers realized, not to be missed. He ran up to a British cameraman filming the arrival of the tanks, and begged him: 'You take film for us? You take film for us?' The tanks rolled on to the lawn, and formed automatically into a semicircle in front of the palace, firing a salute into the air as they did so. Soon the air became full of the sound of saluting guns. Beside the gate, sitting in a row on the lawn, was a group of soldiers, former members of the palace guard. They waved their hands above their heads in terror. An NLF soldier took his flag and, waving it above his head, ran into the palace. A few moments later, he emerged on the terrace, waving the flag round and round. Later still, there he was on the roof. The red and yellow stripes of the Saigon regime were lowered at last.

I thought, I shall know if I'm under arrest when I jump off the tank. There came suddenly to mind a story of a plane which went through an electric storm: when it touched down, all the passengers were electrocuted on contact with the earth. I jumped off, and noticed that I was still alive and free. The palace grounds filled up with soldiers, and trucks were arriving all the time. The broad avenue towards the cathedral became the centre for the arriving troops. Their vehicles and helmets were covered in leaves, their uniforms were green. A great wave of greenery swept over the city. It blended into the grass and the trees of the avenue. Only the red armbands and the red tags on the guns stood out. Everything had changed in a trice.

For the Westerners present, it was an occasion for overt celebration. I saw Jean-Claude running through the palace gates, his hands over his head, his cameras swinging hectically around his body. Old colleagues greeted each other with delight. We felt bound to congratulate each other, as if we had a right to partake of the victory. For the National Liberation Front troops, on the other hand, such satisfaction as they felt was completely suppressed. They sat down and lit up North Vietnamese cigarettes, like men who had simply done a good day's work – they were justified and did not need praise. Sometimes they shook hands with the foreigners, occasionally they smiled, or waved from the trucks, but never once did I see them lose their self-control.

I walked past the cathedral, and came upon a North Vietnamese soldier in a condition of extreme embarrassment. He was facing a wall, secretly looking at something. I thought he was embarrassed by having to relieve himself in front of a group of interested onlookers, but in fact he was consulting his compass, unsure of where he was supposed to be. The group realized his difficulty, and gave him directions. At this moment the fire brigade drove past, lights blazing, horn blaring, waving their hats in the air, in expressions of wild delight. Further down, along Tu Do Street, I met a friend and we walked together to the Ministry of Defence, which was in the process of surrendering. At these ceremonies, a salute was always fired over the building, and so the city must have been full of falling lead, and yet I never heard of anyone being injured from such fall-out. This was one of the many curious features of the day.

The most dramatic change that had taken place was the complete disappearance of the Saigon army. All round the streets one would come across piles of clothes, boots and weapons. Some of the piles were so complete it looked as if their former occupant had simply melted into his boots. And then, in the doorways, one would see young men in shorts, hanging around with an air of studied indifference, as if to say, 'Don't look at me, I always dress like this – it's the heat, you know.' Where groups of soldiers had been caught and told to surrender, they were made to take off their clothes and sit down. I came across one such group by the town hall.

Slowly the streets were beginning to fill up again. Occasionally the requisitioned jeeps of the former regime came past, full of cheering youths in gear that was intended to look like Vietcong attire. These new revolutionary enthusiasts were immediately distinguished in appearance and behaviour from the real thing. Some of them were disarmed on the spot. Others were to carry on for several days or weeks before being identified, but for the moment they had a great fling, cheering, shouting and riding around. Most people were still indoors, wondering what would happen to them. The first to appear on the streets and talk to the soldiers were the old men, women and young children. They brought out tea to the tired troops, and sat with them, firing questions about what would happen next. The reassurance they received spread visibly throughout the suspicious city, and in a short while the areas where the troops were concentrated (around the palace and the port) took on the air of a massive teach-in.

The sorts of questions being asked were: Would there be revenge? Would those who had left North Vietnam at the time of the division be forced to return? Would the women be forced to cut their hair? Would those with painted nails have them pulled out, without anaesthetic? Would the women be forcibly married off to the crippled soldiers of the North? To all such questions, the answer was a gentle no. Another question was, what did the North Vietnamese eat? The fact that

such a question could be put shows the ignorance of young Saigon about Hanoi, since the answer of course was rice.

I was getting very hungry and thirsty after the exertions of the day, so I wandered down to my old hotel by the market. The manager was pleased, and rather surprised, to see me. She had obviously assumed that, whatever I said, I would in fact leave with the Americans. I told her what was happening outside. 'We are very pleased to welcome the liberation forces,' she said, through clenched teeth. The night-club dancer, whom I had failed to assist to leave, was also there. She gave me some very sick looks. She had dressed simply, in black pyjamas, and done up her hair in a bun, in what she imagined would be a manner suitable for receiving the forces of liberation. The landlady and the old doorman produced from the siege rations a meal of bread, olives, walnuts, cheese and beer. It was the first and last time that the landlady ever let me have anything for free.

A phrase ran through my mind, from the time of the arrival of the tanks, and on through the day as I wandered round the streets, meeting people I knew, watching the chatting groups, and seeing how the whole place settled down. The phrase was: 'a permanent and marvellous disgrace'. It seemed to me evident, and bitterly ironical, that all the talk of what the North Vietnamese would do when – if – they took Saigon, all of it had been wrong. During the whole of the day I saw only three or four corpses. The North Vietnamese Army were clearly the most disciplined troops in the world. They had done nothing out of order, and it could not be that they were just waiting till the foreigners were out of the way before setting about the rape and pillage which many had prophesied. You could not fake the sort of discipline they had shown, nor could the events of the day be depicted (even by the most bigoted critic) as anything other than a triumph – a triumph that exceeded the expectations of their warmest, most bigoted, admirers. Consequently when the

story was told (by now the lines were down), it would disgrace those who had predicted otherwise. It would be a permanent and marvellous disgrace; the CIA and Pentagon boffins, a generation of hawks, would be made to stand forever in the corner, wearing the dunce's cap. I did not think that Saigon had been liberated in the way that would shortly be made out. I did not think that there had been an uprising – I had seen no real evidence for such a thing. But the victorious army had justified itself by its behaviour alone. That I will never forget.

Peace had come, more or less. In the afternoon one desperate group of South Vietnamese soldiers had made a last attempt at a fire-fight right in the centre of town, and sometimes in the distance one would hear explosions, for which I never found the reason. Along the outskirts of the town the looting continued wherever any wealthy establishment had been abandoned, or wherever the troops had not yet arrived to take control. I went to the Buddhist University, where the students were already organizing the collection of the enormous number of arms that had been abandoned on the streets. Nguyen Huu Thai, the student leader, greeted us and gave us a form of identification which would serve for the next few days. Were we not impressed? he asked. Was it not like the Paris Commune of 1871?

As we drove back, we passed the Taiwanese and Malaysian Embassies, which were being very thoroughly looted. People were stealing everything, including the chandeliers. The young students who had taken it upon themselves to stop the looting tried to do so by firing into the air. When this did not work, one of them adopted a most terrifyingly effective technique. Holding a rifle in his left hand and a pistol in his right, he pointed the pistol at a looter and fired his rifle into the air.

Back at the Caravelle Hotel, I watched the landscape settle down in peace. The flares still went up, on and on into the night. The intense excitement of the past days subsided into an irritable exhaustion. I had a bitter argument with one of my greatest friends, and went to bed in the worst of spirits. As my head sank into the pillow I burst into tears.

After the Fall

May Day 1975 was probably an occasion for worldwide celebration of the liberation of Saigon. I don't know. In Saigon itself, indeed throughout Vietnam, May Day was not celebrated. It had been cancelled by Hanoi, as part of the war effort, and now, the day after the war was over, it was too late to organize. May Day would have to wait.

I went out at dawn on May Day morning. The flares were still going up, and the flags of the National Liberation Front had already appeared on public buildings. NFL washing hung from windows. The soldiers were breakfasting by the parked tanks. They had dug foxholes in the public squares, and slept in Saigon as if in the jungle. The trouserless soldiers of the defeated army wandered around with nothing to do. There were beggars in the doorways, and an old woman asleep and a young girl beside her looking through a work of lurid pornography. There was litter everywhere, military and domestic, and piles of incriminating documents and letters and, in one case, a large stack of seventy-eight gramophone records.

There was a pair of nuns on a motorbike, sporting the NLF flag. Sightseers. Saigon was coming out to see the NLF, and the NLF was being conducted around the city in trucks, gazing up at the buildings. It had been told of the poverty of Saigon. It had never seen such wealth. As yet the spivs, beggars and prostitutes had not come out. But I saw one cripple from the Saigon Army dressed in what he clearly conceived to be the outfit of a guerrilla.

As yet, very few of the guerrillas, the true Vietcong of the South, had appeared. They strolled in in twos and threes, with strangely shaped bombs tied to their belts, and antique weapons. They sometimes had no holsters for their guns, but carried them in their hands or in trouser pockets. Some were barefooted. They wore the same range of cheap man-made fibres in blues and browns. They wore either pith helmets or floppy hats. When I asked them about the difference between these two forms of headgear, they replied that the pith helmets were hard, whereas the floppy hats were – floppy.

I put out my hand to shake that of a Vietcong. He thought I was trying to take the revolver from his hand. Prudently he put the gun behind his back.

Most of the regular troops seemed to come from the north. They arrived in trucks, and all but the officers abandoned their arms. Then they wandered hand in hand through the streets. We rushed down to the port to marvel at the navy in their nineteenth-century suits. At Tan Son Nhuot, the air-force arrived, wearing wings and speaking Russian. Near the still smouldering remains of the

DAO compound, these elusive aristocrats of the air could be found drinking Chablis and American beer.

The Saigon bourgeoisie, to meet the occasion, dressed themselves up to the nines and drove round and round the city for days on end, until they were stopped by the price of petrol. Many cars had been destroyed, and lay at the side of the roads. The bourgeoisie then came round and round on Hondas. They were at last admitted to the bar of the Continental Shelf, where they came to be seen. The cafe crowds came back to their old haunts, and cowboys resumed work, stealing watches and handbags: they thought it good sport to snatch cameras from the necks of NLF soldiers. People were said to have been shot for stealing, but the reports did not deter the criminals.

After a time the beggars returned to their usual patches, and an unusually large number of prostitutes started hanging around the hotels. As Saigon got used to the new soldiers, and realized that their orders were not to intervene, the hope grew that the city might draw these saints into its aged corruption.

It was easy to pick out the stalls of looted goods. Drink was cheap, and since many Embassy wine cellars had been ransacked the quality was high. It was in liberated Saigon that I learned what happens to aged champagne, how it loses its sparkle and turns to a nutty dessert wine. The French residents of Saigon – there were many – descended on the street-markets early and got the best wine home and out of the sun. The journalists – of whom there were not a few – picked off the bottles of genuine spirits: it had been foolish to try to buy whisky in Saigon before; now the real thing was as cheap as the imitation. Over the next three months, the depletion of stocks told you a lot about drinking habits: it was clear, for instance, that since the Americans had left, no one in Saigon could stand tequila, or knew what to do with it. I tried it, and tried to imagine what it would be like with a salted rim. Ten years later the thought still disgusts me.

The chief customers in the market were the NLF. The soldiers had been paid on arrival in Saigon, and with the North Vietnamese dong standing at four to five hundred piastres (the panic rate) they were richer than they had ever been in their lives. They bought several watches and might wear them all. They bought cigarette lighters with tiny clocks concealed inside them. And the more they acquired, the less they resembled the nineteenth-century army of the early days of liberation. Once they had bought the dark glasses, they had taken on something of the Saigon look.

There were no wounded soldiers. They were not allowed to visit Saigon. The soldiers we met were appalled by what they saw: the beggars, the painted faces of the women, the dishonesty. They spoke of a future in which they would turn Saigon into a beautiful city. They compared it unfavourably with Hanoi.

The soldiers had a mission to perform, but they did not have a missionary's reforming zeal. They knew it was best to take their time, and they had time on their hands. Saigon society slowly returned to abnormal, out of gas and freewheeling downhill. Everyone knew the situation could not last. Nobody knew what would come next.

In those initial days it was possible to travel outside the city, since no formal orders had been given. Indeed it was possible to do most things you fancied. But once the regulations were published restricting us to Saigon, life became very dull indeed. The novelty of the street scenes had worn off, and most journalists left at the first opportunity. I, however, had been asked by the Washington Post to maintain its presence in Vietnam until a replacement could be brought in. I allowed the journalists' plane to leave without me, then cabled Washington stating my terms, which were based on the fact that I was the only stringer left working for an American paper. The Post, on receipt of my terms, sacked me. I had thought I had an exclusive story. What I learned was: never get yourself into an exclusive position. If the New York Times had had a man in Saigon, the Post would have taken my terms. Because there were no rivals, and precious few Americans, I had what amounted to an exclusive non-story. By now, I was sick of the East, sick of travel, sick of the journalistic life. But I was stuck. I crawled back to the Post.

When there was nothing to write about, I described myself, but as this was against house style in an American paper, I had to be thinly disguised: '"It's like a spa at the end of the season," remarked a dejected Englishman, sitting on the empty terrace of the Continental Palace – this abandoned, echoing, colonial hotel. The rains have begun, leaving the air cooler and clearer. Most of the foreigners are preparing to leave.' And I went on to record how the old Assembly building had been turned back into an Opera House, where a brute of a conductor leaped around in tails, and where the mixed evening always included the same programme: a movement of Beethoven's Fifth, some Strauss, and a rendition in Russian of La Donna è Mobile, sung by a Vietnamese tenor with an idea of how to smile like an Italian. The NLF soldiers would listen relaxedly, sticking their bare feet over the gallery. It appears to be an idea common among conquerors that what a fallen city needs is a good injection of culture. After the capture of Berlin, every sector was immediately featuring Russian dancing and lectures by T. S. Eliot. Hanoi sent down pretty well everything it could transport, including massed choirs and an archaeological exhibition of a strongly nationalistic bent.

In early June I went to a reception at the Presidential Palace, to mark the sixth anniversary of the founding of the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Nowadays, I believe, you will find that Vietnam has written the PRG out of history. The process was just beginning then. A particularly frank and cynical guerrilla told me that the talk about the PRG was nonsense. Hanoi called all the shots and it was stupid to believe otherwise. And yet I believe that the members of the southern movement did generally believe in the authority of their own existence. The excitement was, on this occasion, to spot the PRG leaders, such as Huynh Tan Phat, with his face wreathed in smiles, dressed in the kind of khaki suit favoured by foreign correspondents in the tropics, but with the addition of a matching khaki tie.

The person we all wanted to meet was General Tran Van Tra, Saigon's military chief. He was in a terrific mood, and laughed and laughed when we reminded him of some of his previous activities. We would ask: the Americans say you masterminded the Tet Offensive from headquarters in Thu Duc; is this true? And he would reply that he couldn't remember. I'd been reading Lucien Bodard's extraordinary The Quicksand War, in which Tran features as having organized a patriotic liquidation campaign against the French. Was that true? He said he

wouldn't elaborate. All he would say was that he had been in the environs of Saigon since before 1945.

There was a sense that the life work of such men was coming to fruition, that the plan of years could now be implemented. And the implementation could proceed at its own proper pace. The centre of Saigon was losing its significance. The shops of Tu Do, dealers in luxury goods, were now also soup-stands. But Tu Do itself was deserted. It reminded me of an old French photograph, with a couple of blurred figures in the middle distance, and a cyclo-driver snoozing in the shade.

In the suburbs, by contrast, the mobilization of the youth groups had got under way. They sat around awkwardly singing revolutionary songs, clapping in unison and not wearing jeans. They had turned the task of sweeping the streets into a ceremony. They were tearing down the old police posts, but not all the barbed wire, not all the barbed wire by any means.

The major effort was to get people back from urban squats to their homes in the country. A truck would come through the streets bound for Quang Nam, its destination written in large chalk letters along the side, together with the words 'We drive by night'. That was an astonishing novelty. For over twenty years the golden rule in Indochina was not to be on the roads at night.

Something had to be done about crime. Saigon had lived on crime, all kinds, from the petty to the most highly organized. With the fall of Saigon, prisons were opened, all prisoners released, and judiciary suspended. I spoke to one judge, an opponent of Thieu and yet part of his criminal court. He said that after the liberation he and about a hundred other former judges had presented themselves and asked for pardon. The pardon had been given, after they had informed on their fellow judges. Since that time they had gone to their place of work every day, and waited for the arrival of the new Minister of Justice. Finally he came and looked round the tribunal, delivering himself of one sentence: 'Comrades, continue your work.' So a hundred judges sat around and waited. In the provinces it was said that they received unwelcome visits from men they had sentenced.

Justice took to the open streets, and in one week the official newspaper (the old papers had been closed down) gave two front-page stories showing robbers executed by the liberation forces. Both accounts emphasized the popular support for the executions. In the first case, a Honda-cowboy was killed trying to escape. Support was ex post facto. In the second, the photograph showed a former 'puppet soldier' tied to crossed planks in the manner of Spartacus. Public support preceded the action. The man had been caught attempting to steal a watch at gunpoint, had resisted arrest, and, not having repented when finally caught, had committed further 'savage' actions. So: 'In order to protect the tranquil life of the Saigon population and in accordance with the aspirations of the people, the revolutionary law shot the thief Vo Van Ngoc.'

In another case, three thousand people assembled in order to judge three thieves. They climbed up on buildings to witness the popular tribunal, which sentenced one of the culprits to death. He was shot 'before the joy of the people', whom the newspaper showed in a rather blurred photograph waiting for the event.

That a thief had not repented was a serious point to be held against him. In the judicial and moral climate of the day, repentance was of prime importance, and obstinacy was a political category. Re-education, Hoc Tap, was underway, and everyone was talking about it. It appeared that the private soldier or NCO could go along for the three-day political education session: if he performed well he would be praised, whereas if he was uncooperative he would be told to emulate those singled out for praise. It sounded an absurdly lenient programme – perhaps merely a way of filling in the time and keeping idle officers off the street. But later on, the same people who had spoken with modest pride of their good performances in Hoc Tap came back to say that Hoc Tap was not yet over. It was becoming inexorable; it was impossible to extricate oneself from the guilt of being associated with the Thieu army. In South Vietnam, men of military age had had no choice but to join the army: they were conscripts. And yet they seemed to be asked to share the guilt of Thieu.

It was, in fact, over the question of re-education that the new regime showed its true character, and it brought to an end the long period in which the Saigonese were prepared perhaps to give their conquerors the benefit of the doubt. One morning my Vietnamese assistant burst into my room. 'It's sensational, all the officers have to leave home for a month's course. They're going to be re-educated.'

I got back into bed, crossly, and asked why that was so sensational.

'Don't you think it's harsh? They're to be separated from their families for thirty days.'

I replied that in the case of the generals I thought the whole thing pretty lenient.

The details of the announcement were extraordinary. You were told exactly how much money you would need for the course, for the purchase of food, and you were advised to bring three kilos of rice as emergency rations. In addition, you needed a change of clothes, blanket, towel, mosquito net, mat, raincoat, pullover, toothpaste, toothbrush, bowl, cigarettes (if a smoker), paper, pen, health card and medicines. It seemed to indicate a trip to the Central Highlands, and looking at the list I was foolish enough to express the wish that I was going too.

That there was a ten-day course for junior officers seemed to indicate that the duration of the course was seriously meant. The officers put on their raincoats and went off to their departure points, joking that if they tell you to shower and don't provide the soap you are not to go in. They left, and as long as I was there they didn't come back.

The officers had been duped, and you might almost say that the deception was justifiable: there were decades of corruption in an army that was going to be extremely difficult to incorporate into the new society. But the ruse was exacerbated by the way it was reported. In the days of Thieu there had been a press of sorts, and spokesmen of the Provisional Revolutionary Government used to be eloquent in its defence. Then, with the end of the war, they came in and closed the papers down, replacing them with Giai Phong.

The new official press hated mentioning disasters of any kind. A friend of mine sent a report abroad concerning a road accident. This was censored, and the rumours began. There was a rumour that two truckloads of former officers had been ambushed, or had hit a minefield, somewhere near Tay Ninh. The rumour grew until I was assured by one woman that two thousand former officers had been killed. The women of Saigon went into shell shock. There were gatherings, real demonstrations in the streets, and slanging matches between the innocent

soldiers of the north and the very down-to-earth wives of Saigon. The women wanted to know from General Tran Van Tra what had happened. The soldiers seemed completely unnerved. Worse, there were more officers waiting to leave on similar 'courses', and so there was always a group of tearful women waiting behind the Post Office to learn when their husbands were due to go. I was told that four officers had returned from reeducation in coffins.

It was becoming impossible for me to work as a journalist. Up to now my stories had all had the theme of life returning to normal, but when the censorship began it was very difficult to describe normality truthfully. I wrote a story about how a fishnet factory had been ordered to stay open with full employment, even though there was no nylon thread for the nets (the implication being that the employer would soon become impoverished). No one questioned the truth of the story, it was that they wanted me to say simply: the factory has been ordered to stay open despite all the difficulties. If they could not admit that there was no thread, how could they allow us to say that no one seemed to have returned from the re-education camps? And if one could not write such a story, how could one justify giving a general impression of normality in other stories? In one I mentioned that a man had committed suicide in the ruins of an old military monument. But the outside world was not allowed to know that there had been a suicide in Saigon.

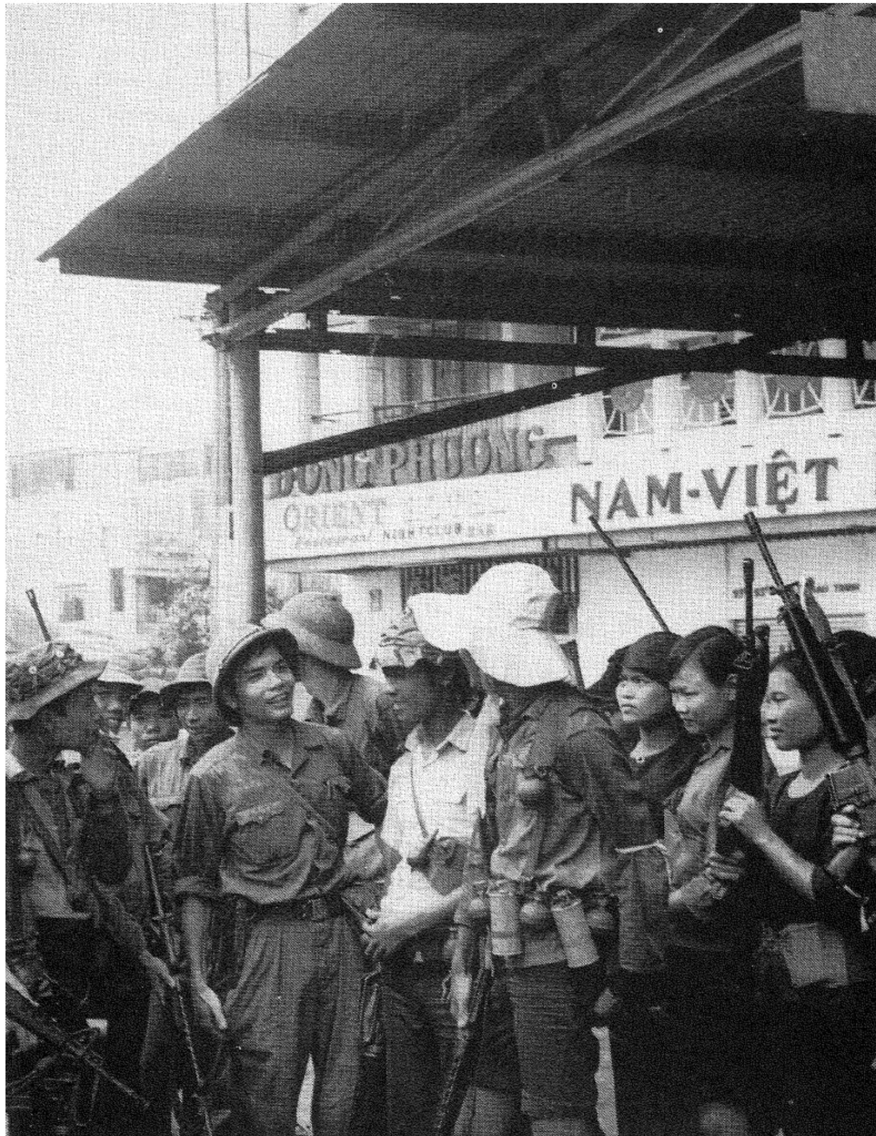
I began to wonder if there was a code word to explain to my employers on the Washington Post that my copy was being censored. The thought, judging from the subjects they asked me to write about, hadn't occurred to them. I had retained from the Post's bureau (before I handed it over to the authorities) a copy of a handbook for the paper's correspondents. I looked up censorship. There was no entry. I looked up Moscow, where the most I learned was that a correspondent should beware of making unflattering personal references to Lenin and to the way Jews were treated in Russia. I decided to solve the censorship problem by stopping writing and applying to leave. It was not a solution, but I could no longer bear Vietnam.

I had a spacious but gloomy old flat in Tu Do Street. If I looked out of my window any time during the day, there would be a bum swinging in the window opposite, which belonged to a bodybuilding club. If I looked down at the street to the corner slightly left, my eye would immediately be caught by a tiny cyclo-driver in a panama hat, who had decided that I was the only generous customer left in the city, and that he might as well specialize. I was under a kind of commercial house arrest, genial enough, but unrelenting. If I told the cyclo-driver I was walking today, I would still have to go past my spastic beggar, the one who was all smiles and whom I was supposed never to let down. But he was generous enough in a way. One day I carefully crossed the street to avoid him on my usual walk. I was studiously pretending not to be anywhere near him when I happened to see he was doubled up in laughter. He knew exactly what pressure he was putting on me every day, and he seemed to think it well within my rights occasionally to refuse.

Early in the morning at, say, 5.30, you would hear the bells ringing in the military billets. Then there was a noise – a great tearing sound – which I thought must belong to some extraordinary contraption for removing the surface from the road. I rose and threw open the mosquito blinds: it was a company of soldiers sprinting along the street in their Ho Chi Minh sandals. The soldiers were relaxed and cheerful at this time of day. They shouted a few slogans, exercised, listened to what sounded like a little pep-talk for about ten minutes and then went off to breakfast.

These soldiers – the bo doi, as we all now called them – were members of the best army in the world, disciplined in war and extraordinarily well-behaved in peace. But they had no gift for drill – even their gymnastics were uncoordinated – Saigon rooked them something rotten. The stall-holders persuaded the bo doi, when they suspected the dud watches they had been sold, that the

only foolproof test was to put a watch in your mouth, block your ears and close your eyes. If you could hear it ticking, it was kosher.



The bo doi hated keeping order. They did at one stage execute thieves in the street, but that was at the height of the crime wave in May. Later I saw a robber trying to escape from a pursuing crowd. The bo doi were appealed to, but were reluctant to interfere: because the bo doi had a great deal of sympathy for the poor of Saigon, and all the people they had put out of work by winning. They believed their own propaganda. They were heroes. A story was told in the early days after the fall that a bo doi had been driving a truck carelessly and had killed a child. His commanding officer said to him: you have been a good soldier and have sacrificed much for the revolution – the time has come to make the final sacrifice. Whereupon the bo doi shot himself. The fact that the Saigonese told these rumours says something for the reputation of the bo doi. Even so, they were sometimes stabbed in the back streets, and once or twice one would hear gunfire at night.

If I had been able to talk to the bo doi, Saigon would have been the most interesting place in the world. But I mean really talk. They were forbidden to chat to us. Once one told me: 'I always liked going into battle because the atmosphere was so good. Everybody knew they were going to die. They had no food, and nothing to drink for days. If a man had something to eat, he would share it with you, and if you had nothing to give in return, you would show him the letter you had just got from your wife. Everybody loved each other, because they all knew they were going to die.' But then he became embarrassed at confessing all this to a foreigner.

Part of our admiration for the bo doi derived from what, in contrast, we were now learning of the Khmer Rouge after the fall of Phnom Penh. Large numbers of refugees had been making their way from the evacuated Cambodian capital across the border into Vietnam and, in some cases, to Saigon itself. The stories they told made it clear that the Khmer Rouge had not just instigated a bloodbath, they had no plan for the governing of the country they had won. If you could persuade a Vietnamese officer to talk about the Khmer Rouge, the best he would say, with a shudder, would be that they do not respect the laws of Ho Chi Minh. But it was obvious now that the regime was one of unparalleled savagery, and the Vietnamese were shocked by what they knew of it.

What was happening in Cambodia meant far more to me personally than the events I was witnessing in Vietnam, and I spent some time cultivating contacts with those who had escaped the Khmer Rouge regime. In particular, there were nine officers who had been associates of Son Ngoc Thanh, the former Cambodian prime minister and leader of the Khmer Krom (the ethnic Cambodians from South Vietnam). They had now requested asylum in Vietnam, as they were terrified of repatriation. But nobody knew precisely what the relationship between the authorities in Saigon and the Khmer Rouge would be.

The officers were living with their families in a Cambodian pagoda not far from the city centre. They were free to go around town. One day, one of them came to see me in the hotel. He asked if he could borrow my spare bed. I asked him why. He explained that over the last few days a particular car had been arriving at the pagoda and taking people away. The pretext was that the officers and the head of the monastery, the Venerable Kim Sang, were to meet with Son Ngoc Thanh himself. Four people went and did not return. Nobody knew if they had been arrested by the Provisional Revolutionary Government, or if Khmer Rouge undercover agents were involved.

I told the officer that he could stay the night, but he would not be able to continue in the hotel for a long time, or he would draw suspicion on both of us. We sat up and talked until late into the night. As it happened I had Sihanouk's memoirs with me, which included a long attack on the CIA and Son Ngoc Thanh for undermining his regime. The officer agreed with much of Sihanouk's account, and admitted to me that he had been involved with the CIA. I asked him a number of times where Son Ngoc Thanh was now. It took a long time before he would say. Finally, he admitted that Son Ngoc Thanh was in Saigon. I said that it seemed very strange, if the man had been an associate of the CIA, that he should have stayed on in Saigon. The officer replied that Ho Chi Minh and Son Ngoc Thanh, both being nationalist leaders, had a respect for each other, and that there was a stipulation in Ho's will that Son Ngoc Thanh must not be harmed in any way. He had nothing to fear from the PRG.

Once his story was out, the officer began to talk about his fears that the Khmer Rouge would catch him. He recounted his escape from Cambodia. He talked about the screams he had heard from the undergrowth, when they had taken away suspected officers. He talked about the beatings. He was still pleading for help and he believed that I had influence. I remember his soft voice from the next bed asking if I could imagine what it was like to be put in a cage and left all day in the sun, 'like a wild animal, like a wild animal'.

That night, every time I fell asleep, there was a loud knocking at the door. I would wake fully, then wait, my heart beating, to see whether the knocking was real. I would doze off again. Then the knocking would resume. The next day the officer left to find a new hiding place.

I was out of my depth entirely, and confided my problem to a colleague who was not only very curious to know who had spent the night in my room and why, but also seemed very well-connected. A few days later he came rushing into my room and said that if I could find my lieutenant-colonel, the one who was supposed to have done stuff for the CIA, he couldn't guarantee anything but he just might be able to help him. But it had to be straight away. I said it was impossible. I couldn't find him. He was in hiding.

Later on, the desperate officer came to see me in my flat. His wife, who was still at the pagoda, had been threatened by the same mysterious men in the car; if her husband did not come with them, they said, she would be beaten up. It was I think on this visit that the officer found something I had not told him I possessed – a copy of the last will and testament of Ho Chi Minh. I had not told him about it because I knew that in the published version at least there was no reference to Son Ngoc Thanh. He flicked through the little pamphlet desperately, and had to agree that unless there was a secret codicil, his hero and mentor was entitled to no special protection from the Vietnamese. And that meant perhaps that his position was even worse than he had thought.

I still do not know what to make of this story. I do not know why Son Ngoc Thanh stayed on in Saigon, or who was causing the disappearance of the Cambodian officers. But the reason I tell the story is this: those who actually set out to see the fall of a city (as opposed to those to whom this calamity merely happens), or those who choose to go to a front line, are obviously asking themselves to what extent they are cowards. But the tests they set themselves – there is a dead body, can you bear to look at it? – are nothing in comparison with the tests that are sprung on them. It is not the obvious tests that matter (do you go to pieces in a mortar attack?) but the unexpected ones (here is a man on the run, seeking your help – can you face him honestly?).

At that time in Saigon there was a craze for a cheap North Vietnamese soup called bun bo. All the shops in Tu Do seemed to be serving it in the hope of attracting military customers. Some friends called on me and suggested we should go for lunch in one of these establishments. As we were crossing the road, I bumped into the Cambodian officer, with his pockmarked face and his pleading smile. Something very important has happened, he said, I must talk to you. I told him I was going with some friends for a bowl of bun bo. He was welcome to join us. No, he said, this was very urgent; and he added meaningfully that this might be the last time we met. He had hinted at suicide before, and on this occasion my heart hardened. I told him I was going with my friends for a bowl of bun bo. The incident was over in the time that it took to cross the road, and I never saw the officer again. But I can remember where I left him standing in the street.

It takes courage to see clearly, and since courage is at issue I know that I am obliged to address myself to the questions raised at the outset of the journey. I went as a supporter of the Vietcong, wanting to see them win. I saw them win. What feeling did that leave me with, and where does it leave me now? I know that by the end of my stay in Saigon I had grown to loathe the apparatchiks, who were arriving every day with their cardboard suitcases from Hanoi. I know that I loathed their institutional lies and their mockery of political justice.

But as the banners went up in honour of Lenin, Marx and Stalin, I know too that I had known this was coming. Had we not supported the NLF 'without illusions'? Must I not accept that the disappearances, the gagging of the press, the political distortion of reality was all part of a classical Stalinism which nevertheless 'had its progressive features'? Why, we supported unconditionally 'all genuine movements of national independence'. I must be satisfied. Vietnam was independent and united.

In my last days in Saigon I began to feel that it had all been wrong. But when, on a plane between Vientiane and Bangkok, I learned from a magazine that Solzhenitsyn had been saying precisely that, and condemning the Americans for not fighting more ruthlessly, I was forced to admit that I still believed in the right of Vietnam to unity and independence. The French had had no right in Vietnam. The Japanese had had no right in Vietnam. The British had had no right to use Japanese troops to restore French rule in Vietnam. Nor had the Americans had any right to interfere in order to thwart the independence movement which had defeated the French. Many of my bedrock beliefs were and are such as one could share with the most innocent bo doi. 'Nothing is more precious than independence and liberty' – the slogan of Ho that had driven me wild with boredom in the last few months, broadcast over the PA system through the streets, and emblazoned on all those banners – but it is a fine motto.

But the supporters of the Vietnamese opposition to the United States had gone further than that, and so had I. We had been seduced by Ho. My political associates in England were not the kind of people who denied that Stalinism existed. We not only knew about it, we were very interested in it. We also opposed it. Why then did we also support it? Or did we?

I was forced to rethink this recently when I read a remark by Paul Foot: ‘No revolutionary socialist apart from James Fenton was ever under the slightest illusion that Vietnam could produce anything at all after the war, let alone socialism.’ My first thought was: what about the poor old bo doi? Do they count as revolutionary socialists? And my second point may be illustrated by an editorial in New Left Review ten years ago: ‘In achieving the necessary combination of national liberation and social revolution the Vietnamese Communists drew on many of the best traditions of the international workers’ movement which produced them.’

The editorial – written by Robin Blackburn, a Trotskyite as influential as Paul Foot in securing the support of my generation for the liberation struggle of the Vietnamese – never mentions that

the victory of the Vietnamese was a victory for Stalinism, because to do so would have muddied the issue. The great thing was that the events of ten years ago represented a defeat for American imperialism. The same issue of New Left Review quotes Lukács: 'The defeat of the USA in the Vietnamese war is to the "American Way of Life" as the Lisbon earthquake was to French feudalism . . . Even if decades were to pass between the Lisbon earthquake and the fall of the Bastille, history can repeat itself.' Stirring words, and – look – we don't have to support the Lisbon earthquake in order to support the Fall of the Bastille.

Blackburn's editorial ended by saying that the success of a socialist opposition against such odds would have 'a special resonance in those many lands where the hopes aroused by the defeat of fascism in the Second World War were to be subsequently frustrated or repressed: in Madrid and Barcelona, Lisbon and Luanda, Milan and Athens, Manila and Seoul.' An interesting list of places, and a reminder of the variousness of political change. The example of Madrid, for instance, would I think be much more inspiring to anybody in Seoul than the example of Saigon. We seem to have learned that dictatorships can be removed without utter disaster. Is this thanks to the Vietnamese? Maybe in some very complicated and partial way. But Madrid has not yet been 'lost to capitalism' like Indochina.

While I was working in Vietnam and Cambodia I thought that I was probably on the right track if my reports, while giving no comfort to my political enemies, were critical enough to upset my friends. I knew something about the thirties and I absolutely did not believe that one should, as a reporter, invent victories for the comrades. I had the illusion that I was honest, and in many ways I was. What I could not see in myself, but what I realize now is so prevalent on the Left, is the corrupting effect of political opportunism. We saw the tanks arriving and we all wanted to associate ourselves, just a little bit, with victory. And how much more opportunistic can you get than to hitch a ride on the winning tank, just a few yards before the palace gates?

When the boat people later began leaving Vietnam there was an argument on the Left that this tragic exodus was a further example of the pernicious effects of US foreign policy. Yet it is striking that for three decades after the Second World War such a mass departure did not take place. It is only in the decade since unification that people have been trusting themselves to flimsy vessels in the South China Sea. A recent report described a group of North Vietnamese villagers who acquired a boat and were setting out in the dead of night when they were noticed by another village. The second group said, Let us come too. The first group did not have enough space for safety, but they were afraid that if they did not agree the other villagers would raise the alarm. So the boat was impossibly crammed.

The boat people are not merely 'obstinate elements' or Chinese comprador capitalists on their way to new markets. They are simple people with no hope.

For two months after the fall there had been no banking facilities in Saigon. Petrol was expensive and it was not unusual to see students directing the traffic in streets where there was no traffic to be directed. Everything changed when the authorities allowed the withdrawal of small amounts of cash, and when petrol prices were reduced. The rich brought out their cars again. The Hondas reappeared. And the whole bourgeoisie went into the cafe business.

You borrowed an old parachute from a friend. You got hold of a few small stools, brought your crockery from home and you were in business. Every day I walked the length of Tu Do, looking to see if my name had come up on the departures list at the Information Ministry, and one day I counted seventy of these stalls, excluding the allied trades – cake vendors, cigarette stands,

booksellers, manufacturers of Ho Chi Minh sandals, and the best example of Obstinate Enterprise, the man who sat outside the re-education centre making plastic covers for the new certificates.

The parachutes were strung between the trees for shade. With their varying colours and billowing shapes, they made the city utterly beautiful. The tables had flowers. The crockery was of the best and the service – inexperienced. It was all an economic nonsense. There was a group of students who ran a bookstall but spent all their time in the cafe across the street, watching for custom. During the day they might just make enough money for soft drinks. If more, they moved further up the street to drown their sorrows in a spirit called Ba Xi De, 'the old man with the stick'. With this they ate dishes of boiled entrails, and peanuts which came wrapped in fascinating twists of paper – the index of an English verse anthology, or a confidential document from some shady American organization.

In Gia Long Boulevard, by the tribunal where the judges were twiddling their thumbs, proprietors and clients came from the legal profession. The proprietor of 'The Two Tamarind Trees' told me she made about a thousand piastres a day. Previously she had made two hundred thousand piastres a case (755 piastres to a dollar). On the street beneath the Caravelle Hotel, there was the Café Air France, known to us as Chez Solange. Solange came from a rich family. She was beautiful. One day she brought two rattan bars and a set of bar-stools from her house, and set up shop. I was one of her first clients, and she told me over a breakfast of beer and beer what it had been like to become a barmaid.

Her elder brothers had told her she was mad to try it. They dropped her off with her things, but later would have nothing to do with her. Her younger brothers had been more helpful. But: 'This morning when the first customer came for coffee, I was so ashamed that I couldn't serve him. And then when I did serve him, I couldn't decide how much to charge him.' But once the business was established, the elder brothers relented and were to be seen lounging at the bar most of the day, except during the heat.

Solange had come down in the world. There was a thing called bia om, meaning beer and a cuddle, a half-way house to prostitution. The client ordered the beer. With it he paid for the company of an attractive girl. The open-air cafes were not great places for a cuddle, but the suggestion was still there. The new slang term was caphé om, coffee and a cuddle, reflecting the diminishing spending power of the bourgeoisie.

The morality of the cafes was attacked in the newspapers, particularly on the grounds that the bourgeoisie were procrastinating. What role were they going to play in the future society? I sometimes asked these people, particularly students, why they didn't try going to the countryside as teachers or in some professional capacity. Of course they were horrified. One man told me that he wanted to stay on in the capital in order to read foreign newspapers (there were no foreign newspapers). Another girl said she couldn't teach in the countryside because peasant children didn't go to school (they did go to school).

The bo doi occasionally came along with loudhailers, clearing the cafes away. But a few days later the obstinate economy was back in place. And it was still there when I finally got permission to leave.

The majority of the emigrants at this stage belonged to the French community, and it was obvious at the airport that they had spent their last piastres very well. We were going out on a plane provided by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. You should have seen the kind of refugees we were. I had a Leica and two Washington Post typewriters. That was my loot. They, the French, had ransacked the market for hi-fi systems of the very highest quality, and they had snapped up the best of the leather jackets and coats in Tu Do, where for some reason you could get very good calf. Their photographic equipment was luxurious, but the thing that held us all up was the censorship of photographs.

Vietnam had become known throughout the world through photos of a kind which emphasized the grain of squalor. The bo doi did not like these photographs, and they weren't fools either: if they found a print of an unacceptable image, say a poor woman squatting, they took the print and insisted on a search for the negative. Everyone's attempts to be better than Don McCullin were confiscated, and the process took a long time. There were more mysterious reasons too: I was told that a bo doi confiscated a photo of a flower: when asked why, he explained that there was a kind of powder on the flower; if you enlarged the photo enough, you would see a grain of the powder, and if you enlarged that grain enough – you would see a photograph of the whole of Vietnam.

As I waited for the French to clear their loot, a panic seized me which was just like the panic I had had all those months before. I would never escape from Vietnam. The bo doi would never get through all those enormous suitcases. And besides the runway was absolutely dancing with rain. We would be sent back to Saigon, and then we would be forced through the whole process again. It had happened to others and it could happen to us. I wished those fucking French would get a move on.

And then at last we were let through. The man in front of me had too much hand-luggage and I offered to help. I took from him the French Embassy's diplomatic bag and we all ran together across the tarmac through the cloudburst. My last memory, as we entered the aircraft, is of the overpowering smell of tropical rain on very expensive new leather.

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