

Hope in a Note

By An Ngo Lang

Bullets whiz angrily past my head and suddenly we're under attack, long before the sound of gunfire announces our peril. Shots travel so fast there's no time to react. I understand, in the milliseconds after they've passed, that somehow this time, I'm lucky. Instinct takes over, dropping me to my knees as slugs pierce the fiberglass bow of our patrol boat. Others careen past me into the inky night.

Behind me, my rifleman screams in agony. I dare a quick glance, my helmet heavy, making it difficult to swivel my head. He's bleeding and has collapsed at the stern. My eyes dart back and forth for signs of movement in the rice fields. My lips and tongue dry, a metallic taste in my mouth. A rocket explodes, water rains upward, showering onto my tense body; its fishy, musty smell soaking through my flak jacket, mixing with my sour sweat. The boat bucks in protest on the ensuing violent waves and I slip, half rolling on the deck beneath me, lunging at the metal railing to steady myself, the cool, steadying steel of my rifle slipping awkwardly in my sweaty grip. Startled by the boom, a flock of cranes roosting nearby, take flight down the river, their rattle calls shrill.

My breathing is ragged as my heart knocks noisily against my chest, my eyes strain to see into the darkness. There isn't a breeze and yet I think I see reeds move ever so slightly directly in front of me. Rising, I take aim and empty my rifle at that spot and bark at my helmsman, "Go!"

Immediately, the engines roar to life, twin water jets spew, and the boat bolts across the water like a wild stallion. The gunner, at the front, eyes wild, screams profanity, as he grips both sides of the machine gun and blankets fire at the patch of reeds—now shrinking into the distance behind us.

"Enough!"

My terse tone breaks him out of his mania and his hands drop. Order resumes; we progress up the river at a more sedate pace, still vigilant but less desperate. My team and I have been on the river all night, patrolling for communist assaults. We're hungry, sleep-deprived, and everyone is on edge—me most of all. It's only fear and anxiety over the constant potential for ambush that keeps us on our feet these days.

My gaze continues to flit between the river, the rice fields, and the horizon until we halt tentatively at a bend downstream, cutting the power, and I head to the back of the boat.

“Are you okay?” I ask my injured rifleman.

He grimaces and nods.

We drift, listening, alert to signs of movement: a rustle, a click, the sound of a throat clearing— but it’s deathly quiet. My heart rate slows, and the cicadas resume their whine. The ache in my neck and shoulders is unbearable; I long for the comfort of my bed. There’s no glory fighting in this war and dawn alone will bring sweet release from duty. For now, we’re just glad to survive another patrol on the Sài Gòn River.

The sky is bright blue and already streaked with airplane trails as I arrive at my brother’s house. So many South Vietnamese are flying free of this place, headed for safer destinations and new possibilities, like migrating birds. The ticket out is deep wallets or the right connections, and there seemed to be plenty of both. Just not for us. We’re still waiting to hear if our sister, who married an American and lives in the United States, has been able to organize and fund our family’s escape. She’s promised to send a car and driver to the house to pick us up and take us to the airport.

Lan, my four-year-old niece, runs excitedly out to greet me, clasping a stuffed toy, her bare feet pattering noisily on the hot bricks of the courtyard. I swing her onto my shoulders, her joyful giggles making my heart sing. I’ve loved her like a daughter since the moment I held her at three days old.

“Uncle are you going to sleep now?” she asks, her toddler hands patting my head and sliding down to grip my ears.

I chuckle, lifting her off my shoulders as we pass through the doorway into the hallway, littered with our suitcases and bags, packed and ready. None of us know when—or if—our ride will come, but we keep hoping. Every time a car slows near the gates, one of us ventures hopefully outside.

“Just a little nap,” I reply. “Then we can play.”

The radio is playing in the living room; my eldest brother Hoài is listening, while my sister-in-law prepares porridge in the kitchen, and my nephews rough and tumble on the sofa nearby, laughing. Such happiness and normalcy make it hard to believe just a few hours ago my ears were ringing from rocket explosions and that our country is sliding out from under us.

The newscaster on the radio is telling the room...“North and South troops have clashed with

heavy fighting at Xuân Lộc.” That’s just 42 kilometers away. Hoài and I exchange glances, and a sense of foreboding turns my guts over. The distant, muffled sound of another rocket explosion just then confirms the news.

“I can’t live in Sài Gòn under the Communists,” my brother vehemently says.

“Surely the Americans will save us?” His wife places a steaming bowl on the dining table.

Hoài looks dubious.

“I’m not running away,” I declare. “I won’t shirk my responsibilities as an officer in the navy.”

This can’t end like this. Why should we be forced apart? None of us speak the question out loud, but we’re all thinking it. Their duty is to their little family; mine to protect our country and values for as long as I am able.

Later, somewhat rested, I sling my bag over my shoulder and prepare to say my farewells. I never know if it’s the last one. Hoài accompanies me to the front gates, where I’ve parked my motor scooter, Lan tramping loudly across the paving stones, now in a pink dress and pink clogs, her hair in pigtails, tied with a pink bow.

I turn as Hoài grabs my arm. I see tension in his face; the usual tortured fear in his eyes. “No-one will come for us—not in time, anyway.” He glances at Lan, playing at his feet. “The clock is ticking. We must find a way out ourselves.”

The lump in my throat is the size of a mango. I know what he’s saying, but I can’t bring myself to believe that this is the end; that our country will fall. I struggle to contain my emotions; reaching for the thousandth time the lifebuoy of private resolve to do everything I personally can to stop the war.

But I nod my head.

“Lan!” I call.

“Goodbye uncle,” Lan says, lifting her arms up as a request for me to swing her around one last time.

I laugh as I reach for her and swing her around full circle, hoping that my feigned happiness masks the uncertainty and anxiety coursing through me.

“Take care of yourself. Love you.”

I’m saying it to her. But it’s for him, too.

I mount my scooter.

On my way to the navy staff office, I ride past the Newport Bridge, the main thoroughfare into Sài Gòn from north and central Việt Nam. The Việt Cộng are on the other side of the bridge, bombarding mortars into the city. Despite the twenty-four curfew, people are scurrying about in the streets, running away from the bridge, carrying babies and bundles of clothes. The carnage I see cements in my mind that my city will soon fall.

I slow my scooter to a crawl and then hear a scream. I turn in time to see a soldier dash by, cradling a young girl, bloodstained and unconscious, in his arms; her mother trails two steps behind, frantic and tearful.

Enemy rockets pelt the airfield in the distance, the booms of their explosions add to the fright and confusion. A gunship flies low overhead and fires a steady stream of bullets at approaching North Vietnamese targets to the east of the airport—the powdery smell of gun smoke assaults my nose. My gut protests with queasiness, and a sour and acidic taste invades my mouth.

I realise I am only one. I see now that I can't save my country's inexorable demise, but I must rescue my family. My palms, clammy with sweat, grip the handlebars, and I speed through the streets, trying to avoid discarded South Vietnamese uniforms and boots. Rockets raze buildings and neighborhoods; looters take to the roads.

At the staff office, I look for my direct commanding officer to release me from duty. He's not there. I can't leave my post, but I can't stay. I pace, glancing outside, watching black columns of smoke rising throughout the city and listening to the staccato report of gunfire and thundering rocket blasts. Tân Sơn Nhất airport is obliterated, and I watch wave after wave of American helicopters fly overhead and out to sea. The direct commander never appears, and I wonder if he has left his men to fend for ourselves.

Thoughts and plans stumble over each other in my mind, and I don't know which one to prioritise. One sister just delivered a baby and is still in hospital. Another sister is eight months pregnant. My other brother, Big Hung, is a teacher and unmarried like me. *What will become of them?*

By late in the afternoon, a senior officer gives me the order to go home and gather my family members for escape. I am ready for this moment, and a rush of adrenaline courses through my body, making my skin tingle. The ride to my pregnant sister's house is a blur. I arrive, and my sister

waddles out to greet me.

“We can flee with the navy. Ships are waiting at the port...” I begin.

“No Little Hùng,” she tells me. “Hoài and his family have left. You should go too.” My heart stops.

They’re gone? A memory of the two of us as boys flits through my mind. Only seven, I tightly clutch his waist while riding on the back of his scooter as we weave our way through traffic, heading to our favourite dessert shop.

The whiteness of her heart-shaped face, the dark circles under her eyes, and the wispy tendrils that stick to her cheek make my heart ache. I grasp her hands urgently.

“Ask Big Hung to meet me at the port at 6 pm. I can get him on a ship. I love you.” This was goodbye. My next stop is home.

My mother rushes out at the sound of my engine.

“Come with me! We can escape with the navy.”

But I see her choice in her expression. I see her fear. I see her pain. I realise then that her home holds deep meaning for her. The souvenirs of her life cling to every nook and cranny of the house, like dust motes. Losing it, is letting go of her life, all the memories she holds dear, and would equate to death.

“I am not running anymore. I ran from the Communists in 54’ when they took the North.”

“Mum, I will always love you, but I must go,” I choke and hug her so fiercely her breath catches.

Back on my scooter and wasting no time, I weave through the crowds of people and head to the Sài Gòn river port. Three navy frigates line up side-by-side, and sailors and their families are streaming on board. I search for Big Hung, and a tide of relief washes over me when I spot him at the edge of the crowd. I motion to the Military Police (MP) guard to permit my brother through the barrier.

“Go ahead, just get on board. I haven’t received orders to leave. I must return to the office and find my commanding officer.”

I rush off.

With still no sign of my direct commanding officer by 8 pm, I hurry back to the port. Foremost on my mind—find a senior officer who has the authority to grant me leave. I notice the crowd of

people has grown, but only navy personnel and their families are allowed past the MPs and onto the ships.

The frigates are so overloaded with people; it is hard to discern faces. I jump onto the first frigate, and like a wedge, I drive my way through people on board and jump onto the second ship. As soon as I land on the deck, the vessel hoists anchor and is underway. The other two frigates follow suit, and soon all three, full of refugees, are sailing into the night. The “whop, whop, whop” of US Chinook helicopters as they fly overhead and out to sea, match the pounding of my heart. We pass an armory that had suffered a direct hit from a Việt Cộng rocket and is up in flames; shrill whistles, from exploding artillery in the depot, punch the surrounding darkness.

I look back at the scene on the dock. Three MPs try to hold back a mob of anguished, terrified faces. We are the last ships. There will be no return for me and no escape for those left behind.

I find a space at the stern of the ship, and squat, looking back at the skyline of Sài Gòn. Streaks of red artillery fire slash the night sky and resemble the gashes I feel in my heart. Everything I believed in—my country, my honor, my men—I never considered forsaking, yet I had been abandoned. In the final hours, my sense of duty and strong conviction to follow orders made me waste valuable time. I had made all the wrong choices. My decision to return to the staff office to await evacuation orders rather than grab my bag, save myself and get on the ship with Big Hung put me here—alone. I have no way of knowing if Big Hung is on this ship or any of the vessels. In my rush to return to the office, I forgot to tell him which ship to board.

I look around and notice everyone on the boat has bags or bundles. I look down at my bare hands. I have nothing: no clothes, no food, no identity documents and no Big Hung. Despair descends over me as dark as the night and my breathing becomes labored; my chest is tight and heavy. I run my fingers through my hair, sensing the coldness of my fingertips on my hot scalp, and cradle my head in my hands.

As I mull over these thoughts, something out of the corner of my eye catches my attention - the jagged hairline at the nape of a thick, brown neck leading to broad, rounded shoulders and a familiar shirt I had given as a birthday present. He is also looking at the receding Sài Gòn cityscape.

“Big Hung?” I am incredulous.

My brother turns and sees me, the corners of his lips shoot up, his round face lighting up like a

harvest moon. He gives me a bear hug, and I sense what feels like electricity course through my veins.

He's here! He's alive!

Somehow my wrong choices still led me here, to the right ship and to my brother. I breathe the warm, moist, salty air deeply into my lungs; I realise I have been holding my breath.

Before the sun could kiss the sky, we arrive at Định An, a small port town. More South Vietnamese soldiers are here awaiting rescue, and like me, had been left behind to face the consequences of fighting on the vanquished side. Our ship enters the ocean, and we continue to sail.

Dawn breaks over the horizon and Big Hung gasps, driving me to my feet. The ocean is teeming with life and colour as far as the eye can see. Fishing boats, cargo ships, junks, and sampans, along with what was left of the South Vietnamese Navy fleet, undulate on the waves. South Vietnamese helicopters pepper the blue sky, flying out to meet us, bringing the last, lucky escapees. Some of them hover over our ship or our sister ships, dropping off desperate passengers. Just yesterday, I watched planes leaving Sài Gòn, like migrating birds, and I wished for the possibility of the same. And here I am, not in the sky but on the sea, fleeing my homeland after all.

What did we have left? We are a mass of humans, with no home and no country, converging in the sea, on nothingness, carrying with us an abiding hope for safety and peace.

Our remaining South Vietnamese fleet heads to Côn Sơn island where we rendezvous with the USS Kirk. The American naval destroyer leads our flotilla of ships, cargo vessels, and fishing boats toward the Philippines. Underneath the punishing Pacific sun, Big Hung and I sit, stand, or squat but never lie down—it is too jammed with people to afford that luxury. The grumbling in my gut soon turns to a pervasive gnawing, and I am so weak with hunger, I cannot stand. The adrenaline-filled hours before my flight, the worry, the sadness, the disappointment and human limitations, combined to sap every vestige of energy from me.

On the fifth day, we glimpse land. The anticipation on board is palpable. As we sail into Subic Bay, the captain formally lowers the South Vietnamese flag. On deck, I stand, my gaze glued to the red stripes of the yellow banner. *Red for the blood spilled.* My eyes burn, and my legs shake, but I force myself to stand upright. This will be my last stand for my country and the ideas of democracy, unity, and peace. A lone voice, strong and rich, starts singing our national anthem. Soon hundreds of

voices have joined, and the words belt out of my mouth:

Of one heart, we go forth...

A storm cloud of grief, black and thick, settles on our ship, over the sailors and their families, bringing rain in the form of tears to many faces. Only our nation's ashes remain on the land where we were born. We are a people without a country. All I have left is the brother next to me. The wind caresses my face, drying both the tears and the sea spray, leaving only a salty residue. I resolve to find the rest of my family.

We spend mere hours on Subic Bay; enough time to undergo a noxious delousing spray, take a refreshing shower, pick out a new set of clean clothes, and ravish a meal of ham sandwich and a soda. There is no time for questions, paperwork, or naps; thousands of refugees at the camp are waiting for processing, and there is no room for us.

Instead, we board a merchant marine cargo ship docked at the port and sail with it for Guam. I am a seasoned refugee now; I know to find a suitable spot on the top deck underneath a tarp. It slaps incessantly in the strong sea wind, and I learn to let the sound lull me to sleep. Even though there are many onboard, we have enough room this time to sit and stretch out our legs.

Big Hung and I take turns collecting a plateful of rice and sardines from the galley at mealtimes. It's not a gourmet meal and doesn't touch the gulf in our bellies, but we at least have food.

"Do you think Hoài and his family made it out?" I ask Big Hung one night.

"I'm sure of it. They are probably in America by now. Don't worry, we'll find them."

Treasured memories—eating sticky rice with my eldest brother in Hà Nội outside his high school and playing with the toy tank he bought for me—flash through my mind. He's always been there, steady, reassuring, my best friend.

I drift off to sleep. I am swinging Lan around in a circle; her giggles fill my ears. "Uncle, swing me again." The dream changes and I am no longer swinging her around but cradling her in my arms. Her eyes are closed, her body bloody and lifeless.

We are the last cargo ship to arrive at Orote Point, Guam. It is a considerable effort for me to walk down the gangplank behind my brother. I was never a big guy, even compared to other men my age, but now, I am weak, sunburned, dehydrated and emaciated, I look like a re-education camp survivor.

The sun is blistering as I squint at the astonishing scene before me. Countless large green tents stretch neatly, row after endless row.

“I see why this is called Tent City,” Big Hung says as we walk to our tent along a “road,” passing offices, kitchens, and eating halls. I even spy a stop sign at an intersection.

The following day, Big Hung and I meet with an immigration official to fill in forms, creating a new paper history. I write down my sister’s address and hand in the paperwork. Suddenly hopeful, my wrong choices on the last day of Sài Gòn turned out all right after all. If it was fate or serendipity that led me to Big Hung, surely other miracles might happen?

I return to my tent, sit on my cot, scrawling the same message on several scraps of paper:

I am Ngô Văn Hùng. I am looking for my eldest brother Ngô Văn Hoài, his wife Marguerite and his three children Dương, Tuấn and Lan. Big Hung and I are headed to America.

I walk to the message board closest to my tent and scan the notes there, finding nothing of interest. I tape one of my notes in an empty spot and move onto the next board.

Squinting, I pass over hundreds of messages until my eyes fall on handwriting that is as familiar as my own. My heart thuds so violently I can hear it in my ears; ten years my senior, my eldest brother was the one who taught me how to write as a kid. A gust of wind whips the note, driving red dust into my eyes. I furiously blink away the wetness that comes to them, and reach out, hands trembling, to hold down the furling edges. My fingers pass lightly over the meticulous handwriting. I read each word slowly and deliberately:

This is Ngô Văn Hoài. I lived in Sài Gòn, Việt Nam. I have a wife and three children. We are all safe. I am searching for my parents and the rest of my family: Thu, Hung, Thúy, and Hùng.

I take the note into my hands. I am not alone. Big Hung is with me, and my family is in my hands. That is all that matters.

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