Baptism by Fire

Ho Chi Minh City—or Saigon, as it is still commonly called—is a single-mindedly commercial place. Filled with pushcarts and vendors selling everything from soup to CDs, the streets are roaring rivers of two-stroke motorcycles. The exhaust fumes are so thick that Saigon's famously beautiful women have started covering their faces with scarves. "We are all Muslims now," says Viet, my Honda man, who drives me around the city on the back of his motorcycle.

Approaching An's house—a villa in District Three, a densely settled neighborhood near the train station—we pass an intersection full of motorcycle repair shops and come to a street that specializes in selling tropical fish, including the Siamese fighting fish that An admires. I tug on the bell that hangs from his green metal gate. As the dogs start barking, I peer through the grill to see An shuffling down the driveway on this sunny day in January 2004. A wispy figure, he wears a white, short-sleeved shirt with a ballpoint pen in the pocket, gray trousers that flap around his legs, and rubber sandals. He arrives winded but smiling and greets me with a handshake that involves only the tips of his fingers. Recently hospitalized with a collapsed lung, the result of a lifetime of smoking Lucky Strikes, seventy-seven-year-old General Givral, with his full-toothed grin, looks as puckish as ever.

I had first visited An in the early 1990s when I was in Vietnam researching a book on Amerasians—the children of American soldiers and their Vietnamese lovers. When the book was published, I sent him a copy, and I sent him other books when mutual friends of ours visited Vietnam. An knew that I was interested in hearing his story. He was a gracious host to the visitors who were allowed to see him after Vietnam adopted *doi moi*, its version of perestroika, in the late 1980s. He would spend hours explaining Vietnamese history and culture, but he was silent as a sphinx on one subject—his life as a spy. Late in 2003, I received a message that he might finally be willing to talk, not formally but in friendly conversations. These began at Têt, the lunar new year, and resumed for another couple of weeks at the onset of the rainy season in May 2004. I saw An again in March 2005 and then the following year before Têt.

An leads me through his garden, a tropical enclave lush with star fruit and bushberry trees. It is perfumed with frangipani and splashed with color from the flowering apricot blossoms and orchids. A hawk and three fighting cocks stare at us from cages under the trees. We stop in the middle of the garden to admire a porcelain statue of one of An's beloved German shepherds. An credits Edward Lansdale, military intelligence agent and supposed model for Graham Greene's "quiet" American, with teaching him how to use dogs in his work. "I trained my dog so that he could alert me when the police were searching people's houses, even a kilometer away," An says. "He was a good spy." An, with his puckish humor, also points out that the superintelligent, Lansdalian dog in his garden has three testicles.

An's wife, Thu Nhan, is sweeping the front porch with a short-handled broom. She is a pleasant, round-faced woman who wears her hair tucked into a bun. Ten years younger than An, she is busily cleaning before the rush of visitors who will be coming for the Têt holiday, including their daughter, who lives in California. Hanging on the porch and from poles set in the driveway are cages containing An's laughing thrushes, golden-fronted leaf birds, magpies, canaries, and other songbirds. A blue Indian mynah with a yellow bill announces in Vietnamese, "Grandfather, telephone call for you!" The bird is mimicking the voice of An's grandson, who lives with him along with An's three grown sons.

We kick off our shoes and enter the large room that once served as An's office and library, as well as his reception and dining room. Lining the far wall are the glass-faced shelves that house his books. A Chinese landscape painting hangs above a green upholstered sofa and chairs. Below the open windows sits a fish tank that holds the third component in An's menagerie.

"Dogs are loyal," he says. "Birds are always hopping around in their cages, keeping busy. Fish teach you to keep your mouth shut. Unfortunately, while I was in the hospital, most of my fish died."

The room has been changed since I last visited. In the alcove near the front door, in place of An's desk and filing cabinets and the piles of magazines and papers which used to reach toward the ceiling, sits his son's piano. Later I discover what happened to An's office when he and I walk past the family altar and out through the kitchen into the driveway at the back of the house. "Here is where my wife threw all my papers," he says, pointing to two gray filing cabinets and a desk piled with yellowing documents. All that protects them from the elements is a narrow plastic roof.

As we stare at the papers heaped in the driveway, An laughs. "My wife tells me it's time to make room for the younger generation, but I can't die yet. There's nowhere for me to go. I can't go to heaven because I have told too many lies; hell is reserved for crooks, but there are so many of them in Vietnam, it's full."

An has pendulous ears, a high, square-domed forehead, close-cropped dark hair, and lively brown eyes. His left eye is slightly larger than his right, as if he were simultaneously taking both the long and short view of the world's affairs. Photographs of him from the 1950s show him wearing narrow suits, white shirts, and black trousers. An looks like one of the nice, clean-cut young men who joined fraternities and mastered social drinking. He was taller than the average Vietnamese, a scrappy boxer and swimmer who once thought, after failing his school exams for the second year in a row, that he might become a Vietnamese gangster.

"I don't want to talk about myself," An says frequently. "There is too much to remember." Then without skipping a beat he begins recalling in minute detail scenes from fifty years ago. He leans forward in his chair. He gesticulates with his fingers, which are long-boned and nearly translucent with age. He shapes the air in front of him as if it were a doughy ball, taking a punch at it from time to time. He divides his remarks into Confucian triads and pentads while waving his fingers through an arc that represents one of the *déesses*, the protective goddesses to whom he credits his success in life. An can also talk for hours about world events, drawing parallels between Vietnam and the Iraq war ("techniques first developed in Asia have been moved to the desert") or evaluating the world's intelligence services ("The Americans are masters at gathering intelligence, but they don't know what to do with it").

Pham Xuan An was born in the Vietnamese Year of the Cat, at the Hour of the Buffalo, on September 12, 1927, twenty miles northeast of Saigon, in the Bien Hoa psychiatric hospital, which at the time was the only European medical facility in Cochin China open to Vietnamese. As the firstborn son of a *cadre supérieur*, an educated member of the colonial administration, he received a French birth certificate, an unusual privilege.

"They had one doctor to take care of the crazy people who were pregnant," An says. "It's because I was born in an insane asylum that some people say my blood was infected by the 'virus' of Communism. *An was born in a psychiatric hospital? That's why he follows the Communists. He's crazy!*"

An is a great fabulist. He uses animal stories and proverbs to poke fun at people's pretensions. His humor acknowledges life's absurdities and embraces its contradictions, but sometimes I wonder if it isn't also a shield, a kind of protective carapace to keep interlocutors at bay. Why *did* An become a Communist? Does he joke about it because the question is too serious to be treated any other way?

Originally from Ha Dong, the heart of North Vietnam in the densely populated Red River delta lying between Hanoi and the coast, An's great-grandfather, Pham Xuan Ong, a silver- and goldsmith, was recruited by the Nguyen dynasty to make medals for the royal court at Hué in central Vietnam. An's grandfather, Pham Xuan Duong, rose through the Vietnamese civil service to become a teacher and eventually director of a primary school for girls. In the photograph that stands as the centerpiece of An's family altar, Duong wears a gold medal on his chest. Given to him by the emperor, the large tulip-shaped medal, called the *kim khanh*, signifies that An's grandfather holds a rank equivalent to a secretary in the government. An shows me a picture of himself as a baby with the medal hanging around his neck. I ask if he still owns his grandfather's *kim khanh.* "It was sent to Ho Chi Minh for the gold campaign," he says, referring to the massive bribe that Ho paid the Chinese army in 1946 to convince them to withdraw from northern Vietnam after World War II.

After graduating from the University of Hanoi, An's father, Pham Xuan Vien, worked as a cadastral surveyor establishing property lines and tax rolls in Vietnam's southern frontier. Vien laid out roads in Saigon and canals through the U Minh forest, along the Gulf of Siam. While surveying in Cambodia, he met An's mother, another emigrant from the north, an industrious woman with a second grade education who could read and write. The work of a colonial surveyor in southern Vietnam involved press-ganging peasants into carrying surveyor's chains through the Mekong marshlands and building towers in the jungle to establish sight lines. "When you do land surveying and build canals and roads, you see the poor Vietnamese workers eking out their living," An says. "You see the French system of forced labor, beatings, and other abuses. The only way to oppose these abuses is to fight for independence. The Americans did the same thing in 1776. When my father saw how badly the French treated the peasants, it was natural for him to fight for Vietnamese independence. My father became a patriot. My family was always patriotic in their desire to remove the French from Vietnam."

As a *cadre supérieur,* An's father held one of the highest ranks available to a Vietnamese in the colonial administration. There was no engineering school in Indochina (for this advanced training one had to study in France): so Pham Xuan Vien had been schooled as an *agent technique,* which was the functional equivalent of a civil engineer. Born in Hué in central Vietnam and educated in the north, Vien spent his entire career in the south, building France's colonial infrastructure. At the time, the south was the Vietnamese frontier, much of it still covered in jungle. Other parts were accessible only by boat. Working his way through seasonal flood plains, mangrove forests, and rice paddies buffeted twice yearly by monsoons, Vien served in the vanguard of what the Vietnamese call the *nam tien*—the march to the south.

The Viets, one among Vietnam's fifty-four ethnic groups (although by now the dominant group), have been expanding southward from their home in the Red River valley near Hanoi for the past five thousand years. But it was only after the Mekong wilds in the south had been overlaid with roads and plantations that the Viets could finish their march. Pham Xuan An, like his father, had served the *nam tien.* In fact, he could be said to have brought it to its end. A unified Vietnam stretching from the Chinese border to the Gulf of Thailand could exist only after all of Vietnam's invaders—Chinese, French, Japanese, American, and Cambodian—had been expelled and Vietnam had fought the last of its Indochinese wars. Only then would the *nam tien* be complete.

Like many Vietnamese, An traces his ancestry to southern China. "That's where we lived before we were pushed out," he says. "We migrated from Hanoi to central Vietnam, the area of the Cham and Cambodians, before we moved farther south into Cochin China. My ancestors followed the same history as the rest of the country, moving from the heartland in the Red River delta south into the lowland areas."

Soon after arriving at the royal court in Hué, An's family began its ascent from manual laborers to colonial cadres. While Pham Xuan Ong, the family patriarch, was a craftsman, shaping gold and silver into plants and animals so elaborately

detailed that they seemed to take on a life of their own, his children used their position at court to secure jobs as teachers and administrators. The school directed by An's grandfather, Duong, was one of the first in the country to teach *chu quoc ngu*, or modern Vietnamese writing—an adapted version of the Latin alphabet developed in the seventeenth century by French missionary Alexandre de Rhodes. Vietnam's original system of writing, *nom*, based on classical Chinese characters, was banned by the French in 1920. Duong's school was part of a strategy to reset Vietnamese history to year zero. With a new language and literature, Vietnam would become the sole Asian country with a Roman alphabet. To help reshape the consciousness of its Asian subjects, France introduced the guillotine into Vietnam and began using it with revolutionary fervor. The French ultimately failed to impose their political will on Vietnam, but their linguistic revolution was a success. A country that was largely illiterate, due to the difficulty of mastering Chinese calligraphy, is now almost universally literate.

An's uncle also directed an elementary school. Another uncle became a civil servant working for the post office, while his aunt married an *agent technique*, who, like An's father, had graduated from the University of Hanoi. An's successful, upwardly mobile family might have been expected to feel beholden to the powers that had trained and employed them, but instead of supporting the French, they resisted them. They ran the schools, built the roads, and delivered the mail, but at the same time they were patriots who opposed French colonial rule in Vietnam. They were quiet revolutionaries, not the ones who went to prison or fought in the Viet Minh resistance, but their fervor was deep and unwavering, and it would come to fruition—with devastating effect—in the revolutionary career of Pham Xuan An.

The Viets are a fierce tribe whose history consists predominantly of battles against enemies from the north (Genghis Khan and the Chinese and Japanese), the east (Portugal, France, and America), and the west (Laos, Khmers, Indians, and Thais). The list of Vietnam's warriors, including women warriors, is long, and so too is the duration of their struggles. The Vietnamese fought for a thousand years to oust one Chinese occupation.

Patriotism in colonial Vietnam was inadvertently fostered by the French. They taught the Vietnamese about nationalism, including the idea of the nation-state and its aspirations to express the spirit of a unified people. Vietnam's school curriculum was devoted to studying the French Revolution and its happy conclusion in a republic devoted to *liberté*, *egalité*, and *fraternité.* The French never intended for the Vietnamese to embrace these ideas as their own. They were talking about *France*, not Vietnam. But once the nationalist ideal began bleeding into the colonies, not even the guillotine could cauterize it.

"To make a living, you had to work for the French regime, but none of the Vietnamese wanted their country dominated by foreigners," An says. "Our history is full of battles against invaders. We borrowed our language for fighting this struggle from the French, but it was motivated by our love for our own people—the same force that motivates any country to fight for its independence."

The French divided Vietnam, like Gaul, into three parts. Tonkin in the north included Hanoi and the port city of Haiphong. The central region of Annam was simultaneously the birthplace of revolutionaries, such as the Tay Son brothers and Ho Chi Minh, and home to the quaint royal court in Hué. Cochin China in the south was comprised of Saigon, the Michelin and other rubber plantations at Dau Tieng, and the great rice-growing domains of the Mekong delta. A unified Vietnam stretching from the Chinese border to the Gulf of Siam had never existed. Nor did the French *want* it to exist. They outlawed the word *Vietnam*—because it referred to the idea of a unified country—and arrested anyone who used it.

"The map of Vietnam was made by the French," An says. "Before they arrived we had no nation. The high plateaus belonged to the Montagnards. Other parts belonged to the Cham or Khmer."

I am speaking with An one day when he walks to the buffet next to the dining room table, opens the top drawer, and shuffles through a collection of old photographs and letters. "Here it is," he says, holding out his police identity card from the

colonial era. Because his father's family came from central Vietnam, known to the French as Annam, the Sûreté (French criminal investigation department) has identified An as an Annamite.

"All the Vietnamese opposed the French occupation," An tells me. "Insurgencies were always popping up in one area or another." He launches into a story about the depth of anti-French sentiment in colonial Vietnam. Like many of his stories, this one, stretching back over successive generations, involves an interlocking mosaic of family and social relations so tightly knit that I can barely tease out the strands. To help me, An gives me a handhold for keeping track of the narrative as it slips backward into Vietnamese history.

Today's point of reference is Nguyen Thi Binh, whose name is mentioned frequently in An's stories. Binh and An, both born in 1927, were childhood friends. Their fathers were classmates at Hanoi University and worked together as engineers in Cochin China. Binh and An might have married if their paths had not diverged during Vietnam's interminable wars. Imprisoned for two years by the French, Binh became foreign minister of the National Liberation Front (the coalition of southern revolutionaries whose armed forces were known as the Vietcong), and she led the NLF delegation at the Paris peace talks. In 1992, after serving as Vietnam's minister of education, Binh was elected vice president of Vietnam. During the tumult immediately following the end of the Vietnam war, she helped An get his family reunited in Saigon, but today's story stretches even farther back in time.

Binh's grandfather, scholar and anticolonial agitator Phan Chu Trinh, believed that France should honor its democratic principles by replacing Vietnam's mandarin rulers—of which he was one—with modern laws and institutions. After peasant tax revolts erupted in 1908, Trinh was sentenced to death, but instead was shipped to Poulo Condore, the Devil's Island prison camp also known as Con Dao. Thirteenth-century explorer Marco Polo was the first Westerner to discover this archipelago of sixteen mountainous islands in the South China Sea—or Eastern Sea, as the Vietnamese insist on calling it. With their windswept nesting grounds for turtles and dugongs, the islands have a lonely, spectral aura enhanced by their long years of use for imprisonment and torture. It was here that the infamous "tiger cages," first built by the French and later adopted by the Americans, became the symbol of the cruel U.S. presence in Vietnam.

After three years on Poulo Condore, Trinh graduated to exile in France, where he worked as a photo retoucher and coauthored articles signed "Nguyen Ai Quoc," Nguyen the Patriot, which at the time was an alias for Nguyen Sinh Cung, later known as Ho Chi Minh. When Phan Chu Trinh died in 1926, thousands of people swarmed into the streets in Saigon and Hanoi, demanding an end to French colonial occupation. An's father helped organize these demonstrations, and An followed his father's example in the 1950s, when he too used the funeral of a Vietnamese patriot to launch a series of street demonstrations and strikes.

When we meet, An and I usually sit in his living room. Sometimes we walk to the bookshelves that line the back of the room. One day An takes me behind the shelves into a narrow corridor where his family altar is located. It holds the usual sticks of incense and bowls of fruit and jumbled collection of photos which honor the dead. Vietnam is a country that celebrates death days instead of birthdays. "The Vietnamese are not Buddhists," An says. "They are animists. The religion they practice is ancestor worship. This is why the Têt holiday is so important to the Vietnamese. It is the occasion when you invite the souls of the dead to come back to visit the living."

"We believe we have three souls," An says, "spiritual, sentimental, and material. The spiritual soul distinguishes humans from animals. The sentimental soul comes from the heart. The material soul comes from the abdomen. It explains why humans are bad, why we kill people and are corrupted.

"When you die, you report to the emperor of hell. If you have committed too many crimes, you are forced to stay there. In any case, you will stay in hell for three days after your burial. Then your family comes to visit your grave with a black chicken. If the chicken cries, it is let out of its cage and allowed to run free. Called 'the opening of the grave,' this releases the sentimental soul. You can use a black dog for this ritual, but it costs more. If the dog returns to your home, it will bring your sentimental soul with it. We celebrate this event by placing a photo of the dead person on the family altar."

Placed in the center of the altar is the photograph of An's grandfather, showing him dressed in a tight-fitting tunic and wearing around his neck the gold medal from the emperor. Nearby are the photographs of other ancestors, whose stories An begins to tell. His grandfather had three wives. His first wife bore him four children, including An's father, who was the second of three sons. His third wife bore him three children. His second wife, childless, left An's grandfather and then married into an aristocratic family in the north and gave birth to To Huu, who became one of North Vietnam's greatest poets and politicians.

"At that time, the French allowed you to have three wives," An says. "In the old days, you could have five wives and seven concubines. That's why I always wanted to live in the old times," he jokes.

An's father, Vien, also had two wives, actually one wife and a concubine. Before Vien met An's mother, he had a daughter with a peasant girl in Rach Gia, the southern town at the edge of the U Minh forest. For a brief time in 1941, the girl came to live with An's family, but she soon got homesick and left. An never saw her again.

Like his father, An's mother was part of Vietnam's southward march. She came from the coal mining region near Haiphong, and her family hailed originally from China, where her grandfather, like An, was an avid bird lover. As a little girl, she tended his skylarks—Chinese birds that are carefully bred to produce the finest singers and dancers.

"Where is a photo of your father?" I ask An, as we stand in front of the family altar.

"It is here," he says, reaching for a picture toward the back. The photo shows a stern man wearing black spectacles and a dark Western suit and tie.

"I can't stand up too long, particularly when it's hot," An says, returning the photo to its original position. I wonder if his father's censorious gaze is also making An gasp for breath.

Born in 1900, An's father was educated in the girls school run by An's grandfather—a rare exception to the strict colonial rules regarding single-sex education. After high school, Vien went north to Hanoi for his training as an *agent technique*, a civil engineer. The engineers divided their tasks into different specialties: mapping, surveying, dredging canals, building roads. An's father excelled in mapping. He spent most of his working life in the jungles and wild areas of Cochin China scouting out the plan of attack for his colleagues, who arrived later to build South Vietnam's public works. An himself mastered these skills when he started mapping battlefields during the Vietnam war. One of his most important jobs at *Time* was to submit weekly coordinates for all the troop emplacements and battles in the ongoing war.

In spite of their privileged position as civil servants, An's family members were not oblivious to the suffering around them. Forced labor and an immiserated peasantry formed the base of the colony's economy. Ngo Vinh Long, in his book *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants Under the French*, describes how Vietnam's rubber plantations functioned as slave labor camps, with annual death rates higher than twenty percent. Stiff taxes on the peasantry, *corvée* labor, an elaborate system of police controls and prisons, periodic famine in the countryside followed by peasant revolts and swift reprisals—this was the political economy that ground the vast majority of Vietnamese into poverty. At the same time, the French built roads and schools throughout the countryside, and the mail was delivered with remarkable celerity. This economic system operated

like a great machine for converting jungle into rubber and rice plantations, and it also provided the leisure for French *colons* to spend their afternoons sipping Pernod on the terrace of the Continental Palace hotel.

Vietnamese opposition to French colonial rule took a variety of forms. Some Vietnamese wanted to ameliorate the brutality of the French system while maintaining a Franco-Vietnamese alliance to keep the Chinese at bay. Others called for throwing off the French colonial yoke. An's immediate family wanted to bring the colonial era to an end. "If you are a teacher, every day when you face your students, you can see that their families are poor, and you know why they are poor," An says. "My grandfather saw the consequences of the French occupation, and he couldn't help but be opposed to it."

An's father also saw the consequences. "My father mapped the forest by laying out chains, which is hard to do in the jungle," An says. "He had to build towers for sight lines and rely on *chaineurs*, who included prison laborers and peasants too poor to pay their taxes." After mapping the area around Bien Hoa, Pham Xuan Vien was transferred to Rach Gia. This vast area of swamps and mangrove forests bordering the Gulf of Thailand marks the end of the road in Vietnam's southward march. As far from civilization as you can get, the area is sparsely settled by refugees from China and Cambodia and by pirates who cruise offshore in the gulf. Surrounding Rach Gia is the U Minh forest, an aqueous domain filled with various species of Melaleuca water palms and cajeput groves. Thousands of fish traps, triangular cages made from bamboo sticks, float in the water. The slender white trunks of the cajeputs thrive in the marshes, as do a large variety of insects, including honeybees whose combs are avidly collected. The French tried to drain these swamps and canalize them into rice plantations, but they never fully tamed the U Minh badlands. The forest was a staging area for the Viet Minh. It served the same purpose for the Vietcong, and it was here that Pham Xuan An was trained as a revolutionary soldier.

As a child, An traveled through the vast, watery reaches of the U Minh forest on his family's sampan, which was loaded with his father's surveying equipment and maps. At night the family docked in canal-side villages, where local authorities loaned them huts in which they cooked dinner and slept. One evening before An's second birthday, the family was crossing the estuary of a big river that opened onto the ocean when the twin spouts of a marine tornado began racing toward them. "It looked like the black necks of two geese intertwined with each other," An says. The boat survived the storm, but An's mother, then pregnant with An's sister, decided that a waterborne life was too dangerous for her firstborn son, and An was sent to live with his paternal grandparents in Hué.

They lived in a brick house, built by An's father, which was occupied by An's grandfather and his first and second wives and An's half uncle and aunt. After delivering her second child in Hué, An's mother rejoined her husband in the south. "I was abandoned there to live with my grandfather at the age of two," An says. He is not using the word *abandoned* by accident. This first separation from his parents would be followed a few years later by another separation, which An calls his exile.

It was two years before An saw his parents again. They came to Hué on the death of his grandmother, and after the funeral, they took An back to Cochin China. No longer living on a boat, the family occupied a house in Gia Dinh province outside Saigon, which at the time was a provincial city of a few hundred thousand souls surrounded by rice fields, rubber plantations, and forests. Few roads had been cut through the countryside (An's father was charged with mapping where they would go), so people traveled the area on jungle paths, mostly on foot and occasionally by tilbury, a small two-wheeled cart pulled by a horse.

And so began An's lifelong love affair with Saigon. He spent hours along the Saigon River, swinging in the banyan trees and jumping in the water. He made friends with the workers in the Ba Son shipyard who cast him fanciful metal coins to play

with. He rode the trolley to Cholon, the Chinese district, and then rode back to the movie theater near the bridge at Da Kao, where he watched films of Johnny Weissmuller playing Tarzan. “It was a beautiful dream of freedom in the jungle,” An says of those movies. “I thought under Communism I would live like Tarzan. I put this dream into the revolution.”

“Look at Tarzan!” An exclaims. “What does he have? Only his loincloth. When you are a Communist you become Tarzan, king of the jungle.” This is Communism as a pure state of nature, a Rousseauian idyll. It is the high school philosophy version of Communism, which An acquired from books sent to students in the colonies by the French Socialist Party. “Yes, I am a Communist,” he says. “Communism is a very beautiful theory, the most human theory. The teaching of God, the Creator, is the same. Communism teaches you to love each other, not kill each other. The only way to do this is for everyone to become brothers, which may take a million years. It’s utopian, but it’s beautiful.”

As a political analyst, An knew that Communism was a failed god, responsible for millions of deaths in the twentieth century, and he knew intimately the limits of the Communist regime under which he lived. But An the patriot made a choice when he was young to fight for an independent Vietnam. The most effective force in leading this struggle against the Japanese, French, Americans, Chinese, Cambodians, and other invaders of his divided country was Communist. “Here in Vietnam, which organization did you have to join in order to carry on the fight for your country?” he asks. “You had no choice but the Communist Party.”

An was happy to be reunited with his parents in Saigon, but school was another matter. Enrolled in the French primary school, he had to take a big exam at the end of third grade. If he failed the exam, he had to repeat the class. If he failed again, he flunked out of school. The exam was so important that, on the day it was given, police surrounded An’s classroom and locked the doors against parents who might try to bribe the teacher.

“I failed the exam,” An says. He laughs remembering this scholarly setback, a full-throated, hearty laugh. “The school where I did my best work and spent my happiest days was *école buissonnière*,” he says, using the French term for playing hooky.

The father of one of An’s classmates was a coffin maker. At night, An slipped out of the house to sleep with his friends in the empty coffins. (When business was slow, the coffin maker thought it lucky to have his surplus stock temporarily occupied.) “It was cozy inside our coffins, and I slept quite well,” An says. “My father would go out looking for me. When he discovered I had been sleeping in my friend’s coffins, he would whip me.”

“Other nights, I went out with my friends to look for ghosts. We hid near the cemetery, beside a stand of bamboo. They say that at night, when ghosts appear, they make a noise, and if you look at a grave, you can see the spirit rising from the body. This is actually the mist that rises when the rains begin to fall, but we thought the first exhalations of mist were the spirits of dead people rising from their graves. So we would lie in wait, and at night, when the wind blew, the bamboo would knock together and make a clicking noise, like bones shifting in their coffins. This was the sound that told us to get ready, the ghosts are coming.”

As I listen to him tell this story, An reminds me of Tom Sawyer, conjuring with spirits and getting into mischief, while back home his father, playing the role of Aunt Becky, is preparing to tan his backside.

Five kilometers outside of colonial Saigon, the forested area where An lived would turn pitch black and silent at night, except for the plaintive cry of the peanut vendor as he made his rounds from house to house, selling cones of roasted peanuts for a few pennies apiece. An was sometimes allowed to buy a cone of peanuts as a special treat. One night, with heavy monsoon rains beating on the roof, he heard the peanut vendor’s distant cry. An summons up the plaintive voice from his youth: *yang rang yang, yan cau boi mang, mang dao rang.*

Opening the door, An discovered that the peanut vendor was a boy his own age. His only protection against the monsoon rains was a conical cap and cape made from the leaves of water coconuts.

An had returned to his homework and was munching his roasted peanuts. When his father asked him what he thought of the peanut vendor, An replied, “He’s a boy like any other boy.”

“Do you think so? Then why are you sitting here, in this comfortable room? Why are you reading books under an electric light while he is outside in the dark, wearing nothing but a cape made of coconut fronds? He is earning money to feed his family. His mother and father are poor. Why don’t you take advantage of your lucky situation? Why do you fool around all the time, day and night, night and day? I beat you to make you study, for your future benefit.”

Neither beatings nor lectures improved the headstrong youngster. “He whipped me. So I didn’t study,” An says. “My father was afraid I would turn into a Saigon hooligan, a *du con Sai Gon.* That’s why he exiled me to Truoi. Already in third grade you had to read and write French. Even mathematics was in French. History was taught in French, and it was mainly French history. I was doing well in math, but I failed the French oral dictation, and that was the part they took most seriously.”

“My father sent me to Hué, and my grandfather sent me to Truoi,” An says, describing what he calls his exile. “Truoi was a very poor area, with only one primary school for many villages. The head of the school was the adopted son of my grandfather. His wife was also a teacher in the school. I stayed with them for a year. I took the exam and failed again. My father was so mad! I had spent a whole year enjoying life, doing nothing.”

Living among people so poor that they ate roasted cicadas for meat and lit their homes with rendered rat fat was supposed to scare An into working harder in school. Instead, he delighted in playing hooky and larking around the countryside. After flunking his exams again, he was caned by his father and brought back to Saigon for a stricter regime.

One morning, after I pull the bell at his gate and An walks through his garden to greet me, I find him looking tired and dispirited. “A friend died last night,” he says. “This is happening all the time now.”

“Old people lose their teeth,” he says. “What they should lose instead, since they have no use for them, is their balls.”

“I really wanted to grow up to be like Tarzan. To have a pretty girl and live freely in the jungle. Now they make me live in a house. I have to put on a tie to go to meetings and weddings and funerals. Tarzan never put on a tie.”

“I thought you wanted to grow up to be a Vietnamese gangster.”

“When you’re a good gangster, people like you. You can help them. You fight for the weak against the bullies who dominate them.”

“What happened to your project?”

“My grandfather said no. My father said no. That’s why he exiled me to Truoi, when he noticed that I was trying to become a Saigonese gangster. Seeing the hard life of the peasants, I was supposed to mend my ways, but I enjoyed it. Do you know why? Because my father wasn’t there. I wasn’t being whipped by him with his rattan cane.”

An was brought back to Saigon for a final try at passing his exams. He returned to swimming in the river and larking about town, but things had changed. War was looming in Asia. The world was shifting around him.

“I had a friend, a Vietnamese boy, who was a French citizen. His brother was drafted by the French in 1938 to serve in the French army. Before he was shipped to Europe to fight the Germans, he was detained in the military barracks near the zoo. Every weekend my friend and I would walk from Gia Dinh to the barracks, carrying a big bunch of bananas. His mother wanted him to have them. This might be the last native food he ate before going to die in Europe.”

An tells few stories about his mother, but one concerns a family dispute that occurred when he was ten or eleven years old. “The most beautiful women in the world are French,” said his father. “No,” said his mother. “American girls are the prettiest.”

An’s father was surprised to have his opinion contradicted, since he was an expert on the subject. As a respected member of the French civil service, he was occasionally summoned to judge local beauty contests at provincial fairs, and according to him the French girls—not the Vietnamese or *métisses*—were always the most beautiful.

“I asked my mother, ‘How do you know American girls are beautiful?’ ‘Look at the movies made in Hollywood,’ she said. ‘In their manner, their speech, their gestures, the American girls are prettier than the French girls. So when you grow up, you should go to America and marry a woman like this. You will be happy. Don’t marry a French girl. They are arrogant.’”

To prove his point, An’s father sent him to watch *Les Misérables*, a movie about an impoverished French family with a pretty young French girl as the heroine. An appreciated this lesson from his father, but the movies he really loved were American films with Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy and, of course, his great favorite, Tarzan.

In 1938 An’s family moved from Saigon to Can Tho, the bustling colonial city that was the economic and cultural capital of the Mekong delta. An’s father, replacing a Frenchman who had been mobilized, was officially elevated to the rank of engineer, and An, in spite of his failed exams, was admitted to fourth grade, where he finally mastered the devilish French *dictée.* Sitting at the confluence of two rivers in a skein of waterways and canals, Can Tho presides over a region known as Cuu Long, or Nine Dragons. This is a reference to the nine branches of the Mekong River which traverse this verdant floodplain. The city is filled with floating markets and edged with orchards growing durians, mangosteens, and oranges. Rife with coconut palms and groves of sugar cane, the area is dominated by the emerald green paddies that make this the rice bowl of Southeast Asia. Can Tho was originally settled by Khmer krom—downstream Cambodians—who ruled until the end of the seventeenth century, when the Nguyen lords began to expand their influence southward. By the 1860s, the French had taken control of the delta and set to work draining and canalizing the marshy land into rice plantations—a project begun eighteen centuries earlier by Indian traders.

An was a happy-go-lucky schoolboy, but World War II was approaching. Desperate for conscripts, the French tried to draft the colony’s able-bodied men, even people as old as Pham Xuan Vien, An’s father. In 1938 Vien was called to Saigon for a physical exam, which he failed. In 1940 the Japanese occupied Indochina. The French colonialists were left to run their own form of Vichy government, which put a French face on Japanese rule.

An spent his high school years at the Collège de Can Tho, which trained boys through the tenth grade. He remained an indifferent student, but he was beloved by teachers who admired his independence and inquisitiveness. They saw in him a new kind of Vietnamese—agile, quick on his feet, adventuresome. The world was turning topsy-turvy with war and revolutionary fervor. The French colonial era was collapsing. The Vietnamese understood that mastering the French *dictée* would not be enough to guarantee success in this new world. A couple of An’s teachers, pinning their hopes on this devilish boy, tried to push him forward.

An sensed that the French world in Asia was dead, although it would be another fifteen years before the body was finally carried offstage. He began taking private English lessons from a Vietnamese Protestant minister who had been trained in Singapore, and he became an avid student of American culture, being particularly impressed by its revolutionary history, its films, and its legendary Chicago gangsters.

In 1941 An’s father was transferred back to his old territory near the U Minh forest. An’s family, which now included his younger sister and two younger brothers, moved to Rach Gia, while An stayed behind in Can Tho. His French teacher, Truong Vinh Khanh, assumed the role of An’s absent father. Khanh was the loving and appreciative counterpart to the stern

Pham Xuan Vien. Deeply cultured in Vietnamese and French literature, Khanh was also a sportsman and, like An, he had a keen sense of humor. A French citizen from a wealthy landowning family, Khanh had an unusual appreciation for the United States, which he sensed would be the next major influence shaping Vietnam.

Khanh had the worldly tolerance required to appreciate a student like An, who never worked hard enough to get more than middling grades but possessed an abundance of good humor and animal spirit. The two of them exercised every day with Khanh's punching bag and sparred in his boxing ring. "I loved him so much. He taught me all sorts of things," says An.

An's American friends claimed him as one of their own, but his early training was deeply French. Whenever he had difficulty finding a word in English, it was the French term that came to mind. His sense of Vietnamese nationalism and his early training in Marxist theory and Communism were borrowed from France. "We students knew about patriotism and nationalism, and how did we know these things?" An asks. "Because we were taught by the French."

"In our first year of secondary school we were allowed to learn Vietnamese for only an hour a week. The rest of the instruction was in French. They taught us about the French Revolution, the origins of France, French solidarity, French wars, the history of World War I and France's other wars against Germany, French religion, Catholicism, the royal court and nobility, French law. There was a strong emphasis on civic education," An says, referring to the idea of a united people, with rights incarnated in a constitutional state.

Khanh supplemented An's readings in French literature with the stories and fables of Jean de La Bruyère and Jean de La Fontaine. An loved these stories about humans and animals which reveal that the only difference between them is human pride and pretension, which put us at a disadvantage when compared to the noble simplicity of other animals. "When I feel a little unhappy I read the *Fables* of La Fontaine, because he's a *professeur universel*," An says. "Another favorite of mine is Jean de La Bruyère. He's a very optimistic writer. He teaches you how to smile, to be happy. Professor Khanh introduced me to these writers. That's why I owe him a lot."

"He thought I should go study in France. 'There is no jungle in France,' he said. 'You won't have any friends calling you out to play. There will be no swimming in the river, no boxing, fighting, training every day. You will have to become serious, like the French.'"

Khanh came up with another idea. "Since the only school at which I excelled was *l'école buissonnière*—playing hooky—he thought I should become a gangster. 'You will never be a good student,' he told me. 'To speak French, all you need to do is learn three words. To learn English, learn another three words. For the rest, you should learn how to fight. You should become the leader of the gangsters in Cochin China. This will make you highly respected by your friends and family.'"

"'The best gangsters are in Chicago,' he said. 'You should become a Vietnamese gangster, but learn how to do it from the Chicago gangsters.' He told me to go to the United States and learn about technology, the modern way of doing things. He said the Chicago gangsters, when they fight, always use *poing américain*, brass knuckles. He taught me how to make them. You pour hot lead into a mold and then cool it with water. You can break someone's skull very easily."

Khanh and his pupil spent hours swapping jokes and fabulous stories about An's future training as an American gangster. One of Khanh's stories involved the Chicago stockyards. With a smile tugging at his lips, An tells me about Chicago's miraculous machine for killing pigs, which Khanh considered the apex of American technology. "In Vietnam, we tie down the pig and cut its throat with a knife. We collect the blood. We open up the abdomen of the pig and clean out the entrails. In America, you never touch pigs. They're dirty. They're inhuman. The Americans are very clean people. They have beautiful Yorkshire pigs, Berkshire pigs, which are much bigger than Vietnamese pigs. Each one weighs over a hundred kilos."

Telling me this story, An begins to grunt like a Yorkshire pig on its way to slaughter. He is a brilliant mimic. I am hearing a perfect Yorkshire grunt here in Saigon. “At the stockyards, where the pigs are killed, an American wearing fine shoes and a necktie opens a gate leading to a big metal machine. He pushes a button. The pig falls down. The machine finishes him off. The dirty pig goes in one side of the machine and comes out the other, all cooked and nicely arranged on a plate. Sausage, ham, salami—it’s all prepared in this wonderful machine.”

“On the far side of the machine sits a big gentleman wearing a tuxedo and bowtie. In front of him is a table set with white linen, crystal goblets, fine china and silver, and a good bottle of wine. The food comes out of the machine and lands on his plate. He tastes a morsel. He sips his wine. He puffs his cigar. He pauses and with a nod of his head—but only if it meets his highest standards—the food is whisked away for delivery nationwide to all the markets in America.

“If he’s not happy, he shakes his head and someone pushes another button. The food is transported off his plate, back into the machine. Do you know what happens then? Out the other side of the machine walks the Berkshire pig!

“I went to Chicago and tried to find this machine,” An says, referring to his travels across the United States in the 1950s. “My professor was dead by then, or I would have written to tell him that I couldn’t find this miraculous machine anywhere in America.”

In the context of wartime Vietnam, Khanh’s recommendation that An become a gangster was not far-fetched. Vietnam has a long tradition of criminal gangs. The French used criminal enterprises to finance their colonial administration, and they put gangsters in charge of running the country. In colonial Vietnam becoming a gangster could indeed “make you highly respected by your friends and family.”

Preeminent among Vietnam’s modern gangsters was Le Van “Bay” Vien. An illiterate, bullnecked assassin who was adept at Sino-Vietnamese boxing, Bay Vien was chief of the Binh Xuyen river pirates who controlled the opium traffic and all the casinos and houses of prostitution in Saigon. A graduate of the Poulo Condore prison camp, he would rise to become the unofficial mayor of Saigon, the city’s richest man, its de facto police chief, and a general.

In one sense, the entire history of Vietnam—all fifty centuries of it—can be seen as a long succession of rival war bands and gangsters. Vietnam is a great crossroads, a veritable stew of cultures, all of which seem to have staked out this territory because it was as far from home as one could get. Vietnam was where you went after a failed revolution in China, India, Cambodia, or France. It was the land of pirates, exiles, war lords, and criminal gangs, all fighting each other in the dark obscurity of the country’s jungles and tropical flood plains.

Vietnam is named for the Nam Viets, or “southern” Viets, who were forced to migrate from the Mekong headwaters in Tibet into the Red and Black river valleys. As the Viets continued to move south, they bumped into groups of people from India, Cambodia, and Malaya who had settled in the rich, rice-growing regions of the Mekong delta. The contentious history of the delta emerges from obscurity in the first century C.E., when the Indianized civilization of Funan was established. Funan had walled cities replete with libraries and silversmiths and a strong fleet, which allowed it to control Vietnam’s coastal waters. To the north of Funan, another Indianized culture took root in Champa.

As described by William Cassidy, who has written a lively account entitled *Southern Viet-Nam’s Criminal Traditions* (1991), “What we know today as Saigon began as a collection of villages some eighty kilometers inland from the coast, known originally as Prey Kor, or ‘the Land of Forests,’ a refuge and hiding place from and for the pirates that harassed seagoing traffic to the south and river traffic to the west. The area presented a vortex of piracy and banditry. The Malay pirate fleet operated inland from Poulo Condore. The Champa pirate fleets operated southward from below Hué. Funanese and Cham bandit gangs monopolized the overland routes.”

By 1859 a new band of pirates—the French—had captured Saigon, and by 1862 Emperor Tu Duc had ceded a big chunk of Cochin China to his new European overlords. Cambodia fell in 1863, and by 1884 the entire region was under French control. The French suppressed coastal marauding, preferring to control sea traffic and tax it for themselves. This forced Vietnam's gangsters to move inland, where they became river pirates, hiding in the swampy regions southeast of Cholon—Saigon's Chinatown. In Cholon itself the river pirates ran bordellos, opium dens, and gambling halls. The staging area for their criminal activities was an area called Rung Sat, the Jungle of the Assassins. Here, in the hamlet of Binh Xuyen, coalesced a yeasty mix of swamp bandits, Cholon street thugs, escaped contract laborers from the Michelin rubber plantation, and members of various criminal associations linked to Chinese Triads and Vietnamese secret societies.

By the early 1930s, the Binh Xuyen pirates had welcomed into their ranks a young street hoodlum named Bay Vien. He was captured by the French and imprisoned on Poulo Condore, but he got a lucky break when the Japanese assumed control of Vietnam in 1941. They released the Binh Xuyen gangsters from Devil's Island and began employing them as a useful tool for ruling the country. After the Japanese coup d'état on March 9, 1945, when French citizens in Vietnam were rounded up and thrown in prison, Bay Vien emerged as a government police official.

The Japanese occupation of Vietnam shadowed An's teenage years. He saw the Japanese as a belated addition to the long line of invaders who had tried to rule his country. If anything, the Japanese were even more brutal than the French. Other Vietnamese allied themselves with this new political force, excited by the prospect of Asians ruling Asia—a racial platform that the Japanese exploited to good effect.

"The Japanese talked of 'Great Asia' and 'Asia for East Asians,'" An says. "They wanted to kick all the white people out of Asia. Eventually South Korea and Hong Kong were the only two places where the Caucasians still had their foot in the door. The Japanese considered this their great achievement."

Vietnam's political parties and even its religious sects began to hew the Japanese line. "The Japanese were very smart," An says. "They invented the Hoa Hao religion. They co-opted the Cao Dai religion. They set up the Dai Viet political party and recruited students into the Vietnamese Kuomintang (VNQDD), influenced by Sun Yat-sen. They were also very smart in using the French against the Communists. They knew the Vietnamese Communists opposed them, so to keep order and mobilize the economy to serve the Japanese forces, they left the French in place to do their bidding."

Part of this mobilization involved converting Vietnam's rice crop to fuel for Japan's military machine, which resulted in two million Vietnamese starving to death. The charade of French rule in Vietnam ended in 1945 with the Japanese coup d' état. As An watched the French citizens of Can Tho being beaten and forced to sit in the town square without water all day before being thrown into prison, the scene left him with a visceral distaste for the Japanese and their colonial legacy in Asia.

Caught up in the patriotic fervor sweeping over Vietnam at the end of World War II, when the country seemed poised to shake itself free from the defeated French and retreating Japanese, An dropped out of school in the spring of 1945 and joined the Communists. "Our first enemy was the Japanese, who were occupying the country," he says. "The Communist leaders were particularly keen to recruit students who knew how to read and write. We were young and patriotic."

"At that time, we knew for sure that the Communist leaders would sacrifice their lives for the good of the country. The majority of them were educated, like Ho Chi Minh and Dr. Pham Ngoc Thach, who had a French wife. My own primary school teachers joined the Communists. It was the best organization. All the others claimed they were fighting the French, but when the French returned, they stopped fighting, like the Dai Viet, which had been created by the Japanese to fight with them.

After the war, the Dai Viet joined the French or Americans and worked secretly for the CIA. Some of them tried to join the Communists but were boycotted, which doesn't seem right to me. It's not good if you become suspicious of everybody. In that case, you have poisoned yourself.

"The Communists made many mistakes," An admits. "The Communism of Stalin and Mao—I don't like that kind of Communism. They invented their own form of Communism. They propagated their own theories for their own benefit.

"Do you remember what happened to the son of Deng Xiaoping, the secretary of the Communist Party in China?" An asks. "The Red Guards threw him out of a window and broke all the bones in his body. Now he is paralyzed from the waist down. Marx didn't teach them to do that. I don't think so."

Whenever An and I talk about his Party allegiance, it is the benevolent gods of Communism whom he chooses to worship. "Communism teaches you to love each other, like Jesus Christ taught his followers. He's a kind of Karl Marx, I guess."

"We were fighting not for Communism but for independence and the unity of Vietnam," An says. "That's what the majority of Vietnamese wanted. This is different from fighting for Communism."

At the end of World War II in the fall of 1945, Vietnam was overtaken by the short-lived euphoria of what was known as the August Revolution. In Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh, quoting America's Declaration of Independence, declared the country free and united before a cheering crowd of a million people. Ho ruled the Democratic Republic of Vietnam for a handful of days, until the Chinese moved in from the north and the British landed troops in the south. The British rearmed the French, who stormed Saigon's government buildings and soon gained the upper hand in splitting off Cochin China from the rest of Vietnam. In November 1946 the French navy bombarded Haiphong, killing as many as six thousand Vietnamese civilians. The French resumed control of Hanoi and forced Ho Chi Minh to flee into the countryside. It would be another decade before he returned to power in the north and another thirty years before Ho's revolutionary forces regained control of the south.

"We were bitterly disappointed in the British," An says. "We were even more bitterly disappointed when the French returned to power. After the August Revolution, almost all the students in the high schools and universities joined the struggle. Even the children of landowners and the French *métis* joined, like my friend whose father was my physics teacher. He was a Vietnamese who had graduated from university in France. His wife was French. Their son, who was half Vietnamese, half French, joined the revolution."

An tells me another story about a *métis* who joined the fight against the French. His father was a major in the Expeditionary Corps. His mother was Vietnamese. Their son, who looked more French than Vietnamese, tried to fool the enemy by donning a French uniform and leading an attack on the southern city of My Tho. He was captured and faced a death sentence.

"'I have captured your son,' said the French major to his Vietnamese wife. 'Do you want me to release him or send him to the military court?'

"'I would like you to save his life,' she said.

"'I will lose my job. I will be dismissed from the army.'

"'Yes, but I love him very much, and he loves his country. He is a patriot.'"

On the next beat, An starts rewriting the dialogue.

"'He loves *two* countries. The country of his mother, and the country of his father.'

"In the end, the major released his son," An says. "He lost his rank and returned to France. His son was regrouped to North Vietnam and stayed there until 1975, when he returned to the south. By then he had lost everything, all of his father's estates

and property. Today he lives in Saigon, a poor man. This happened to many children of landowners. Their parents were killed by the Communists during the revolution, but they continued to serve their country."

In September 1945, An signed up for a "crash course" in soldiering taught by the Communists near Rach Gia. For a hundred recruits there were only fifty weapons, including some muskets left over from World War I. Trainees had to pick up spent cartridges to make new bullets. Although he was involved in fighting first the Japanese and then the French, An dismisses this experience as little more than running errands. But a government Web site, recounting his activities as a Hero of the People's Armed Forces, describes An as "a national defense combatant who participated in all battles in the western region of South Vietnam," and it is not until March of the following year—six months after enrolling in his crash course—that An undergoes what he calls his *baptème de feu.*

"This course was reserved for the peasant class and the children of workers," An says. "I was considered an intellectual. My father was a *fonctionnaire,* a *cadre supérieur,* which was considered a pro-French element."

The Communists were also suspicious because An owned land. Doubting that his son would get far in school, An's father had bought him a tract of land near the U Minh forest. An visited his land from time to time, where he witnessed firsthand the hardships of peasant life in the countryside. These visits provided An with a good excuse for traveling into remote areas and also provided him with a source of income—most of which came, ironically, from the Americans.

"My father said the only way to help me was to make me a landowner. So in 1941 or 1942 he bought me seventy hectares of land in Rach Gia, plus thirty hectares of concession. This was rice tract land, very rich in rice paddies. Unfortunately we didn't have a chance to exploit the land because the revolution came in 1945."

An's land near the U Minh forest would later become a landing zone for the American military, which touched down here when ferrying troops into the region by helicopter. When he was a journalist accompanying soldiers on commando raids into the forest, An landed here several times.

"In the end, do you know who paid me for my land?" he asks. "Uncle Sam. In 1970 the Vietnamese government instituted land reforms. They would get rid of the owner class. They would show people they could do better than the Communists. The Americans footed the bill. They gave me a lump sum payment for forty percent of the value, and then every year after that they gave me another portion. I was supposed to receive the final payment in 1975, but I didn't have a chance to get it because the Communists came.

"If Uncle Sam hadn't bought my land, the Communists would have come and seized it. It would have been socialized and become the property of the government. I would have become the owner of *all* of Vietnam, possessing *all* the land in the country. I would have become Tarzan living free in the jungle, owned by nobody and everybody. This would have made me a happy man."

An laughs uproariously at his own joke. History dealt him the best of both worlds. He got Uncle Sam's cash in his pocket, and then he got to swing happily through the Communist jungle of collective ownership. "You know, God is always changing his mind," An says. "He never decides anything properly."

An's instructors in Rach Gia were guerrilla fighters from North Vietnam who had been incarcerated by the French on Poulo Condore. "The French system for controlling Vietnam was quite simple," An says. "They built a big palace for the

provincial governor and next to it they built a prison, and next to that they built a courthouse. They captured you, took you to court, passed sentence on you, and threw you in prison, where the governor and his subordinates could watch you. It was all very logical."

"In addition to the main prison in each province, there were many concentration camps and prisons scattered throughout Indochina. In order to be a leader you should have spent time in one of these prisons. These people had been captured because they loved their country." When An uses the word *captured*, it is one of the rare instances when he employs a revolutionary term for its Western equivalent, in this case, *arrested.* The old *Time* reporter is discreet about tipping his hand with politically loaded words.

"The Communists who made propaganda in the prisons were well trained. They knew how to recruit members from among the other nationalist parties, the VNQDD, the Hoa Hao, and the Cao Dai. These people were also patriotic, but they were vague. They didn't have any ideology. The Communists were ideologues. This was very important. They had a system for acting on their nationalist sentiments, a plan of action. When you 'graduated' from prison, this was the first step to being promoted."

I have asked him to tell me this story before, but only once does An let slip that he saw combat in at least one battle as a Viet Minh platoon leader. "One day I was assigned to fight the French. I led my platoon out into the field. We set up an ambush along the road. This was in the hot season, April 1946. The French had signed an agreement not to move through this area, which was controlled by our forces. They were breaking the agreement."

"I had thirty people in my platoon. We were armed with guns, grenades, and pistols. We had French shotguns, what they call 'Flauberts,' which are bird-shot rifles used by children to shoot pigeons, and some double-barreled shotguns. The French came marching down the paths alongside the canal. There were two columns of troops moving toward us. In between them was a boat, with machine guns ready to rake the sides of the canal.

"We had taken up a position on a bridge over the canal. I ordered my platoon to fire on the French, but we were too far away to hit anyone or see if anyone was hit. The French called in air cover, and when the plane arrived, I ordered my platoon to withdraw. This was my *baptême de feu*," An says, using the French term to describe his baptism by fire. "I never shot a gun again during the war."

An's real *baptême de feu* came in 1947, when he realized that even the people he loved would have to be sacrificed for the revolution. By mid-1946, he had left the countryside and returned to Can Tho. He was walking down the street one day when he ran into his beloved French teacher, Truong Vinh Khanh, who had been appointed by the Japanese to be director of the Lycée de Can Tho and had just been named minister of education in the newly created state of Cochin China. Surprised and pleased to see his old student, Khanh asked An what he was doing.

"I have just returned from the countryside, from my land," An told him. "The French are back, and most of the revolutionaries are gone. So I'm looking for a job. Maybe I'll go to Saigon or join the military school at Vung Tau."

While An tells me about this encounter, I notice that he is already wearing his protective coloration as a spy. He is pretending to be a landowner concerned about defending his property from the Viet Minh. Then he floats the idea of enlisting in the newly formed officer training school of the Franco-Vietnamese colonial army.

"An, don't be stupid," Khanh told him. "A soldier gets killed very easily. Stay here in Can Tho, and the next time I return, I'll take you to Saigon and give you a scholarship to go to France and finish high school. When you grow up you'll be able to learn properly. Now you're too crazy."

An laughs heartily, remembering his old teacher and his former craziness. The scholarship to France never materialized. The opportunity disappeared when Truong Vinh Khanh was ambushed by the Communists and killed in a roadside attack. They were aiming for the prime minister, a Cao Dai optometrist named Le Van Hoach, but they got Khanh instead.

"In 1947, in broad daylight, outside My Tho, the Communists ambushed a whole convoy of government officials," An says. This bold move was the first major attack organized by Tran Van Tra, the young military commander who later led the assault on Saigon during the Têt Offensive in 1968. By 1975, Tra would emerge as deputy commander of the Ho Chi Minh campaign, the last battle in the Vietnam war.

It is hard to imagine the pain An must have felt when he learned that the Communists had assassinated his French teacher. The moment reveals with blinding clarity the tragedy of modern Vietnam. An was caught up in a war, an actor who had taken sides. He knew that many people, including friends and family members, would die in this conflict. He had no choice but to carry on. "It's not a matter of reason or justice," a French military officer says to the British journalist who is the protagonist in *The Quiet American.* "We all get involved in a moment of emotion and then we cannot get out."