

I heard the whiz from above knowing it would end in a frightful explosion.

I feared the worst—the ceiling crashing in, the walls tumbling down, and my entire family dying in a pile of rubble. My fears started to become reality when a huge explosion, which literally brought pain to my ears, rocked our home. I watched in shock as the wall across from our hiding place crumbled before my eyes, rocketing shards of cement across the room and creating a wall of dust. When it cleared, I had an unobstructed view of the garden.

It was much worse than I had imagined. This was hell. Fires were blazing in a sea of smoke. Bodies were lying in awkward poses among our trees and bushes. Men I did not recognize were in our yard. Some had rifles and were shooting at people on the ground. Others had shoulder-fired missiles aimed at the helicopter overhead. I recognized the shooters' language, but not the accent. These were not my people.

I heard the helicopter fly away, and the shooting on the ground suddenly stopped. A uniformed soldier, probably a member of the PAVN, came walking along what was left of our garden path. He peered into the room in which we were hiding and started to climb over the fallen debris. My father, my siblings, and I tried to make ourselves small and invisible while in plain sight of the enemy. It was no use. He saw us. Keeping his gun pointed downward, he motioned for us to come out of hiding. We had no choice but to do as he ordered.

Protectively, my father gathered us children to himself like a mother hen with baby chicks. Stepping over the rubble, we made our way outside and fell in line with the other captives, several of whom I recognized as neighbors. There were about 30 of us in total, of all ages. My father pushed us behind him, using his body as a shield. Thanh, who was a year younger than me, stood solemnly off Dad's right shoulder. I stood directly behind my father holding Chau's right hand and Dan's left. And we waited as the enemy soldiers used intimidation tactics to demonstrate their power and keep us in line.

Starting at the far end, the soldier in charge began his interrogation. I could see his lips moving as he spoke to the first woman

in the lineup, but I couldn't hear what he asked. She responded with a desperate plea for mercy. He had none. I heard the shot and watched her fall to the ground.

The soldier moved on to the next person, and the interrogation continued. It appeared to me that children were not being shot because I could hear them crying long after their parents fell. I remember thinking that the soldier conducting the interrogation was a very powerful man because he got to decide who would live and who would die. He held our future in his hands.

I must have been in shock because I don't remember feeling anything as the horror moved toward us. I simply watched. Some people were shot; others were not. From what I could tell, several adults were let go based on their responses. *What had they said? Who were these people?* The soldier was obviously looking for specific information. I desperately hoped that my father would have the right answer when it was his turn to speak.

I heard crying. It was Dan and Chau. Lost in time and space, I had forgotten that they were with me, holding onto my hands. I turned away from the killings playing out to my left and focused my attention on my young brother and only sister. I tried to comfort them by saying, "It will be OK." I had no idea if my words would prove true.

And then it was our turn. The soldier stood before us. He told my father to kneel. Dad knelt. I think he asked my father his name, but I'm not sure. I do remember him asking, "Are these your children?"

"Yes," my father answered. Then he added, "They are harmless."

The soldier smiled cynically before responding, "That's what you say!"

*Did my father answer correctly? Would we be spared?* I looked up at the soldier, and we locked eyes. I didn't look away. I held his gaze the way Mademoiselle Laurentin had taught me. Predictably, he engaged me in a conversation. He asked, "Do you love your father?"

I hesitated. I wanted to shout: *Yes!* But was "yes" the right answer? Or would "yes" get us shot? The word was in my head and in my heart, but I couldn't form it on my lips. I loved my father with my whole being, and I wanted him to know it. Yet surrounded

by hate, I feared that “yes” to love might get us all killed. I shifted my gaze to my dad, thus ending the conversation with the soldier. I needed my father’s help, but he was frozen like me. We simply stared at each other. There was a sadness in his eyes I will never forget.

I don’t think the soldier appreciated my silence. With a flick of his head, he said, “You can go back to your home.”

*Did we hear him correctly?* My father attempted to confirm what he heard. Slowly he said, “If you let us, we will.”

“You can go,” the soldier said again. Affirming his decision.

Cautiously, Dad began to rise from his knees. We instinctively huddled around him, falsely assuming we were free, but the soldier had no intention of letting us walk away. Our ordeal was just beginning. Tauntingly, he said, “Let’s see how fast you and your children can run to your home.” This wasn’t going to be a clean execution. It was to be a hunt.

I remember my father turning to us and saying that we had to run as fast as we could back to the house. I was a fast runner—the best at Saint Paul Catholic School. But the landscape before me was nothing like the track I was used to; it was covered with rubble and dead bodies. I looked down at my beautiful five-year-old sister and handsome seven-year-old brother clinging to my hands. All my skill as a relay runner had not equipped me for this race.

“We can’t run very fast!” I pleaded.

“I will help you,” Dad replied as he scooped Dan into his arms. I followed his lead and picked up Chau. Thanh took off, and we followed. We all ran for our lives.

I’m pretty sure my father expected to die. As we began running, he yelled out, “God help us!” This was the first and only time I had ever heard my father call on God. It was also the first time since the destruction and slayings started that God had entered my own thoughts. *Where was He?* I wondered. *Did He see what was happening?*

A shot rang out; we kept on running. “I’ve almost got you!” the soldier yelled, as if we were playing a friendly game of tag.

My brother Thanh was in the lead. I watched him jump over the rubble of the demolished wall, my Dad and Dan right behind

him. The gun fired again. My Dad fell, taking Dan down with him. As Dan stood up, the gun went off again. I watched his little body fall like a rag doll.

By now I had made it back to the house with Chau, but in order to get inside, I had to set her down to climb over the rubble. I thought she would follow. Instead, she turned toward my father's body and became the perfect target. The gun fired again, and Chau fell. I had failed to protect her. Disoriented, I went after her lifeless body.

Suddenly, shots rang out in all directions. Someone shouted, "*Lui ra! Bọn nó trở lại!*" (Pull out! They're coming back!) I could hear the American helicopter in the distance. It was returning. People started screaming and running in all directions, soldiers and civilians alike. There was mass confusion.

Our assassin was momentarily distracted. Before giving up the chase though, he turned his gun toward me and pulled the trigger. I had been in the process of rolling Chau's body under the bed when I heard the whiz from the helicopter overhead. Seconds later, the blast rocked our home, and the ceiling caved in.