

FROM

The Mountains Sing

BY NGUYỄN PHAN QUẾ MAI

Hà Nội, 1972–1973

Grandma is holding my hand as we walk to school. The sun is a large egg yolk peeking through a row of tin-roofed houses. The sky is as blue as my mother’s favorite shirt. I wonder where my mother is. Has she found my father?

I clutch my jacket’s collar as the wind rips through the air, swirling up a dust cloud. Grandma bends, putting her handkerchief against my nose. My school bag dangles on her arm as she cups her palm against her face.

We resume walking as soon as the dust settles. I strain my ears but hear no bird. I search, but there isn’t a single flower along our path. No grass around us, just piles of broken bricks and twisted metal.

“Guava, be careful.” Grandma pulls me away from a bomb crater. She calls me by my nickname to guard me from evil spirits she believes hover above the earth, looking for beautiful children to kidnap. She said that my real name, Hương, which means “fragrance,” would attract them.

“When you come home today, you’ll get our favorite food, Guava,” Grandma tells me.

“Phở noodle soup?” Happiness makes me skip a step.

“Yes. . . . The bomb raids have stopped me from cooking. But it’s been quiet, so let’s celebrate.”

Before I can answer, a siren shatters our moments of peace. A female voice blares from a loudspeaker tethered to a tree: “Attention citizens! Attention citizens! American bombers are approaching Hà Nội. One hundred kilometers away.”

“Ôi trời đất ơi!” Grandma cries for Heaven and Earth. She runs, pulling me along. Streams of people pour out of their homes, like ants from broken nests. Far away, from the top of the Hà Nội Opera House, sirens wail.

“Over there.” Grandma rushes toward a bomb shelter dug into the roadside. She pulls up the heavy concrete lid.

“No room,” a voice shouts out from down below. Inside the round pit just big enough for one person, a man half kneels, half stands. Muddy water rises to his chest.

Grandma hurries to close the lid. She pulls me toward another shelter.

“Attention citizens! Attention citizens! American bombers are approaching Hà Nội. Sixty kilometers away. Armed forces get ready to fight back.” The female voice becomes more urgent. The sirens are deafening.

Shelter after shelter is full. People dart in front of us like birds with broken wings, abandoning bicycles, carts, shoulder bags. A small girl stands alone, screaming for her parents.

“Attention citizens! Attention citizens! American bombers are approaching Hà Nội. Thirty kilometers away.”

Clumsy with fear, I trip and fall.

Grandma pulls me up. She throws my school bag to the roadside, bending down for me to jump onto her back. She runs, her hands wrapping around my legs.

Thundering noise approaches. Explosions ring from afar. I hold on to Grandma’s shoulders with sweaty hands, burying my face into her body.

“Attention citizens! Attention citizens! More American bombers are approaching Hà Nội. One hundred kilometers away.”

“Run to the school. They won’t bomb the school,” Grandma shouts to a group of women lugging young children in their arms and on their backs. At fifty-two years of age, Grandma is strong. She dashes past the women, catching up with those ahead of us. Bounced up and down, I press my face against her long, black hair that smells like my mother’s. As long as I can inhale her scent, I will be safe.

“Hương, run with me.” Grandma has squatted down in front of my school, panting. She pulls me into the schoolyard. Next to a classroom, she flings herself down a vacant shelter. As I slide down next to her, water rises to my waist, gripping me with icy hands. It’s so cold. The beginning of winter.

Grandma reaches up, closing the lid. She hugs me, the drum of her heart throbbing through my blood. I thank Buddha for the gift of this shelter, large enough to fit us both. I fear for my parents on the battlefields. When will they come back? Have they seen Uncle Đạt, Uncle Thuận, and Uncle Sáng?

Explosions draw closer. The ground swings, as if it were a hammock. I press my palms against my ears. Water shoots up, drenching my face and hair, blurring my eyesight. Dust and stones rain through a small crack onto my head. Sounds of anti-aircraft fire. Hà Nội is fighting back. More explosions. Sirens. Cries. An intense burning stench.

Grandma brings her hands together in front of her chest. “*Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật, Nam Mô Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát.*” Torrents of prayers to Buddha pour from her lips. I close my eyes, imitating her.

The bombs continue to roar. A minute of silence follows. A sharp screeching noise. I cringe. A powerful explosion hurls Grandma and me against the shelter’s lid. Pain darkens my eyes.

I land feet-first on Grandma’s stomach. Her eyes are closed, her hands a budding lotus flower in front of her chest. She prays as the thundering noise disappears and people’s cries rise into the air.

“Grandma, I’m scared.”

Her lips are blue, trembling from the cold. “I know, Guava. . . . I’m scared, too.”

“Grandma, if they bomb the school, will . . . will this shelter collapse?”

She struggles against the confined space, pulling me into her arms. “I don’t know, darling.”

“If it does, will we die, Grandma?”

She hugs me tight. “Guava, if they bomb this school, our shelter might collapse on us, but we’ll only die if Buddha lets us die.”

We didn’t perish that day, in November 1972. After the sirens had signaled that it was safe, Grandma and I emerged, shivering thin leaves. We staggered out to the street. Several buildings had collapsed, their rubble spilling onto our path. We crawled over piles of debris, coughing. Billowing smoke and twirling dust burned my eyes.

I clutched Grandma’s hand, watching women kneeling and howling next to dead bodies, whose faces had been concealed by tattered straw mats. The legs of those bodies were jutting toward us. Legs that were mangled,

covered with blood. One small leg had a pink shoe dangling. The dead girl could have been my age.

Drenched, muddy, Grandma pulled me along, walking faster and faster, passing scattered body parts, passing houses that had crumbled.

Under the *bàng* tree, though, our house stood in glorious, incongruous sunlight. It had miraculously escaped damage. I broke away from Grandma, rushing ahead to hug the front door.

Grandma hurried to help me change and tucked me into bed. “Stay home, Guava. Jump down if the planes come.” She pointed toward our bomb shelter, which my father had dug into the earthen floor next to the bedroom entrance. The shelter was large enough to hold us both, and it was dry. I felt better hiding here, under the watchful eyes of my ancestors, whose presence radiated from the family altar, perched on top of our bookshelf.

“But . . . where’re you going, Grandma?” I asked.

“To my school, to see if my students need help.” She pulled our thick blanket to my chin.

“Grandma, but it’s not safe. . . .”

“It’s just two blocks away, Guava. I’ll run home as soon as I hear the siren. Promise to stay here?”

I nodded.

Grandma had headed for the door, but she returned to my bed, her hand warming my face. “Promise you won’t wander outside?”

“*Cháu hứa.*” I smiled to assure her. She’d never allowed me to go anywhere alone, even during the months absent of bombs. She’d always been afraid that I’d get lost somehow. Was it true, I wondered, what my aunt and uncles had said, about Grandma being overprotective of me because terrible things had happened to her children?

As the door closed behind her, I got up, fetching my notebook. I dipped the tip of my pen into the ink bottle. “Beloved Mother and Father,” I wrote, in a new letter to my parents, wondering whether my words would ever reach them. They were moving with their troops and had no fixed addresses.

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