

# from When Heaven and

**A**fter my brother Bon went North, I began to pay more attention to my father.

He was built solidly—big-boned—for a Vietnamese man, which meant he probably had well-fed, noble ancestors. People said he had the body of a natural-born warrior. He was a year younger and an inch shorter than my mother, but just as good-looking. His face was round, like Khmer<sup>1</sup> or Thai,<sup>2</sup> and his complexion was brown as soy from working all his life in the sun. He was very easygoing about

everything and seldom in a hurry. Seldom, too, did he say no to a request—from his children or his neighbors. Although he took everything in stride, he was a hard and diligent<sup>3</sup> worker. Even on holidays, he was always mending things or tending to our house and animals. He would not wait to be asked for help if he saw someone in trouble. Similarly, he always said what he thought, although he knew, like most honest men, when to keep silent. Because of his honesty, his empathy,<sup>4</sup> and his openness to people, he



# Earth Changed Places

Le Ly Hayslip

understood life deeply. Perhaps that is why he was so easygoing. Only a half-trained mechanic thinks everything needs fixing.

He loved to smoke cigars and grew a little tobacco in our yard. My mother always wanted him to sell it, but there was hardly ever enough to take to market. I think for her it was the principle of the thing: smoking cigars was like burning money. Naturally, she had a song

1. **Khmer** (kner), one of the native peoples of Cambodia.
2. **Thai** (tī), natives of Thailand.
3. **diligent** (dil'əjənt), *adj.* hard-working; industrious.
4. **empathy** (em'pəthē), *n.* the quality or process of entering fully into another's feelings or motives, into the meaning of a work of art, etc.



for such gentle vices<sup>5</sup>—her own habit of chewing betel nuts<sup>6</sup> included:

Get rid of your tobacco,  
And you will get a water buffalo.  
Give away your betel,  
And you will get more paddy land.<sup>7</sup>

Despite her own good advice, she never abstained<sup>8</sup> from chewing betel, nor my father from smoking cigars. They were rare luxuries that life and the war allowed them.

My father also liked rice wine, which we made; and enjoyed an occasional beer, which he purchased when there was nothing else we needed. After he'd had a few sips, he would tell jokes and happy stories and the village kids would flock around. Because I was his youngest daughter, I was entitled to listen from his knee—the place of honor. Sometimes he would sing funny songs about whoever threatened the village and we would feel better. For example, when the French or Moroccan soldiers<sup>9</sup> were near, he would sing:

There are many kinds of vegetables,  
Why do you like spinach?  
There are many kinds of wealth,  
Why do you use Minh money?  
There are many kinds of people,  
Why do you love terrorists?

We laughed because these were all the things the French told us about the Viet Minh<sup>10</sup> fighters whom we favored in the war. Years later, when the Viet Cong were near, he would sing:

There are many kinds of vegetables,  
Why do you like spinach?  
There are many kinds of money,  
Why do you use Yankee dollars?  
There are many kinds of people,  
Why do you disobey your ancestors?

This was funny because the words were taken from the speeches the North Vietnamese cadres<sup>11</sup> delivered to shame us for helping the Republic.<sup>12</sup> He used to have a song for when the Viet Minh were near too, which asked in the same way, "Why

do you use francs?" and "Why do you love French traitors?" Because he sang these songs with a comical voice, my mother never appreciated them. She couldn't see the absurdity of our situation as clearly as we children. To her, war and real life were different. To us, they were all the same.

Even as a parent, my father was more lenient<sup>13</sup> than our mother, and we sometimes ran to him for help when she was angry. Most of the time, it didn't work and he would lovingly rub our heads as we were dragged off to be spanked. The village saying went: "A naughty child learns more from a whipping stick than a sweet stick." We children were never quite sure about that, but agreed the whipping stick was an eloquent teacher. When he absolutely had to punish us himself, he didn't waste time. Wordlessly, he would find a long, supple bamboo stick and let us have it behind our thighs. It stung, but he could have whipped us harder. I think seeing the pain in his face hurt more than receiving his halfhearted blows. Because of that, we seldom did anything to merit a father's spanking—the highest penalty in our family. Violence in any form offended him. For this reason, I think, he grew old before his time.

One of the few times my father ever touched my mother in a way not consistent with love was during one of the yearly floods, when people came to our village for safety from the lower

5. *vice* (vis), *n.* evil, immoral, or wicked habit or tendency.  
6. *betel* (bɛʔtɪ) *nut*, the orange-colored nut of a tropical Asiatic palm tree.  
7. *paddy land*, flooded areas with raised banks around the sides for growing rice.  
8. *abstain* (ab stān /), *v.* hold oneself back voluntarily; refrain.  
9. *French or Moroccan soldiers*. France occupied Vietnam in the early 1950s. The Moroccan soldiers were in Vietnam because France also controlled Morocco at that time.  
10. *Viet Minh* (vɛʔ et /min /), fighters against the French.  
11. *North Vietnamese cadres* (kãʔ drãʔ), representatives of communist North Vietnam.  
12. *the Republic*, South Vietnam.  
13. *lenient* (lɛʔ nyɛnt), *adj.* mild or gentle; not harsh or stern; merciful.

ground. We sheltered many in our house, which was nothing more than a two-room hut with woven mats for a floor. I came home one day in winter rain to see refugees and Republican soldiers milling around outside. They did not know I lived there so I had to elbow my way inside. It was nearly supper time and I knew my mother would be fixing as much food as we could spare.

In the part of the house we used as our kitchen, I discovered my mother crying. She and my father had gotten into an argument outside a few minutes before. He had assured the refugees he would find something to eat for everyone and she insisted there would not be enough for her children if everyone was fed. He repeated his order to her; this time loud enough for all to hear. Naturally, he thought this would end the argument. She persisted in contradicting him, so he had slapped her.

This show of male power—we called it *do danh* *vo*<sup>14</sup>—was usual behavior for Vietnamese husbands but unusual for my father. My mother could be as strict as she wished with his children and he would seldom interfere. Now, I discovered there were limits even to his great patience. I saw the glowing red mark on her cheek and asked if she was crying because it hurt. She said no. She said she was crying because her action had caused my father to lose face in front of strangers. She promised that if I ever did what she had done to a husband, I would have both cheeks glowing: one from his blow and one from hers.

Once, when I was the only child at home, my mother went to Danang<sup>15</sup> to visit Uncle Nhu,<sup>16</sup> and my father had to take care of me. I woke up from my nap in the empty house and cried for my mother. My father came in from the yard and reassured me, but I was still cranky and continued crying. Finally, he gave me a rice cookie to shut me up. Needless to say, this was a tactic my mother never used.

The next afternoon I woke up and although I was not feeling cranky, I thought a rice cookie might be nice. I cried a fake cry and my father came running in.

“What’s this?” he asked, making a worried face. “Little Bay Ly<sup>17</sup> doesn’t want a cookie?” I was confused again.

“Look under your pillow,” he said with a smile.

I twisted around and saw that, while I was sleeping, he had placed a rice cookie under my pillow. We both laughed and he picked me up like a sack of rice and carried me outside while I gobbled the cookie.

In the yard, he plunked me down under a tree and told me some stories. After that, he got some scraps of wood and showed me how to make things: a doorstop for my mother and a toy duck for me. This was unheard of—a father doing these things with a child that was not a son! Where my mother would instruct me on cooking and cleaning and tell stories about brides, my father showed me the mystery of hammers and explained the customs of our people.



is knowledge of the Vietnamese went back to the Chinese Wars in ancient times. I learned how one of my distant ancestors, a woman named Phung Thi Chinh,<sup>18</sup> led Vietnamese fighters against the Han. In one battle, even though she was pregnant and surrounded by Chinese, she delivered the baby, tied it to her back, and cut her way to safety wielding a sword in each hand. I was amazed at this warrior’s bravery and impressed that I was her descendant. Even more, I was amazed and impressed by my father’s pride in her accomplishments (she was, after all, a humble female), and his belief that I was worthy of

14. *do danh vo* (đồ danh vơ). Note: The pronunciations of Vietnamese words in this selection are approximations.

15. *Danang* (đà nẵng), seaport in central Vietnam, on the South China Sea.

16. *Nhu* (nhũ).

17. *Bay Ly* (bà lệ). The family’s name for Le Ly. In accordance with Vietnamese customs, it refers to her position as the sixth child in the family.

18. *Phung Thi Chinh* (phung thi chình).

her example. "*Con phai theo got chan co ta*"<sup>19</sup> (Follow in her footsteps), he said. Only later would I learn what he truly meant.

Never again did I cry after my nap. Phung Thi women were too strong for that. Besides, I was my father's daughter and we had many things to do together.

On the eve of my mother's return, my father cooked a feast of roast duck. When we sat down to eat it, I felt guilty and my feelings showed on my face. He asked why I acted so sad.

"You've killed one of mother's ducks," I said. "One of the fat kind she sells at the market. She says the money buys gold which she saves for her daughters' weddings. Without gold for a dowry—*con o gai*<sup>20</sup>—I will be an old maid!"

My father looked suitably concerned, then brightened and said, "Well, Bay Ly, if you can't get married, you will just have to live at home forever with me!"

I clapped my hands at the happy prospect. My father cut into the rich, juicy bird and said, "Even so, we won't tell your mother about the duck, okay?"

I giggled and swore myself to secrecy.

**T**he next day, I took some water out to him in the fields. My mother was due home any time and I used every opportunity to step outside and watch for her. My father stopped working, drank gratefully, then took my hand and led me to the top of a nearby hill. It had a good view of the village and the land beyond it, almost to the ocean. I thought he was going to show me my mother coming back, but he had something else in mind.

He said, "Bay Ly, you see all this here? This is the Vietnam we have been talking about. You understand that a country is more than a lot of dirt, rivers, and forests, don't you?"

I said, "Yes, I understand." After all, we had learned in school that one's country is as sacred as a father's grave.

"Good. You know, some of these lands are battlefields where your brothers and cousins are

fighting. They may never come back. Even your sisters have all left home in search of a better life. You are the only one left in my house. If the enemy comes back, you must be both a daughter and a son. I told you how the Chinese used to rule our land. People in this village had to risk their lives diving in the ocean just to find pearls for the Chinese emperor's gown. They had to risk tigers and snakes in the jungle just to find herbs for his table. Their payment for this hardship was a bowl of rice and another day of life. That is why Le Loi, Gia Long,<sup>21</sup> the Trung Sisters, and Phung Thi Chinh fought so hard to expel the Chinese. When the French came, it was the same old story. Your mother and I were taken to Danang to build a runway for their airplanes. We labored from sunup to sundown and well after dark. If we stopped to rest or have a smoke, a Moroccan would come up and whip our behinds. Our reward was a bowl of rice and another day of life. Freedom is never a gift, Bay Ly. It must be won and won again. Do you understand?"

I said that I did.

"Good." He moved his finger from the patchwork of brown dikes, silver water, and rippling stalks to our house at the edge of the village. "This land here belongs to me. Do you know how I got it?"

I thought a moment, trying to remember my mother's stories, then said honestly, "I can't remember."

He squeezed me lovingly. "I got it from your mother."

"What? That can't be true!" I said. Everyone in the family knew my mother was poor and my father's family was wealthy. Her parents were dead and she had to work like a slave for her mother-in-law to prove herself worthy. Such women don't have land to give away!

19. *Con phai theo got chan co ta* (Kôn fi tãô gô'rchun cô tã).

20. *Con o gia* (Kôn u yã).

21. *Le Loi* (lã loi), *Gia Long* (yã long).

"It's true." My father's smile widened. "When I was a young man, my parents needed someone to look after their lands. They had to be very careful about who they chose as wives for their three sons. In the village, your mother had a reputation as the hardest worker of all. She raised herself and her brothers without parents. At the same time, I noticed a beautiful woman working in the fields. When my mother said she was going to talk to the matchmaker about this hard-working village girl she'd heard about, my heart sank. I was too attracted to this mysterious tall woman I had seen in the rice paddies. You can imagine my surprise when I found out the girl my mother heard about and the woman I admired were the same.

"Well, we were married and my mother tested your mother severely. She not only had to cook and clean and know everything about children, but she had to be able to manage several farms and know when and how to take the extra produce to the market. Of course, she was testing her other daughters-in-law as well. When my parents died, they divided their several farms among their sons, but you know what? They gave your mother and me the biggest share because they knew we would take care of it best. That's why I say the land came from her, because it did."

I suddenly missed my mother very much and looked down the road to the south, hoping to see her. My father noticed my sad expression.

"Hey." He poked me in the ribs. "Are you getting hungry for lunch?"

"No. I want to learn how to take care of the farm. What happens if the soldiers come back? What did you and Mother do when the soldiers came?"



▲ A 1960 photograph of Le Ly Hayslip's father.

My father squatted on the dusty hilltop and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "The first thing I did was to tell myself that it was my duty to survive—to take care of my family and my farm. That is a tricky job in wartime. It's as hard as being a soldier. The Moroccans were very savage. One day the rumor passed that they were coming to destroy the village. You may remember the night I sent you and your brothers and sisters away with your mother to Danang."

"You didn't go with us!" My voice still held the horror of the night I thought I had lost my father.

"Right! I stayed near the village—right on this hill—to keep an eye on the enemy and on

our house. If they really wanted to destroy the village, I would save some of our things so that we could start over. Sure enough, that was their plan.

"The real problem was to keep things safe and avoid being captured. Their patrols were everywhere. Sometimes I went so deep in the forest that I worried about getting lost, but all I had to do was follow the smoke from the burning huts and I could find my way back.

"Once, I was trapped between two patrols that had camped on both sides of a river. I had to wait in the water for two days before one of them moved on. When I got out, my skin was shriveled like an old melon. I was so cold I could hardly move. From the waist down, my body was black with leeches.<sup>22</sup> But it was worth all the pain. When your mother came back, we still had some furniture and tools to cultivate the earth. Many people lost everything. Yes, we were very lucky."

**M**y father put his arms around me. "My brother Huong<sup>23</sup>—your uncle Huong—had three sons and four daughters. Of his four daughters,

only one is still alive. Of his three sons, two went north to Hanoi<sup>24</sup> and one went south to Saigon.<sup>25</sup> Huong's house is very empty. My other brother, your uncle Luc,<sup>26</sup> had only two sons. One went north to Hanoi, the other was killed in the fields. His daughter is deaf and dumb. No wonder he has taken to drink, eh? Who does he have to sing in his house and tend his shrine<sup>27</sup> when he is gone? My sister Lien<sup>28</sup> had three daughters and four sons. Three of the four sons went to Hanoi and the fourth went to Saigon to find his fortune. The girls all tend their in-laws and mourn slain husbands. Who will care for Lien when she is too feeble to care for herself? Finally, my baby sister Nhien<sup>29</sup> lost her husband

to French bombers. Of her two sons, one went to Hanoi and the other joined the Republic, then defected,<sup>30</sup> then was murdered in his house. Nobody knows which side killed him. It doesn't really matter."

My father drew me out to arm's length and looked me squarely in the eye. "Now, Bay Ly, do you understand what your job is?"

I squared my shoulders and put on a soldier's face. "My job is to avenge my family. To protect my farm by killing the enemy. I must become a woman warrior like Phung Thi Chinh!"

My father laughed and pulled me close. "No, little peach blossom. Your job is to stay alive—to keep an eye on things and keep the village safe. To find a husband and have babies and tell the story of what you've seen to your children and anyone else who'll listen. Most of all, it is to live in peace and tend the shrine of our ancestors. Do these things well, Bay Ly, and you will be worth more than any soldier who ever took up a sword."

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22. **leech** (lēch), *n.* any of a class of bloodsucking or carnivorous annelid worms living chiefly in freshwater ponds and streams.

23. **Huong** (hū'ung).

24. **Hanoi** (hā noi'), capital of North Vietnam, now capital of Vietnam.

25. **Saigon** (sī gon'), capital of South Vietnam, now Ho Chi Minh City.

26. **Luc** (lūk).

27. **tend his shrine.** A shrine is a place or object considered sacred because of its history, memories, etc.

In some cultures, after someone dies, his or her children look after that person's or family's shrine.

28. **Lien** (lē'ung).

29. **Nhien** (nē'ung).

30. **defect** (dē'fekt), *v.* forsake one's own country, group, etc., for another, especially another that is opposed to it in political or social doctrine.