The Cassava

A burning sensation under my foot made my leg jerk reflexively. I was half-conscious; faintly, I could hear someone shouting, “He’s awake! He’s awake!”

I opened my eyes slightly. My whole body ached, stiff and numb as if frozen solid. I tried to raise my arms, but they no longer seemed to belong to me. I felt like Sun Wukong crushed beneath the Five Elements Mountain—my mind dazed, floating in a fog. There was also a faint stench of pig manure in the air.

In the dim yellow glow of a kerosene lamp hanging from the rafters, I saw a slimy foam bubbling from my mouth and nose—metallic and foul like rust—hissing and trickling down my cheek to pool dark red on the Bamboo cot. I was suffocating; my survival instinct kicked in as my lungs kept sucking in the vile foam and blowing out foul, bloody bubbles.

Then I felt a pair of warm hands rubbing my chest, pounding hard on my back. The burning under my feet returned, pulling me out of the haze into full consciousness. Under the flickering lamp, Trần Liên-“the Half Westerner”—was crouched by my feet, holding a small charcoal stove made from a Guigoz milk can beneath my soles. His round, half-Western eyes locked on mine as he kept shouting, “Hang in there, Tiến! Hang on! You’re alive! You’ve come back!”

Beside me, Phạm Phước—nicknamed “Phước Stomach” because of his chronic ulcers—was warming his hands over the fire, rubbing my chest vigorously and exclaiming with joy, “He’s awake! He’s come back!”

- “The guards told us to go to the pigsty to carry you back! We thought you were stiff dead already!” Trần Liên said.

Only then did the full force of the pain hit me—an unbearable agony flooding every part of my body, leaving me limp, aching, and shivering all over. I still couldn’t move, except to twitch my fingers and toes.

If not for the pair of shorts I was wearing, I'd have been completely naked—covered in pig filth, lying on that bamboo bed in the middle of winter, with the mountain rain drizzling outside…

Camp #2 — Hiệp Đức Prisoner Concentration Camp, Quảng Nam. Around October or November, 1977.

………………………………………………

Hiệp Đức Re-education concentrated Camp #2

In early May 1975, after escaping from the concentrate camp hidden in the rubber forest of Cầu Khởi, Tây Ninh, I caught a ride on a bus back to Saigon.

When I arrived, it was just as the poet Trần Dần wrote: *"I walk and see no streets, no neighborhoods — only rain falling on the color of the red flags."*

I stayed a few days at a old high school friend's house. Some of my classmates from Class 28 at the Military Academy advised me to report to the "Provisional Revolutionary Government" to get a travel permit. After all, "the war is over," they said — I couldn't stay in hiding forever.

Naively, like my friends, I went to register in District 3. The registration office was located in a confiscated house that had once belonged to Lieutenant General Phạm Quốc Thuần.

With the permit in hand, I felt restless again, wondering how my parents and siblings in Huế were doing. A few friends secretly slipped me some money, and I boarded a bus heading north to Huế.

Along the way, that piece of paper helped me pass through several checkpoints. But when I reached Hòa Cầm, near Đà Nẵng, I was stopped, and the permit was confiscated. They sent me to Hòa Cầm Camp — formerly the Hòa Cầm Training Center.

There, the camp was already filled with "remnant soldiers" from all branches — infantry, paratroopers, marines, air force — from colonels on down. Yet now we were all the same, packed into the old army barracks, noisy and crowded. Some

played volleyball, others chess; mornings were for calisthenics, evenings for clapping and singing "revolutionary" songs. Meals were served twice a day — it all seemed deceptively peaceful.

Because the barracks were arranged by rank, I was "fortunate" enough to meet two of my old classmates from Class 28 — Nguyễn Hy and Lý Đình Quy — who, like me, had been caught at the Hòa Cầm checkpoint.

Just as we were beginning to relax and enjoy the strange calm of the postwar days, then…

Around September 1975, "One chilly autumn morning, thick with mist," the wake-up gong sounded much earlier than usual. We were ordered to pack our clothes and personal belongings, then line up at the kitchen to receive two portions of rice — our full day's ration. Everyone buzzed with speculation that we were being moved to another camp, though no one knew where we were headed.

After getting our food, we lined up again to "register our possessions." Anyone who had money, watches, gold rings, silver jewelry, or anything of value was told to turn it in so the "revolution" could "keep it safe" for us — to lighten our load for the journey.

One soldier sat behind a table, carefully recording each prisoner's name and the items surrendered in his ledger — all very official and proper. Meanwhile, another soldier casually tossed the valuables into a sandbag beside him, in no particular order.

From the loudspeaker on the flagpole came the repeated announcement: *"Anyone who has money or valuable belongings must register and hand them over. After you complete your re-education well, the government will return them."*

Ah, hearing that assurance, everyone felt quite at ease!

Dozens of military trucks — Molotovas and GMCs — stood ready outside the camp, neatly lined up since before dawn.

After about an hour of driving, the trucks began jolting violently, bouncing up and down for the rest of the trip. Red and yellow dust billowed into the covered truck bed, choking us. Somewhere in the dark, someone started retching. The two soldiers with AKs sitting on the tailgate didn't seem to be faring much better. The convoy kept going without stopping, and nobody even thought about eating lunch.

The trucks climbed over passes, splashed through shallow streams, and by late afternoon finally came to a stop — probably at the end of the road.

When we got off, all we could see beyond the knee-high thatch grass was dense jungle and towering mountains surrounding us on all sides.

We were ordered to form ranks again, sit down to eat, and were each issued a green army hammock. For every ten men, one was made "team leader" and handed a *dao tông* — a broad, heavy jungle knife forged from a single piece of metal, its tip squared off.

Then, with AK rifles urging us from behind, we marched toward the forest edge, taking turns hacking away branches to clear space for hanging our hammocks.

"Sleeping on the ground at night, the snakes and insects will crawl all over you," one soldier explained. Well, at least he seemed concerned for our welfare.

When the clearing was done, the knives were bundled together and handed back.

That night, swinging in our hammocks, more than a hundred of us drifted in the dark — no one dreaming of the forest fairies from mountain tales, only swarmed by mosquitoes and biting midges, our sleep broken by the constant slapping sounds echoing through the night.

And so, the first night passed. At dawn, we were led once again along winding mountain trails, climbing up and down without any idea where we were being taken.

After about two hours on foot, we reached a clearing with four or five thatched huts built hastily on roughly leveled ground. To call them “houses” was generous — they were merely thatched roofs supported by poles, without any walls at all.

Our group of several dozen “junior officers” — second lieutenants and lieutenants — began receiving hoes and shovels. We dug here, filled there, leveling the ground. A few who could cook were “promoted” to *anh nuôi* — kitchen duty — responsible for the stomachs of the rest of us. At night we hung our hammocks from the posts and swayed until morning.

By the following afternoon, another batch of “defeated soldiers” arrived to join us, and the same process repeated again and again for about a month — bringing the total number of prisoners to around five hundred. We were divided into ten groups, each with two barracks, about twenty-five men to a house. Those who came first cleared the trees, cut the bamboo, and built shelters for those who came after.

I was assigned to House 1, Block 1, Camp 2 — part of the larger Hiệp Đức Camp Complex, known as “Central Camp 1.”

(Later, when the camps gathered for “political education” — ten mandatory lessons on revolutionary ideology — we learned that the lieutenants and second lieutenants had been sent to “build” Camp 1, while captains and above were taken to Kỳ Sơn Camp, near the old Bồng Miêu gold mines. Central Camp 1 included a total of five subcamps. Thousands of defeated soldiers from Hòa Cầm were scattered through the deep forests and mountains of Hiệp Đức, Kỳ Sơn, and An Điềm.)

And so, the days, months, and years slowly passed, while the day of return remained, as the old song said, *“so far away, my love…”*

We leveled an entire valley, felled trees, split bamboo, stripped rattan vines, raised posts, built rafters and beams, split laths, cut thatch for roofing, and constructed houses and meeting halls. We cleared acidic land for rice paddies, planted seedlings, grew cassava, burned forest to make fertilizer. We dug wells, filtered the

water to remove iron, used it for drinking and bathing. We built pigsties and cattle pens — all to serve the victors.

And most importantly, we built a tall, thick wooden fence surrounding two rows of prison houses — ten in each row — guarded by four watchtowers at the corners and one more to the north, at the camp gate.

As for the construction materials, in those early days we were often forced to rise before dawn and march for dozens of kilometers through cold rain, crossing rivers and forested passes into what they said were old "liberation zones" near the Laotian border. There, we dismantled sturdy wooden beams and frames, carried them back, and made repeated trips to haul musty rice from abandoned warehouses — huge strategic depots from the war years.

Tens of tons of rice and dried cassava were hauled back by the prisoners and piled high in storage huts. Because it was the start of winter and no planting could yet be done, we were fed that moldy rice and dried cassava — damp, eaten by weevils, light and hollow, the grains still with husks on. When washed in the stream, most of it floated away!

(Anyone who ever reached that old base could not help feeling stunned — realizing, "No wonder we lost." The vast network of barracks and warehouses, hidden under the canopies of ancient forest trees hundreds of years old, was so thick that no sunlight penetrated. It was invisible from the air — and no one could guess how many such bases existed along the Lao–Vietnam border.)

From that first winter through the spring and summer of 1976, none of us escaped the grip of terrible hunger, compounded by edema, dysentery, and malaria. Some comrades couldn't survive that first "round" and quietly passed away…

The swelling disease — edema — was easy to recognize. If one morning you woke up suddenly looking plump and thought you'd finally gained some weight, don't be too happy. Along with it came fatigue, a heavy face, and legs puffed up like an elephant leg. Press your finger into your ankle and if it leaves a deep dent that doesn't bounce back, soft like kneading dough — then you've got edema. The

illness blocks urination and leads to kidney failure — just like poor Lieutenant Nguyễn Trần Được, an A-37 pilot, who didn't make it.

As for me, I couldn't avoid taking turns with all three ailments — they came and went, one after another. When I couldn't urinate, I would jog in place, do a few Yoko, Shuto, and Teiken moves until I broke into a sweat. Even more terrifying was dysentery — but that's another story; I'm getting off track again!

And that, roughly, was how Hiệp Đức's "Camp 2 for Defeated Soldiers," under Central Camp 1 in Quảng Nam, came to be.

During the opening ceremony of the "Ten Political Lessons," the Commanding Officer of the entire complex delivered his golden words — a kind of official gospel:

"The Revolution has shown clemency by sparing you from execution. We do not imprison you. We bring you here so that you have an environment to study and reform yourselves. You are free to study, free to build your own shelters, free to labor and produce rice to feed yourselves. The fence surrounding this camp is there to protect you — to keep the local people from taking revenge for your crimes…"

Ah! So that's what it was. No wonder the guards insisted we call them *'Mr. security officers'*, and the men in charge of "thought reform" were *'Mr. supervisors.'*

Mother dear! Thank you, Revolution, for thinking so far ahead! Why didn't that man just say plainly that *we built the fence to imprison ourselves!*

From 1975 to 1978, before being transferred to Kỳ Sơn Camp in Bồng Miêu, I came to know every ravine and hill in this remote wilderness. As a woodcutter and charcoal maker, felling trees, stripping rattan, splitting logs, I never once saw a single civilian wander into the area — no one at all trying to "avenge" themselves on us.

Nguyễn Hy and Lý Đình Quy were reassigned to Camp 5. I never knew how clever they were, or how "well they reformed," but apparently well enough for the Revolution to pardon and release them around 1977 or '78.

As for me, after three long years of swinging pick and shovel — my hands hardened like stone — I still hadn't achieved "thought enlightenment." So, I packed up once more and was transferred to Camp 4 at Kỳ Sơn in 1979, to live among the "masters" — the senior officers and higher ranks.

The Blacksmith Team – The "Ham" Charcoal Pit Team

Among the "defeated soldiers" imprisoned at Camp 2, Central Camp 1, Hiệp Đức, there was Trương Giỏi from Huế — a former Lieutenant in the "Lôi Hổ" (Thunder Tiger) unit under Technical Directorate, Section 7. He was skilled in blacksmithing, and according to his own "confession," the craft had been passed down for generations in his family.

Since the camp needed tools for clearing forest to make fields and paddies (and also to sell for profit), Trương Giỏi was "appointed" head of the Blacksmith Team, responsible for "recycling scrap metal" into tools such as machetes, knives, hoes, shovels, rakes, plows, and harrows. He even got to "recruit workers" for his team — Nguyễn Khương from Huế and Nguyễn Công Thế, a northerner who moved south in 1954 — both also "Lôi Hổ" lieutenants from the same Technical Directorate.

As for materials, iron and steel came from old truck springs, leaf suspensions, and chassis frames — all provided by "the higher authorities" after being requested in one of Giỏi's official "supply proposals." But good fuel was needed too — charcoal that burned hot, long, and left little ash.

Now, the term *"than hầm"* ("pit charcoal") could mean either charcoal burned in an underground pit or wood that's slowly cooked — like simmering pork bones for broth. Either way, both meanings made sense. And that was how the "Hầm" Charcoal Pit Team came into being.

I originally belonged to the Sawing Team, whose job was simple: using a shark-tooth saw — also called a “two-man saw” — to cut logs into 3–4-meter sections. The large trees, a meter or more in diameter, had to be split into planks. Just carrying those heavy logs back to the sawing area could fill a whole chapter of “Tale of Misery” — but that’s another story!

After cutting the logs, we’d use charcoal lines and plumb bobs to mark straight guidelines along their bodies and ends. Then we’d set the wood on the sawing rig, angled about 45 degrees, and depending on the order, we’d cut boards one centimeter, two centimeters, even five centimeters thick.

Our team included Lieutenant Hoàng Phước, an intelligence officer from Division 2 — calm and mature beyond his years; Lieutenant Khiêm, a tall A-37 pilot; Lieutenant Trần Đức Đạo, a handsome, cheerful Marine; gentle Ngô Trọng Phục, shy as a girl; and Lê Trịnh Thanh… (There I go wandering off topic again!)

At some point — I don’t even remember exactly when — a few of us were “drafted” into the Charcoal Pit Team at the blacksmith’s request. Probably because we already knew our way around the forest and understood wood types.

There were other teams too — blacksmiths, charcoal burners, livestock handlers, and medics. Compared to those assigned to “farm crews” or “production units” who had to work the fields, plant cassava, rice and sweet potatoes, and labor under the strict rhythm of the bell and the watchful eyes of guards with AK-47s — our teams were considered part of the camp’s ‘technical production teams’, and so our work was relatively less pressure.

The Charcoal Pit Team itself was divided into two groups: the wood-cutting unit and the charcoal-burning unit. I was in the wood-cutting unit.

Daily, the five of us — accompanied by one guard — went into the forest; then we split into two teams. Each two-man team searched for hardwood trees to fell, cut them into sections and carry them back to the gathering point, stacking them into piles to meet the quota. The remaining man played the “The cook” (anh nuôi), who foraged extra wild greens and dug up snails from the stream to “supplement” everyone’s meals. The four of us had to make up the work quota for five people.

As for the guard, at first, he came along with us, but later he didn't seem sure who he was supposed to be guarding, so he loitered around the forest edge, where we gathered in the afternoons.

While the little bundle of promises about "three years of re-education" dangled like bait before our eyes, any thought of running away never really took root. Even if we'd wanted to escape, it would have been hard to break through the ring of posts and guards on the surrounding ridges.

A bit of practical detail: every morning before going into the woods we stopped by the kitchen to collect rice and dried cassava. Everything was dumped into a machine-gun ammo box, which the "kitchen helper" carried off. The daily ration for a heavy laborer like us was one canteen-lid full of rice and one U.S. tin of dried cassava. So, the little scheme of appointing someone as an extra "The Cook" to improve our diet was tolerated by the guard — as long as the work quota was met and productivity stayed acceptable.

We needed hard, dense wood to make good pit-charcoal. By experience, the smaller the leaves, the denser and harder the trunk. Finding the right trees meant hacking through tangled vines and undergrowth, going deeper into the forest each day. The jungle swarmed with bloodsucking insects — mosquitoes, midges, ticks, leeches. To punish those parasites, we smeared tobacco water (thuốc lào) or salt on our legs before entering the forest, but every now and then a leech still latched on. Once Lieutenant Luân had a leech crawl up into his urethra; he screamed and cursed, and when he finally pulled it out blood gushed everywhere. Luân held the leech to his mouth, bit down on it and swore, "Damn you — you bite me, I'll bite you!"

As for getting bitten by ticks, there's no need to describe how awful it is. When they haven't bitten anyone yet, they move quickly like tiny yellow spiders; once they've gorged themselves full, they swell up round like a blackish-purple peanut, hanging loosely from your skin. When you pull them off, their heads stay buried deep under the skin, causing unbearable itching and festering sores that can last for months, even years!

Once we found a suitable tree, we'd chop it down. The trunk and branches—large or small—were cut into logs about one to one and a half meters long so they'd fit easily into the kiln. We tied the logs into bundles and carried them back to the gathering spot.

When we had gathered enough firewood to fill a kiln, everyone would carry and stack it inside to burn. "Those others"—probably the group before us—had already dug the kiln. It was a round pit about as deep as a man's height, with a diameter of three to four meters. At the base wall, there was a rectangular opening—about two by three hand spans—that connected to a long rectangular trench of the same depth. The fire was started in this trench.

After we filled the round pit with wood, we covered it with branches and leaves, then piled on a thick layer of earth about two hand spans deep and packed it tight. After that, we dug three ventilation holes in the "lid" of soil. Once that was done, our group handed the job over to two men in charge of tending the fire and watching the kiln.

Every two weeks or so, we'd "open" the kiln once. It took five to six days to burn—when the blue smoke stopped rising, the charcoal was "done." We let it cool for about ten days before digging open the earth lid to collect the charcoal.

The second kiln we built later, following orders from "higher-ups" (probably for selling and transport outside), was dug according to the same design.

That time was in the middle of winter—drizzling rain, cold northern winds—while we were hungry, cold, and forced to do hard labor. Wild vegetables like fiddlehead ferns, jungle greens, betel leaves, young rattan shoots, and other tender sprouts were growing scarcer and scarcer. The streams were swollen with floodwaters, so we couldn't catch fish or gather snails. But it was getting close to cassava harvest season.

Enjoying a little freedom without guards tailing us into the forest, our "cook" sometimes slipped out across the forest to the cassava fields. At first, he only picked young cassava leaves, boiling them several times to reduce their poison.

Gradually, he began digging up the roots themselves, then covering the soil back up to erase any traces.

Once we'd eaten our fill, we thought of our friends working under supervision—doing the same hard labor, eating the same starvation rations, but constantly watched, shouted at, and driven by guards. So every few days, we filled ammunition boxes with boiled cassava, and at night we secretly passed them around to share with the others in our "house." (During the day we worked separately, but at night we returned to our "house" for meetings, self-criticism sessions, and clapping along to sing "red songs.")

Our ancestors used to say, "Do good and you'll meet good," but that proverb isn't always true. There were still some in our house who, though they received our "extra rations" of cassava, found that the "ticket for good study and good reform—to return home to family" was worth far more. And so...

Around November of 1977. One late afternoon — not a pleasant one — with a gray drizzle falling thick in the air, the whole group of us was escorted back by the guards and handed over at the camp gate. As usual, we'd just walk through the gate straight into our "pen." One man would carry the bundle of axes, machetes, and knives to turn in at the tool shed, then we'd all head back to our barrack.

But this time, the young guard up in the gate tower suddenly pointed directly at me:
— "Hey, you there! Stop!"

I — that day on kitchen duty as the "cook" — pretended to look around as if he were calling someone else.

— "You! The one carrying the ammo box!"
I turned back, brushing the rain off my face.
— "Me??"
— "Yes! What's in that ammo box? Open it up!"
— "Reporting, sir — just boiled cassava roots."
— "The rest of you, back to your quarters! You — stay here!"

I opened the lid of the ammo box, and of course, it was crammed full of boiled cassava.

— “Who gave you permission to dig up cassava and cook it?”
— “Reporting, sir — no one did. I was too hungry, so I tried to help myself a little.”
— “Stay right there. I’m reporting this to your unit supervisor.”

The ammo box full of cassava stayed there. I was taken away by my “house supervisor” back to our barrack.

The Price of Cassava

A small “court session” was convened — a harsh session of “criticism and self-examination,” filled with every kind of revolutionary rhetoric hurled at me by my own friends, under the guidance and “chairmanship” of the reeducation officer. They accused me of having an individualistic mindset, of harboring capitalist ideas that exploited others’ labor (“planting cassava”), of taking advantage of the guards’ “negligence and trust” to “improve my life” during working hours, of sabotaging the camp’s crops and property, of not being fully at ease with “reform,” of complaining about hunger and hardship…

During the session, some tried to implicate the four men from the charcoal team — saying they were accomplices or had “covered” for me. But I swore, again and again, like nails hammered into wood, that this was the first time I had dug up cassava; that I had cooked it and brought it back myself; that those men knew nothing about it — they had no “connection” to my cassava digging. I violated the rules, and I alone would accept responsibility.

For more than two hours I endured the verbal blows without a word of protest — only nodding and admitting my guilt. I also promised the Revolution that I would reform myself quickly, to become a “good and useful citizen of the new society.”

Finally came the closing act — the “sentencing.”
My “house supervisor,” a man about thirty-five or forty years old — I think his name was Khiết or Khuyết, something simple but hard to recall after fifty years —

was from Quảng Nam, with a thick accent, a gaunt, dark face, and a slightly stooped posture though not yet old.
Whenever he gave “lectures,” he would furiously condemn the so-called puppet soldiers for shooting villagers, burning homes, dropping bombs — his words spilling out like lines recited from a memorized lesson. And then, as if on cue, he’d switch to praising “Mr. China,” “Mr. Soviet Union,” “Uncle Hồ,” and “Comrade Lenin” in the highest terms.

On ordinary days, he could be decent and mild-mannered toward the prisoners. But that night, the criticism session was *tense.* His face turned sharp and cold.

After asking if anyone had more opinions — and seeing everyone exhausted after a full day of “labor,” their patience worn thin by my supposed stubbornness — the room fell silent. At that moment, he seemed to forget all those times he’d visited the sawmill, quietly asking me, or Phước, or Khiêm to hide a few planks of valuable wood — gõ, cẩm lai, xá xị, or sơn huyết — for him, and reminding us not to record them in the logbook.

Then, in an official tone, my supervisor solemnly pronounced my sentence:

“According to the report from today’s criticism session, the Revolution hereby sentences inmate Huỳnh Tiến for the crime of *‘destroying the camp’s crops and collective labor property.’* Normally, this offense would merit a severe punishment, but as a warning, we sentence you to plant one hundred banana seedlings, outside regular working hours. The punishment takes effect immediately.”

“Hey Tiến! Follow the guards to receive your tools.”

By then, it was already past ten at night.
At the tool shed, I received a shovel and a hoe, plus a kerosene lamp. In the drizzle, two guards led me to the command staff’s farm area.
They brought me to an open patch of land and ordered me to dig one hundred small holes — each about fourty centimeters deep, sixty wide, and spaced one meter apart.

I bent down and dug hole after hole, without complaint, without a word — silent and focused.

Damn it. I was sweating and soaked, my clothes clinging from sweat mixed with rain, while those two wrapped themselves in nylon, smoking and chatting away in that loud, sing-song Quảng Nam accent — occasionally shouting at me to hurry up.

Thankfully, the long rain had softened the ground; the soil was easy to cut, and there weren't many stones. The hoe went deep and lifted earth quickly. Still, human strength has limits. As the night wore on, I slowed down, resting more often, despite their yelling. But they changed shifts three times before dawn broke, and by then I'd managed to dig maybe eighty or ninety holes. The 5 a.m. wake-up gong rang, and the two guards "escorted" me back to the barrack.

After working almost nonstop through the night, the chill had seeped deep into my bones. I was utterly exhausted.
I changed clothes and collapsed on the bamboo platform. Everyone else was already up — a few glanced curiously at me before heading to the mess hall with their U.S. canteens and mess kits for breakfast. It was still raining, so morning exercise was canceled.

Half-asleep, I drifted off for a short while until the 6 a.m. work gong clanged again. That day, I joined the house team in the field, hoeing ridges for planting sweet potato vines. Of course, I got "special attention" and extra prodding from the guards, but I was half-deaf to it — I just worked within my strength.

At noon, the team returned to camp for lunch and an hour's rest. But for me, after lunch, I was escorted back to the command's farm to finish digging the full one hundred holes. When that was done, they made me borrow a pair of bamboo baskets and a carrying pole, go to the cow barn, and haul manure to fill every one of those hundred holes.

That noon passed like that. I went back to my team to continue hoeing sweet potato ridges.
And of course, that evening — and through the entire night again — I "worked

after hours," hauling manure until all hundred holes were filled. Then I went to the banana garden, still under rain, still cold and soaked. Patient and obedient, I used the hoe and crowbar to dig up one hundred banana offshoots — some large, some small — tied them into bundles, and carried them back to plant in the prepared holes.

The night was endless — painfully long — but in short, by dawn I had "completed my sentence," utterly drained, just as I had been the morning before. And once again, I followed my team, hoeing sweet potato ridges under even closer watch from the guards.

My debt was paid. I thought it was over — that everything had settled down.
But that noon...

The Underground Hotel

Just as I picked up my U.S. Army mess tin for lunch, a guard called out that "Comrade Thanh" wanted to see me immediately.

I put the tin down — hadn't even taken a bite yet.
— "What's this about, sir?" I asked.
— "Don't know! Go see Comrade Thanh and you'll find out!"

The guard escorted me out through the camp gate, up the slope toward the command area. In the drizzle, Sergeant Thanh — head of the guard unit — stood waiting on the hill. He was about my age, maybe younger; tall, fair-skinned, and decent-looking, but his eyes probed me sharply, cold and threatening. I thought to myself, *Damn it, what now?*

I stood at attention.
— "Reporting, sir, I'm present!"

Thanh clasped his hands behind his back, studied me for a moment, then jerked his chin.
— "How many times have you stolen cassava?"

— “Only once,” I answered immediately, without hesitation.
— “Stubborn, huh? Confess the truth and I’ll let you go.”
— “Just once.”
— “Fine, then go up there and carry down a meter and a half of firewood for me!” he said, pointing to the pile of logs behind the officers’ kitchen.
— “But sir, I’ve already completed the punishment from my supervisor!”
— “Still defiant? I’m punishing you again.”
— “Sir, I haven’t had lunch yet — I’m too hungry to haul wood.”
— “Don’t care. Go haul the wood! Are you obeying or not?”
— “If you want to punish me again, just do it.”

Under the eyes of two guards sent to watch me, I borrowed tools and drove four stakes into the ground, forming a rectangle — five hand spans high, one arm-span wide, and one and a half long. Then, silently and steadily, I began hauling logs, stacking them into the frame. Hungry, soaked, and freezing, I could feel the blood rising hot inside me.

After more than an hour, I had stacked about a cubic meter and a half of wood.
— “Reporting, sir — task complete!”
— “Now go borrow a *búa* and split all this wood before noon!” Thanh ordered again.
(*In Quảng Nam dialect, they call an axe a “búa” — literally “hammer.”*)

Even your reincarnated ancestors couldn’t finish this pile by noon, damn you! I cursed silently. *This is too much. Enough’s enough — I can’t take it anymore.*

I went to the tool shed, grabbed an axe, returned to the pile, dragged out a heavy log, and slammed it to the ground with a loud *thud*, mud splattering everywhere — open defiance.
Damn it, eight weeks of humiliation at the Military Academy still lacks this snack!

I swung the axe hard — the blade sank deep into the wood end. My right hand gripped the handle, my left rested behind my back, chest out, right foot on the log, face turned upward into the rain — standing still, fury surging through me.

— "You there, chop the wood!"
— "Tiến! Are you chopping or not?"
— "Tiến! …"
— "This one's stubborn! Beat him to death!"
— "……"

I heard nothing. Saw nothing. Knew nothing.

Sensing trouble, they called for backup. Five or six more guards arrived, shouting, surrounding me. Still, I stood motionless — deaf, blind, oblivious — one hand clutching the axe handle, one foot on the log, face to the sky catching rain. *This time, whoever dares come near me — I'll send him straight to his ancestors. I'm ready to die.*

They shouted and cursed like a pack of wolves circling prey, but none dared step in. It wasn't guard duty hour, so none of them carried rifles — just their mouths, barking orders and insults.

As the rain continued and my body stayed still, cold seeped in. Hunger gnawed deep. My teeth began chattering; my body trembled uncontrollably.

Then the noon gong rang from the watchtower. I didn't move.
The work gong followed, and everyone began lining up at the gate then passing.

— "Hey Tiến! Go with your team to work!" Thanh barked.
— "Go work! You'll finish the firewood this afternoon!"

I thought for a moment, tilted my head, and replied,
— "Fine. I'll finish it this afternoon."

I released the axe handle and started walking down the slope. I'd taken maybe six or seven steps when —

"Thud! Thud! Crack! Crack!"

Suddenly, like lightning striking from behind — blows to my back, shoulders, and head. I pitched forward, falling face-first into the mud. The pack of cowards lunged, ripping out fence posts and raining blows all over me. Instinctively, I curled

up, knees to my chest, hands clasped over my head, rolling to dodge the strikes. Blood began to mix with the rain and mud beneath me.

Summoning all my strength like a spring, I suddenly leapt up and rammed headfirst into the man below the slope. He jumped aside; I tumbled and rolled downhill.

“Bang! Bang!”
Two AK shots cracked from the gate tower above. One bullet hit the ground — right beside my temple — mud exploding up, splattering my face and shoulders. I stayed conscious, but lay still, not moving. Blood and mud mingled together.

— “Tiến’s dead! Tiến’s been shot dead!”
— “They killed Tiến!”

The prisoners, who had just marched out of the gate for work, broke ranks and rushed uphill — dozens of them crowding around me. The guards stopped, realizing I might actually be dead, and pulled back up the hill.

For the guard’s safety, our teams always sent one or two men to collect tools from the shed — hoes, machetes, shovels — which were tied together and carried *separately* from the prisoners. Tools were only distributed once we reached the fields, and collected again before returning. So, when my brothers ran up, they were all unarmed; otherwise, the tower guards would’ve opened fire into the crowd.

More than ten of my brothers crouched around me. Someone wiped the blood and mud from my face. Seeing I hadn’t been shot, two men — I can’t recall who — lifted me by the arms.

— “Disperse, now!”
— “Back to work!” the guards shouted, driving everyone off.

Lieutenant Đèo Văn Đức — an Air Force officer, around forty, tall and lean — hoisted me over his shoulder like a sack of rice and ran toward the infirmary inside the camp. Five or six others followed. They laid me on a bamboo cot, stripped off my mud-soaked clothes. Blood still seeped from my face. A long crack ran from

between my nose and upper lip; my upper lip was swollen stiff — not clear whether from a blow or a jab with a stick. My forearms were covered in raised welts from blocking strikes. My back throbbed all over — burning, numb, beyond pain.

While they were cleaning the mud off me, a group of guards burst in, ordering everyone out. Đức hesitated and was shoved away by a guard swinging his AK sideways. One guard grabbed my arm, trying to drag me off the cot, when the camp medic — a soldier from Quảng Nam — stopped them.

— "Leave him there! Inside the infirmary, he's under my authority. If you want to move him, you need written orders from the warden."

The guards growled threats, but eventually withdrew. I looked at the medic, silently thanking him.

— "Foolish, Tiến," he sighed. "Why fight the sky with a stone? Try to reform properly and go home. Don't you have parents? A wife and children?" (his exact words).

He covered me with a blanket, soaked a bandage in warm water, and gently cleaned the wound on my face. Exhausted, I drifted into unconsciousness.

Lieutenant Đèo Văn Đức — Nùng ethnic, from the Air Force, non-flying unit — was about forty or forty-two then, tall and soft-spoken with a slight Chinese accent. For some reason, he was very close to me. He taught me how to split bamboo cleanly, how to weave roofing thatch evenly — not too thick, not too thin; how to fell rattan or bamboo without snagging vines.

During breaks, when we shared bits of *thuốc Lào* (strong pipe tobacco), he once asked,
— "You from 'Tà Loạt' (Đà Lạt)?"
Then grinning: "I'm from Sí Con Tà Loạt too. I was khóa mười (class 10) — your senior officer, huh!"

I always chuckled politely, not really believing him. But over forty years later, when I helped with a book about the history of the Vietnamese Military Academy, I

found his name listed in Class 10 — graduated into the Air Force. For some reason, by 1975 he was still only a lieutenant — probably sidelined.

In 1978, when Camp 2 was dissolved, he was released. I don't know where he went afterward — perhaps back to the mountains of northern Vietnam.

Something jabbed hard into my ribs, and I opened my eyes wide.
— "Get up and follow me!" a young guard barked, jabbing his rifle butt at me.

Behind him stood three more—just kids, maybe sixteen to eighteen years old—all clutching AK rifles. A thought flashed through my mind: *"What now? These punks are looking for trouble again."*

I didn't reply. Wearily, I pushed the blanket aside and forced myself to get up. My "Uncle Ho" sandals were gone—probably slipped off when I was being beaten earlier. I glanced around—no sign of the medic—and realized I was wearing nothing but a pair of shorts.

Limping slowly, I walked ahead, with the guards clattering behind me, rifles swinging loosely. We marched across the prison yard toward the rear gate. Twilight was falling. The drizzle still drifted in the cold northern wind, stinging my face like needles. A few men peered out from their barracks doors, watching my staggering steps. The camp lights were already flickering on.

Out through the back gate, we headed toward the pig pens near the edge of the forest. Suddenly, a chilling thought struck me: *"They're taking me out to shoot me."* My steps faltered slightly, but I kept my head down, carefully gauging the distance between me and the rifle aimed at my back.

— "Where are you taking me?" I asked.
— "Keep walking! No talking!" one barked, shoving the rifle muzzle into my back.

At a moment like that—when life and death hang by a thread—a single desperate Ushiro kick move might change everything. But there were four of them, and I was still battered from the beating earlier that day. I kept walking, thinking feverishly.

We trudged through the dark rain, their flashlights flickering through the mist. My body trembled from cold and hunger. Finally, they told me to stop.

Sergeant Thanh, the head of the guard unit, was waiting. I looked around—it was a small clearing among thin trees. A few steps in front of me, I could just make out a round, black pit in the ground.

— "Turn around!" Thanh ordered, his voice lower than usual.

I turned to face him. He came closer, about three steps away, drew his K54 pistol, and pointed it toward the ground. In his other hand, he held a flashlight, shining it straight into my face as he paced back and forth. The four young guards stood behind him in a half-circle, rifles pointed down. Like ghost's silhouette

A chill ran through me. The cold drizzle felt even colder. *They're going to finish me off here,* I thought. *What do I do? Think! Think fast!*

— "You're rebelling against the revolution, huh? Refusing to work?" he accused.
— "No, sir," I said. "I already carried the firewood as ordered, but I hadn't eaten lunch. I was too hungry to keep working."
— "Orders from above must be obeyed! Stopping on your own is resistance!"

He lectured on for a while. I stood silently.

Then, suddenly, he switched subjects:
— "How many times did you steal cassava?"
— "Just once… this was the first time."
— "Stubborn! We have reported everything you did, say it again!"
— "Only once…"

Thud! Out of nowhere, he lunged forward and kicked me in the stomach.

Years of martial training—all forgotten in an instant! I staggered back two steps, unable to block a simple kick. Before I could regain my balance, another boot smashed into my chest. I reeled backward, my foot slipped, and I fell—arms flailing—into the black hole behind me. I plunged down, hit the wall of the pit, then crashed flat on my back into water. A dull *splash!* echoed.

My head hit the wall of the pit. I sank, my back touching the bottom. I struggled reflexively, propped myself up on my hands and pulled my head up. My right heel burned as if stabbed with a knife. The water was only up to my groin.

The air smelled of rotting moss and rusty iron of alum water. Everything was pitch-black. Feeling around, my hands brushed over slick, slimy plants clinging to the walls.

I wiped my face, touching a wound that stung like fire. Above me, flashlights flickered, and voices muttered. The beam lit up the pit—about five meters deep, barely wider than an arm's span.

And that's when I realized: **I was standing at the bottom of a well.**

Naked, shivering, I hugged my arms against my chest. My teeth chattered uncontrollably. Oddly, I didn't feel hunger anymore even though the stomach has been emptied for a day. —just cold. My legs trembled so badly I leaned against the slimy wall, the moss and leaves on the wall made me feel better.

The chatting voices above grew faint, then stopped. Occasionally, a flashlight beam swept down, then disappeared. Silence closed in—thick, oppressive, absolute. The only sound was my own weak breathing and the faint whimpering that escaped me.

The stillness was unbearable. I longed for any sound—a lone owl, a cricket—something to remind me I wasn't alone. Strangely, a sense of calm crept in, as if this darkness, this isolation, was a kind of freedom—a twisted, bitter comfort away from the cruelty of men.

Gradually, I discovered something: down here, shielded from the northern wind, the cold felt softer. The water was even warmer than the air, probably holding a faint memory of summer heat stored in the earth. I slowly sank down, letting the water rise to my chest, back resting against the wall. The warmth soothed me.

Then came the mosquitoes—forest mosquitoes, relentless even in day or night, even deep in the well. They swarmed my face and shoulders. I tried to wave them off but soon gave up. The cold numbed everything anyway.

Pain seeped deep into my bones. The pain like a wave flooded my body, the wound on my lips and mouth throbbed in harmony with my heartbeat. I was like lost in a drunken stupor, daydreaming and then gradually fading away, drifting between waking and oblivion, sometimes jolting awake as my head dipped under the water.

And somehow, the miserable, endless night finally passed.

The rain had stopped. Above me, a pale gray sky appeared like the lid of a pot. Faint light filtered down, glimmering on the ferns clinging to the wall. Patches of foam floated around me like green turtles.

I pushed myself up, wincing. My right heel screamed in pain. I lifted it from the water—a long gash, two finger joints wide, split open and oozing blood. Something must have sliced it when I fell. My face throbbed and burned; the swelling had grown worse. I wasn't hungry—but my mouth was dry, my lips cracked with thirst.

The irony, I thought bitterly, *standing in a well full of water and dying of thirst.*

I looked up for a while. The walls rose straight and slick, coated in ferns and moss—no handholds, nowhere to climb. Even a martial artist had mastered "Bích Hổ Du Tường" couldn't scale that.

Damn it… Is this really where my life ends? In an abandoned well in the ground? I muttered to myself in despair.

The Second Day in the Well

Morning in the forest — yet not a single bird sang, not even the faintest chirp of insects. Except for the rippling sound of water when I shifted my body, there was nothing but a heavy, almost absolute silence.

A noise came from above. I looked up and caught sight of a dark silhouette — a guard wearing a pith helmet, an AK slung at his side, peering down. Seeing that I was still there, he circled the rim, poking at it with a stick, perhaps checking something. Then, without a word, he disappeared.

And so the endless day dragged on.
Sometimes I stood still, half-submerged in the water. My face and nose had swollen grotesquely; sometimes the pain grew so unbearable that I groaned and blacked out, only to drift back to semi-consciousness, lost between sleep and delirium.
My limbs had long gone numb, yet my body trembled now and then, clinging to what little life remained.

Whether it rained or cleared, whether faint daylight reached the bottom of the well or not, the bloodthirsty forest mosquitoes never tired. They attacked my face, my shoulders, in wild frenzy. At first, I tried to fend them off, but eventually, I gave up. My skin had turned tough and insensible.
Many of them grew so bloated with my blood that their bellies swelled like grains of sticky rice. They couldn't fly anymore — just crawled weakly, then dropped into the water.

Every few hours, a helmeted head would appear above, peeking down — still without a word.

All that day, the guards didn't throw me even a scrap of dry cassava. Yet strangely, I didn't feel hunger anymore. It was thirst that tormented me.
My throat was parched, my tongue and palate cracked and bitter. At times, the wall before me seemed to shimmer and dance. I licked the rainwater off my arms, sipped from the droplets clinging to the mossy stones, but the relief was fleeting — the thirst returned even fiercer.

The stench of moss and rust had vanished — either I'd grown used to it, or I'd lost my sense of smell. I cupped water in my hands and brought it to my mouth, tasted it, gagged, and spat it out. But eventually, instinct — that raw, primal drive to survive — took over.

By noon, by afternoon, I could resist no more.
The stagnant, iron-tinted water, thick with green moss and mixed with traces of my own urine, stank of rust that made my stomach twist. Yet when I closed my eyes and swallowed, the water slid down my throat like a summer downpour

sweeping through a scorched field. I could feel it travel, cool and alive, into the pit of my belly. That was the elixir of survival — bitter, filthy, yet divine.
Soon my stomach gurgled with the sound of trapped water sloshing inside.

Above, the mouth of the well melted once again into darkness. Another miserable night had come — or perhaps it had never left. Like a nightmare played on repeat: the freezing drizzle needling my face, the faint, indifferent sweeps of flashlight beams slicing through the blackness before vanishing.

The buzz of mosquitoes couldn't break the suffocating stillness of death hanging nearby. My moans, wrung out by pain, brought no relief. Half-dreaming, half-awake, I slipped and dunked my head underwater again and again.

And somehow, that night too passed. Day returned — though I hardly noticed when. I could no longer tell day from night. My heel and my face were badly infected, swollen tight and throbbing with agony. Waves of fever came and went, burning and freezing me by turns.

I stayed sunk in the water, unwilling to stand. My own groans echoed around the walls of the well, mocking me like a cruel echo. From time to time, I dunked my head, drinking again and again. The torment was constant — dull at moments, searing at others — a kind of pain language cannot capture.

I hovered between life and death, trembling on the edge, surviving by nothing but instinct — while Death itself seemed to stand beside me, scythe raised, waiting.

In that state, time ceased to exist.
It was neither real nor felt — only a blur of suffering without beginning or end.

Then suddenly —

"Climb up!"
"Climb up!"

The words floated faintly down from above.

"Climb that tree and get up here!"

In front of me stood a slender tree trunk, barely the width of my hand, jammed into the water and leaning against the wall of the well. Its branches had been chopped short, leaving stubs just long enough to grip. I had no idea when they'd lowered it in.

Looking up, I saw several guards' silhouettes around the rim, one of them shining a flashlight straight at my face.

"Climb up!"

Somehow, that order snapped me back to reality.

I pressed my palms against the wall and tried to push myself upright on one leg. Leaning against the wall, I reached for the trunk, groping for a branch stub to hook my foot on. My head spun with dizziness. Gathering the last scraps of strength, I heaved myself upward — one step, pause, another step, pause — clinging, panting, inch by inch.

I managed to climb about two meters before my strength gave out. My arms shook violently; I couldn't pull myself any higher. The guards' shouting echoed down, urging me on, but I could no longer move.

Then, as I felt myself slipping back, two of them lowered a rattan rope looped into a "U." I fumbled to hook it behind my back and under my armpits. In moments, with no effort, they hauled me up and out of the well.

I collapsed face-down on the ground. The rain had long stopped, but puddles still dotted the muddy earth.

"Stand up!" Thanh ordered.

I pushed with both hands, struggling to rise. My whole body was soaked, wearing only a ragged pair of wet briefs. My right heel was swollen, heavy as if weighted with iron. I balanced on my good leg, trembling again in the gusting wind.

The sky was still gray, hard to tell what time it was, but likely near mid-afternoon. A few guards paced around me in silence.

After nearly two days soaking in the water, sharing my existence with billions of microorganisms in that well, the skin from my chest downward had turned slimy, slick as if coated in grease. A nameless stench rose from me — foul, indescribable. My hands were blistered, stained yellow with iron rust, my fingers shriveled and warped like dried jujubes. I looked at myself — no longer human, but a creature from another planet.

"**How many times have you pulled up cassava?**" Thanh demanded, fists on hips, chin thrust forward.

I lifted my head, looked straight into his face, and said nothing.

Beneath the gray shadow of his pith helmet, his eyes suddenly flared with rage.

"**I said, how many times have you dug up cassava?**"

"Only… once…" I whispered hoarsely.

"This bastard is too stubborn! Stubborn, huh?"

Without hesitation, he kicked me hard. I was thrown backward, falling flat with a heavy thud. The world spun around me; nausea rose in my throat — the metallic taste of blood, or maybe well water.

Instinctively, I curled up like a shrimp, drawing my arms and legs tight to shield myself from the next round of blows. Kicks thudded against my back; boots slammed against my head — sparks burst behind my eyes. I don't even know if I screamed; pain no longer registered as pain.

The filthy water I'd swallowed surged up through my nose and mouth. Choking, gasping for breath, I stretched my neck, trying to gulp a bit of air…

At last, the beating waned, blows landing farther apart, then stopped altogether. Maybe they'd grown tired of kicking a limp sack of flesh — or maybe, just maybe, some shred of human mercy stirred in them.

Thanh paced back and forth, scowling. Then he barked:

"**Comrades, throw him in the pigpen!**"

The two guards hesitated a moment, then one grabbed my legs, the other my arms. They half-carried, half-dragged me away. Four of them took turns hauling me along until we reached the pigpen.

But instead of throwing me inside, they dumped me outside — right by the edge, where a trickle of muck and pig waste seeped out in a foul puddle. They stood around, talking in low voices. My consciousness faded in and out; their figures blurred, then melted into haze.

And then… it was as though I drew in a long, endless breath from a bamboo pipe — a lungful of deep, intoxicating *thuốc Lào* that burned and carried me away. The pain ebbed, slowly dissolving. The cold no longer touched me. My limbs felt useless, heavy, distant. Then, a strange lightness filled me — floating, drifting upward, soft and airy like lying on a cloud of cotton. My fever carried me higher, and the world around me blurred into mist.

Now and then, a drop of water from the thatched roof splashed onto my face, jolting me downward for an instant — before I rose again, soaring farther and farther away, beyond all thought, beyond all suffering.

……………………………………..

A burning sensation in the soles of my feet slowly brought me back to consciousness.

I opened my eyes. I was lying naked in the infirmary.
And beside me there Trần Liên and Phạm Phước — the two men who had pulled me back from death…

Autumn Musings

Liên must be over ninety now, and Phước would be about my age. Where are they today?
It's been fifty years — half a century — since I last saw or heard from them.

To recall this story is also to remember their names, with gratitude —
those companions in suffering who once drifted, half-alive, through the depths of hell.

Fifty years have passed in a blink. The ups and downs of a lifetime now seem like a fleeting dream of *Nam Kha*.
All the joys and sorrows, bitterness and hatred, love and resentment — they have all settled into quiet imprints, leaving behind scars in the soul.

When "the autumn rain gently falls" outside the eaves,
when golden and crimson leaves surrender, letting the cold wind carry them away,
and when the sky turns to that familiar shade of melancholy gray —
memories from a faraway world return once more.

Even now, I still cannot understand those soldiers from the other side —
cannot understand why they hated us so deeply, why they treated us with such cruelty.
The brutality of war may have its limits, but the cruelty of mankind knows none.

In the end, could it really be that they unleashed such hatred upon my body simply because of a few "owl cries" in the silent depths of the forest night?

But that… is another story, long buried in memory.

Oregon, Autumn 2025
Huỳnh Tiến