

# The Year Of The Monkey

By Lawrence Tân JJR 69



It was hard enough to go through our adolescent years when we had to cope with so many issues that seemed to come at us all at once in just a few short years. Our physical change, our self realization, the search and formation of an attitude, an identity, the yearning to understand more of everything that happened around us and the careful attempt to fit in with our peers as they were going through our same experience. All of that exerted an enormous amount of pressure on us. We started to have feelings that we had never experienced before, we were expected a little bit more by everyone around us. Growing up was tough enough, for our generation, war had no doubt accentuated and accelerated it.



1968 seemed to be an unremarkable year like all the previous years. My plans were the same. I had about a week off from school so I planned to be with my grandparents in Vinh Binh. I had the permission from my relatives to go and stay with Nguyen Tam Thien overnight and we hired a taxi early next morning to take us to the inter-city bus stop in Cholon. Thien's Mom lived in my neighborhood, off Cao Thang street. He stayed in his father's complex on Tran Hung Dao, close to the Dai Nam Movies Theater. Every now and then, he visited his Mom. This complex was two or three stories high and it was so big that it occupied an entire small city block. Every time I passed by and looked for him, I had to get somebody to go upstairs and get him; I got lost one time venturing up there by myself. Apparently, there were a number of families of all the aunts and uncles who shared that building.

That was the first time we traveled together. The bus was scheduled to leave at around 6 o'clock in the morning for a good five to six hours trip. It depended on whether we encountered the blockade set up by the

guerillas the night before. Every now and then they came out at night and piled up dirt, rocks and buried a mine or two in the middle of the road to inconvenience the traffic flow. When that happened, we had to wait for the government's military to come and dismantle it before the traffic flow resumed.

Thien's grandpa, Mr. Nguyen Van Hao, built a pagoda on the outskirts of the city of Vinh Binh and planned a burial ground for the family. So, it went without saying that Thien was always welcome there at the temple. From what I remember, from the outside, the temple was a good size structure and it seemed to have plenty of light. It was the only building there on the side of the road. I guess the people normally came by on bicycle, motorcycle or ox-carts. It was a perfect place for the monks. It was a serene place surrounded mostly by rice paddies and close enough to the main road traveled by the inter-city buses; supplies could be dropped off easily. Tam Thien got off there, about half an hour to town. I gave him the instructions to find me if he decided to go to town. We would dine and wine together if he ever showed up. But he never did.

I think I was there a few days already. One evening, I heard the rumor that the guerillas are amassing their forces close to town; but I had heard those kinds of things every now and then over the years. The people there were so used to the distant canons and bombs, but being from Saigon I was always a little bit more sensitive and worried. Sometimes from the rooftop, I could see the flares floating in the distant sky, like those lost souls from the battlefields who have not figured out which way is home. It was just past 9PM in the evening. I was shooting some pool with my friends in a billiard hall on the riverside. Suddenly I saw a military truck stopped, dropping off a few soldiers who quickly got into positions and set up the heavy machine guns. They were not the M60's. At the time the military still used the WW II equipment. I got worried and scared, stopped the game, hopped on my bicycle and started riding home. As soon as I got to the Movie House, I heard a government car coming by and declared immediate curfew via its bullhorn. It ordered everybody to go home and stay in the house until further notification. We cut short the movie show and passed along the same message to the audience. The people started leaving in a fairly orderly fashion...

It must be about 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning; I was awakened by a shot to the wall above my bed. Some of the plaster came down on me from the wall. The target was the neon light right above my bed and I heard somebody was yelling from the street ordering us to turn off the light. I also saw my uncle quietly beckoning me from the doorway to the auditorium to leave. I jumped off the bed and ran crouching towards the switch, turned the light off and followed my uncle. We ran through the entire length of the auditorium to the dugout below the stage. The auditorium was larger than most of the movie houses I have seen in the States where we live. From the large dugout area below the stage, there were two openings with a few steps each going up towards a large backyard. Up on the backyard, right next to the opening on the left and attached to the building, there were a shower stall and a makeshift kitchen shared by the families who lived in the dugout. Beyond the set of steps on the right, way into the yard, there was an open well; a bucket attached to a rope was almost always there sitting on the ground besides the well. The men in their boxers and the kids living in the dugout sometimes got their showers there; the backyard was as wide as the movie theater ground. That was where we let all the chicken, duckling and a couple of pigs run wild. One of the pigs was mine, my grandmother raised it for me, and another one was my brother's. When mine was big enough, she would sell it as supplement to my school tuition in Saigon and other expenditures.

From the auditorium, the dug-out was accessible from both sides of the stage via access doors. Behind each access door, the floor was split and there was a few steps leading up to the stage behind the huge movie screen and another set leading down to the dugout area. The movie screen could be slid off all the way to the back wall to make room for a stage area every time an opera troop came by and performed for a few days. There were three families living in the dugout area beneath the stage. The men were all employees of the movie theater. The painter artist, Hoa Si, who was an ethnic Chinese, but he spoke Vietnamese better than his ancestral language. He was married and had a small boy. He also had a young assistant and painted all our advertisement canvas panels, each one was around 8' X 8'. The colors used on the canvas panels were the washable kind. The right corner of the dug out, close to the staircase to the auditorium was used as his studio where he kept all his bowls of colors and paint brushes with his partially finished work for the next movies. These panels when completed were mounted and displayed on each side of the movie house for the currently shown feature film for a few days until the next feature film. I loved to spend time down there just to watch him work. It was so much fun for me to watch the pictures coming to life under his strokes of colors. After a canvas was complete, we would spray a thin layer of light and washable glue to protect it from the rain. In a larger city such as Saigon, a movie could last about anywhere from a week to two before you ran out of audience. At Phu Vinh, a feature film could last three days at the most. The second family was Mr. Muoi's, one of the ushers, his wife and their young kids, a boy and a girl, Dzung and Hoa. Then there was the family of Mr. Trong, one of the projectionists, with a small son of around three. Besides the common area of the dug out, their private areas consisted of their beds and maybe a small table and a small piece of furniture. Each family fashioned a curtain or two to cover their areas for privacy. Seeing people raised their family like that really made me think hard at times. How many bedrooms do we want now?

The backyard, an atrium, was surrounded by a wall and beyond the wall, the back of the row houses of the surrounding streets. There were five of us altogether, my grandparents, my uncle, my younger brother and I. We

stayed there with the other three families hoping that the situation would eventually ease off, but we ended up staying there all night until around 4:00PM the next day. Then suddenly an explosion shook the whole building and dust was all over the air. As soon as it settled, Mr. Muoi and Kinh, my younger brother decided to crawl up to the auditorium to assess the situation. After a few short minutes, they came back and told us that the gate of the movie house was hit; the grille was mostly destroyed and all twisted, and the lobby collapsed. We decided that it was too dangerous there, the combatants (either side) might come in any time and we would be stuck in between. So we decided to take a chance....

We decided to leave the dug-out. We did not know the source of the explosion. It could be a 155mm canon shell or a rocket from a helicopter. In either case, that meant only one thing, that the guerilla force was in the neighborhood. Since we were right underneath the stage, and behind the projection screen, there is really nothing solid above us except a wooden floor. If god forbid, if one of those shells landed in there, we would not have a chance. After the explosion, there was a lot of confusion. We had to make some fast decisions. We had a couple of challenges, we did not want to be exposed in the backyard fearing that the helicopter above would mistake us for the combatants of the other side because I understand that the guerillas did not wear uniform. The second difficulty that we faced was to figure out how to get my grandparents over the wall. My grandfather always had a limp because one of his legs suffered atrophy when he was young.

We started yelling across the backyard that we needed help and a ladder. After a few minutes, low and behold, we saw a ladder lowered from across the wall. We wait until the sound of the helicopter seemed to fly by then Kinh dashed out across the yard and on to the ladder. He got over it before the helicopter started approaching again. Then we let a few other folks go next asking them to wait on the other side to help my grandparents on their way down. My uncle dashed off with my grandmother, he was behind her on the ladder, and they went over. Then my grandfather and I took our turn. I was behind him. He was kind of slow, but I was there just in case he slipped. During that commotion, I saw the painter used a long bamboo stick stirring the open well, kept calling for his son with a desperate and tiring voice, "Vinh, where are you?". He lost his son during the confusions; he was trying to see if his son fell into the well. Somewhere along the line, I knew the helicopter had seen us, because the time it took to climb the ladder and over the wall.

We all ended up in a narrow back alley of the back of other people's houses. We scattered and went to different houses. Our family stayed together and ended up in a house that sold motorcycles and parts. There was really not much space in there. I think we had less than twenty people all sitting on the floor, wherever we could make room for ourselves. We did not know what to think, all of us were still under shock. The owner of the house turned out to be somebody that my uncle knew. The house we were in shared a common open well with the house next door. Above the well was a door that divided the houses. When the well was covered with a solid wooden lid, they can open the door above it and climb back and forth between the two houses. I was told that the residents of the houses were relatives. We were there for hours; not knowing what would do next. What would you do? The movie house was destroyed and going back there was not an option. What would happen next? The people that owned that house we were in asked my uncle to join them in the house next door to play some cards to pass the time. My uncle politely refused. I would think he had his mind at the time on many things other than a card game. Just about half an hour later, there was a big explosion that shook the house we were in. The plaster and the dust were all over the air. By the time we recovered, we realized that a rocket hit the house next door. There was a lot of screaming and crying and of course the confusion reigned over. There were a lot of dead and injured people next door. Some who survived climbed over the well and came to our side, dazed and confused. My uncle was real lucky! My brother and I dashed to the door immediately. It was a solid folding steel door and it was locked from the inside and we needed the key to unlock it. We all pushed towards the door to try to leave the house. I was afraid that the house we were in would be the next target. I started yelling for the key while the owner said she forgot where she placed it!

Then her husband said he had it and shouldered his way to the door and unlock it. I told him not to open right away. We needed to peek outside first to see if it was safe to do so. Then again my brother went out first, because he was a young kid, hopefully the combatants would recognize that and the civilians would follow. We ran across the street by a group of two or three persons at a time. My uncle had my grand mother on his back; I had my grandfather on mine. Kinh was in front of us. I remembered seeing an old man lying across the street, propped himself up with one of his arm, his head was all bloody. He was moaning about something. I guessed he was too weak to scream. After I got to the other side of the street I looked back to the houses we just left. There was indeed a hole on the roof of the house next door, still smoking. I don't recall how many more neighborhoods we ran by or how many streets we crossed. We tried to run as far away as we could from that trouble zone. Finally, we ended up in the back alley of another neighborhood. By this time as a group, we were really scattered but our family still managed to stay together. A lady in her fifties that owned one of the houses stood in her back door and waved us into her house, God bless her heart! They were also some kind of merchant that I don't recall anymore. After she closed the door, we had about two to three families in her house. We all stayed downstairs and slept on the floor wherever we can find a space. The owner and her family lived upstairs.

Our family occupied the part of the floor that was closest to the steel door. The next morning, they came down and open the door and it turned out that their house was right at the market place. It was customary for a lot of families to live upstairs of their stores. Beyond the sidewalk in front of their house, was the gathering place of the market place. There were a lot of little stalls (*sạp*) that sold anything you need, from clothes to foodstuff. All that time, we did not know how to thank the owner of the house. Of course, we all understood that we would use their resources only when absolutely necessary. That means no showers. The food I believed my family had some cash but we would just spend as little as we could, even on food, therefore all the meals were really meager. So it seemed like we were in the area of town controlled by the government troupes. But you never knew! At least we did not have to run no more at the time and that would give us a chance to think about the next step.

So we settled there. Due to the location where there were people bustling most of the time in the daytime. We learnt to deal with the situation over time. I did not dare to venture too far away from the house in the daytime because there were a few times when the government announced curfew in broad daylight due to some emergency situations. We got inside the house, closed and locked the door. When the steel retractable door is closed, I could not see the outside. At night when there were soldiers or the paramilitary walked by, I could see a little bit of their shadow through the crack underneath the door. And every time I heard them yelling or screaming at night, my heart seemed to jump out of my mouth. I laid there worried about any firefight in the area would be the end of us. This is the end of the road; there were no more places that we can go to.

Eventually, the fighting died down, we were allowed to go back momentarily to the movie house to get the things that we need but we were not allowed to stay there, so at least we could have some clothes to change. But we still got no showers. Have any of you tried not to shower for a month? The first thing I experienced was there was some pattern developed on my skin. I think it was the dust and your perspiration that settled on your skin so you started to look like a grey patterned gecko. Eventually, the situation got better, I ventured out in the daytime to look for some friends of mine. Luu Thai was one of my closest friends. His house is facing the municipal bus stop where all the buses would arrive and depart from there to and from other towns such as Vinh Long and Saigon. His Mom died when he was young, he lived with his father and his stepmother both of whom were really nice to me every time I hang out at his place. He also had a younger sister, perhaps ten years old. His family was in the grain business. They carried all kinds of grain, red, green and black beans, rice and etc.. So at least, one would not have to worry about being hungry there. And besides, those sacks of grains could make good shelters just in case. After we first re-connected, knowing our situation, he said his family wanted to help. And of course, I told them the first thing we needed, a shower for everyone. I went back to the place we stayed and told my family.

And of course I was treated like a hero! Mind you that this is a cold shower! Normally, we would boil some water and mixed it with some cold water for the shower, but at a time like that, that was out of the question. A simple and typical bathroom, a big steel vat filled with water and an empty plastic can that floats on water was all that you need. And of course a piece of Savon Vietnam with the profile of a woman's face embossed on it. American soap like Dial or Camay would wash and smell better but that would be too luxurious. The first splash of water after a month of deprivation is something worth taking time to enjoy. Gosh! The water was so cold, but my body got used to it real quick after a few more splashes. Then came the wonderful soap that lathered all over my body, watching all the flowery patterns disappearing from my skin were such a delight. A sense of freshness and a new me came over me. I put on my pajamas and walked out the bathroom hungry. I don't actually recall how it was in Saigon any more but down there in that small town. A lot of people walked around town in the daytime comfortably in their pajamas. It was such a customary things that you would not even think twice about doing it because everybody else were doing it. The next thing Luu Thai gave me was a pack of Salem since I smoked at the time. He told me not to tell anybody else since we had other friends that came by too. Wow! The first puff was so wonderful, the nicotine rush from a Salem cigarette sent me to where a cupful of Nyquil would do for you. My arms and body felt so relaxed, I just let it go, let it go...Nah! I am not going back to that habit, don't worry...

Eventually, his parent invited us to come and stay in their house as they made a makeshift area for our family in their vast warehouse, which is in the back of the first floor. We moved there because it would be a much better place and we felt like we were in the way of the other family for so long. After we moved to Luu Thai's house not very long, about a few days, we got re-connected with my father in Saigon. He chartered a Cessna to come down there and picked us up. I left Vinh Binh with mixed emotions. We fed up of living in other people's house and we saw no way of reconstructing the movie house, we just had to move on. When we settled down back in Saigon, I had time to think about it and realized that my whole childhood world is gone. For the first few years, I often reflected about the people, the movie house, my friends, the various places that we used to have such a good times. There was no longer any excuse to go back there any more!

Farewell Tra Vinh, farewell my childhood and farewell my field of dreams!

**Lawrence Tân JJR 69 - 2003**