

**Short Story by Nguyễn Văn Sâm**  
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**Story of the Old Days**

In 1963, the day after the government was overthrown, Saigon was a city bloated with the possibilities of the extreme application of the democratic theory. Despite his all-purpose latent strength and all the freedom, the huge Saigonese was still embarrassed and did not know how to react. The city was exploding with the stored energy of a citizenry eager and anxious to do something. There were willing and skillful people with political tendencies and theories. On one side, many young, politically clean generals were about to stage again, a coup d' e-tat to bring back the stability of the country. On the other side, a lot of bright, civilian politicians, often in and out of prison, were meeting to find new tactics to save and rebuild the country by replacing the old ones that had been studied and promulgated. Saigon abounded in student leaders who could call upon a gathering of more than ten thousand young faces to occupy the streets all day long. The city was abundant in religious leaders who, by only one appealing sentence, could cause a stir in the daily activities of the capital for the whole week. Saigon was overflowing with news about the arrests and vengeful actions taking place in the dark. As a result of all the instability and brutality taking place within the city, many political positions and promotions were up for grabs. This was very unlike the usual system of laws and customs that had been in existence for a long time. The time of law and order was over for a city which needed that development impetus in this period of war. The quietness of the past was nowhere to be seen, The Saigonese were submerged under the thoughts and hardships of a future of scarce food, hoarding, and the continuous sound of the martial music which was characteristic of reorganization after a coup d' e-tat and the announcement of a new treaty and a new charter.

Leaving the city, I felt greatly relieved. I was sitting in the open trunk of the Minh Chanh Shuttle watching people riding to and fro. Everyone, if not manifesting the traits of tiredness for the times is bearing the marks of the months and years of anxiety. How did you have the heart to quit the beloved city without regret? I had already been faithful to Miss Saigon for over twenty years. Miss Saigon had degenerated by herself; I was not unfaithful. I did not let her down. At the end of World War II, in the storm of the Allies' lethal weapons, I just followed my parents to shelter in the country for a short time. Then, we came back together to Saigon. I spent my tender years there until, with timid steps, I officially entered upon my life course as an adult. I once stood watching the ant-like line of people who attended the biggest funeral of the century in my country. The funeral was of the pupil Tran Van On, the first voice shot down while protesting the French Colonization of Vietnam. I also followed in the footsteps of the long line of quiet people who were saying good-bye to the only writer of the Tu Luc Literary Club who escaped to South Vietnam. He took his own life in protest of the Government's decision to bring him to trial. I was looking for a more peaceful city in which to hide myself from the oppressive oscillations of the government and the riots which might happen at any time in my idolized city. The philosophy professor in charge of ethics at the university where I had studied was, at this time, responsible for the National Middle School Branch of the public schools. At the request of one of my bosom friends, who was taking part in a so - called "government of the poor people", the professor had me appointed part-time teacher at a school named after a blind writer who was considered as the symbol of uprightness in the beloved small southern part of Vietnam. I did not have a clear image of the school I would be joining. Everything was but dim impressions based on data which was lacking foundation. It seemed impossible that the school I would now teach in could be older

than the one that I attended ten years ago. My old school bore the name of a famous multi-language writer at the end of the last century. It seemed impossible that this school was situated in a spacious area like my old school. It was impossible that it had a style of education like my old school. That made me proud of my young days. It was impossible that...so many impossibilities appeared in my mind.

Those thoughts changed when I arrived at the front door of the school where I would work. The large iron gate appeared august and majestic.

Its two big, cement and brick pillars were imposing. The office building of the registrar looked like a very beautiful small villa. The school was large, the grounds themselves bigger than the total surface of most schools in Saigon. The school had the ancient U-shaped structure. I could see the banister of the row of lateral buildings; its iron bars bent or carved in special designs after the French model used at the beginning of the century. The school lay totally in the heart of a partially crowded yet peaceful sylvan setting. The road, lined with tamarind trees was so lush and beautiful that it made for a very romantic scene. The trees had survived for seventy to eighty years. Their big trunks, luxuriant branches, and falling leaves gave the road its romantic air in my memory of that first sight. I have kept that impression with me to this day even though my road in life already has reached the last stages. The Ngo Quyen Road on the left side of the school stretched out with long rows of luxury houses; many of them hidden behind walls and closed gates made their presence known only by the sweet fragrance of the Ixora and the flowers of the Red Jasmine. The street behind the school was part of the busy market district where, lately, one of my old teachers and I usually sat in front of a bowls of meat balls and glasses of medicinal alcohol, viewing the evenings activities of the district and discussing our grandiose ideas on how to solve all of Vietnam's social problems.

The image of the school, pictured in my imagination, was so different from the actuality that it changed the emotions of this teacher who was just beginning his career. I was amused when getting acquainted with the school boys who wore blue pants and white shirts with the blue letters sewn on the cotton badges. Through them I had a vision of my young self a few years ago and now felt proud to be the adult and the teacher. But, I was new to teaching and was uncertain about the many strange paths that lay ahead of me. The friendly, somewhat shy, respectful nods of the school boys made me feel warm in my heart. I went towards the school office, located in the row of buildings on the left side of the gate, backed on the Ngo Quyen Road. I noticed a short, sturdy, middle-aged man who I later discovered was the general supervisor and who had the same name as mine. He was scolding two naughty school boys and telling them to stand aside. He was waiting to show me the principal's office. That made me feel welcome, so I felt warmer. At that minute I knew that Saigon was really behind me. From that time I was an inseparable part of this school, located in an area famous for its pink, sweet plums. I felt that my life would become deeply attached to this school if things worked out well.

The presentation, in person, before the principal was more amicable and smoother than I thought it would be. I recognized him, called him Teacher, and said that I had come from the school that he had once managed. He called himself "Teacher" and called me "Son". That so familiar sound "Son" made me feel moved although I was an adult and needed to refrain from that feeling, which was not reasonable for my gender. The principal summarized the activities of his school. He advised me that I should finish my last year at the university and obtain my diploma so I would be qualified as a middle school teacher. He talked about my responsibilities as a teacher here and my duty to myself as a student when I went back to

Saigon. His warm, modest, cordial voice was full of intimacy and kindness. I felt protected at my first job through the sincere advice of my former teacher and now, new boss. The minutes spent in this meeting, when I accepted this, my first job, were like the intimate minutes between a teacher and his student! With the guidance of the principal I went towards the registrar's office to arrange for a schedule of my classes. From this moment on, I really became a teacher and a member of the school staff. It was the first day of the year 1964.

Dat seemed embarrassed when I called him up to recite his lesson. The class became tumultuous while he squeezed himself out through the narrow space between the table and the bench. His attitude and posture were not right for a seventh grader. He had the big and powerfully built frame of an adult. He was a whole head taller than I and intentionally approached next to me to show the difference of appearance between the teacher and the pupil. I stepped back and stepped up on the platform and he dared not follow me. Now - his head tilted back and his arms crossed - he threw out his chest and took a deep breath to flatten his belly in order to look like the husky giant in Aladdin's Lamp. The class shook with laughter and there was one pupil who took the opportunity to punch resoundingly at his nearest classmate. The class became really disorderly and I was confused as to what to do. As a student teacher, I was not controlling the class so trouble might happen to me indeed. I assumed control by beating the ruler noisily on the teacher's table and said that from now on Dat could do what he liked but anyone who laughed would be punished. On hearing that the class fell silent although they did not know the level of punishment. My poor Dat, though big, had just recently been passed by the elementary school. His knowledge level was too low for the difficult question I gave him; a question that even my smartest pupil, the son of the writer who specializing in describing the country's activities - Mr. Tr. G.- who had the opportunity to read a lot of books, could not answer. My answer as to why Mr. Van Tien's image seemed so perfect was because the author himself was so unsuccessful at everyday living was beyond not only Dat's comprehension but that of the other students as well. So, Dat received the whole fury of an inexperienced instructor who was unable to differentiate between teaching and his uncontrolled emotions. With a downcast look, Dat went back to his place having received a red double zero above a long line that looked like a rattan whip that cracked over his heart. The class was then absolutely quiet. I could hear a fly buzzing at the end of the room. I could even hear the sighs of my new, gentle, young pupils. Some furtive glances among the students shrank my heart. I explained the lesson but my soul felt like it went over the live coals of remorse. I heard my own voice to be so harsh, so hateful and so undeserving, like a failure as a teacher.

You ask me if I apologized to Dat for that or if I explained to him in order to make him understand? One wrong led to another, my young friend. I considered it as if nothing had happened for the reason that I was the teacher. However, I gave him extra attention to help him in his learning and spoke gently to him without touching on my unreasoning anger at his inability to answer my question. For the past forty years I have been able to picture his smiling but painful look as well as his big, hard biceps when I rapped lightly on his shoulder because of his unsatisfactory answer in class. This so likeable fellow had to give up his studies while he was half-way through because he turned eighteen years old and had to sign up for the war draft. He had no time to take the exam for the first level of high school. Through his friends, I was informed that he enlisted into the local militia at his commune so he would be near his family. My busy life, swirling in the whirlwind of time, made me forget him so completely that I never knew what happened to him. Modern warfare engulfs totally so many young lives that I did not know if this special student could escape the teeth and

claws of this demon war.

Do you still want to hear more? All the stories I have to tell are certainly sad! Don't you know, the happy stories totally escape from my mind while the sad stories remain. At that time I was living in temporary lodging near the school. The three-story house on Ngo Quyen street was owned by the fifty years old widow of a former teacher. It was a rich house that was once a pawn shop before the teacher died. Afterwards, his widow, who wanted company in the house, rented lodgings to students. She helped me get the larger food rations due to a teacher rather than the smaller rations that the students got. After a while, I got to know the students lodging in the house and found that they were poorly fed. I decided it would be better to eat with them and share my rations. As a result, I was often hungry and had to go out to the market to eat because the students ate all the rations quickly and left an empty tray. Due to the fact that I was eating meals with the students I became more intimately acquainted with the older students. There were only a few years difference in the ages between the students and this new teacher. The students knew everything happening in the region around the school: they were *third after the demons and the fiends*, they knew which houses had the youngest and most beautiful girls, they knew where the widow put the food offering for the Buddha, and they also knew where she kept the food that she was saving. One evening we heard the distant sound of the bugles coming from the supervisor's funeral taking place at the house of Dep, his widow. With my eyes I asked my pupil Thuong "Who has died?", and the pupil replied with a sigh, "The teacher Th. The teacher was shot by a sniper while on his way back to school." The pupil continued to tell me that the teacher had been fighting in the war for about a year when he received a special order to return to the school to teach. Just after he was released from his military responsibilities, he was shot. The driver of the jeep was not even aware of the event. He saw his officer's head nod to the side and thought that he was sleeping. The teachers poor wife was still young and his daughter was only about two years old. I shuddered because for two days I had had, in my pocket, a drafting notice signed by the Director of the Military Drafting Department, Sub-General Bui. I did not yet know how to cope with it. The paper seemed to grow fingers with long nails that kept scratching my thigh as a reminder. That night and for several days following the sad sound of the bugle, I was continually obsessed by the death of the teacher Th.. I did not go to his funeral but my heart was pained for him and for my peers. Maybe, when the teacher received his special order, he built many dreams in his mind and planned many projects to be realized in the future. Who, in this world, will not be dead? But, it was the first time that I had heard in detail about the death of an unfortunate colleague. The sound of the bugle as well as the drafting notice gave me a lot of nightmares. To have pity on the others or to think about what might happen to me, I had no time for analyzing my feelings. I only knew that I was afraid of this game of war from the moment I heard the story of what happened at the twenty-fifth hour for Mr. Th.

Do you want to hear more? O.K. I had a pupil with whom I used to discuss literature and poetry. He was only in the seventh grade. He knew, by heart, more poems and prose than I would have believed. Many times, his ideas about the emotional intentions of literature and poetry were from the extreme to the extremely strange. One day, the pupil, Thien, handed me a booklet of poems titled "From That Time" which had been printed in the Liberation Region - also called the "peas and rice" region - of Ben Tre Province in Southern Vietnam. The booklet was beautifully printed in small format on good white paper instead of the usual cheaper gray paper. I took it with trembling hand. This was not a laughing matter. It was, indeed, a serious matter. I did not know if Thien was on the Government side or the Communist side, which left me in an uncertain situation. Advising the boy to keep or throw

away the booklet was difficult for me because I did not know how he would react. I asked where he had gotten the booklet and he replied that it was his elder brother's. He continued, "My brother is one year older than me and he failed the first class in middle school and is no longer in school. Now he follows the Communist side." In the "peas and rice" region at the age of fourteen or fifteen, one has to follow the Communist side or leave the region and go to the town. "He decided to stay because we still have an old mother and two young sisters. Sometimes, at night, he returns to visit and help Mother by chopping wood, embanking a ditch, digging a pond or threshing the grain." I told Thien not to carry that booklet in his hand for everybody to see because it was dangerous for him. Thien sighed, closed the booklet and put it into his pocket. From that moment, he no longer discussed poetry with me. I forgot about the "From That Time" booklet and remembered only the story about the two brothers. There will come a time when the two brothers shoot at each other because one failed and the other passed the sixth grade entrance exam in the school where I taught. I wished my school had enough room to accept all the students who took the exam. I wished my country had no "peas and rice" region.

You ask what happened afterwards? Thien met me in Saigon years later when he was attending the War and Politics College. With a joyful tone, Thien recalled that the students who had lodged with us were now almost grown up and were successful in life. "When we students met, we always recalled you, our teacher, and our teacher's teacher." I interrupted him and said, "I am proud of all the students' success even though our country is still poor and our native land is sunk in the disaster of war. The school has fulfilled its teaching duties and you pupils were hard workers and deserved your success." Don't you know, there is no greater loss for the students than going to school and not believing in what the teachers are saying. There is nothing that harms the children more than the contrasting knowledge between what the school teaches and what the society teaches. You can criticize my generation for many things but you cannot depreciate the student - teacher relationship and the education that the students received at that time.

I said farewell to the lodging house to avoid any deeper embarrassing situations and moved to the very small house in the back of the school and lived with my old teacher whom the students often called the teacher's teacher. As I have told you, very often in the evening, I, and a friend who was a former boxer, escorted our old teacher to the back of the market where we sipped medicinal wine to forget life and to discuss big problems. I really knew my colleagues by that time; Mr. Le, teacher of math and physics and a chess expert; Mr. Quach, chess king; the cheerful supervisor, Lam; Mr. Dai, teacher of history and geography and my school mate who was later promoted to Principal; the philosophical Mr. "Beard" Sang, who proclaimed that he was not the marrying kind; the ambitious Mr. Pham Ba, teacher of French; Misters Tam and Triet, both of whom were eagerly espousing the need for a Tien Giang University. Mr. Nghia Trung, teacher of biology, who was shifting into Law...and so many others that I cannot count them, such as Misters Mai, Thu, Kien, Long, Nhon, The V... All of them were nice towards their friends and whole-heartedly served their students, always wishing for their students to be successful and bring glory to our school. Later, in the busy stream of life, whether I had the opportunity to meet them or not, I always had a good image of these devoted men, these men who, with all their hearts and very little pay, were educating the future generation. Now they are scattered to all parts of the world, one dead, one sick, one lost, but, I am certain that, in those days, they more than fulfilled their duties and never asked for their students' gratitude.

Let me tell you of an idea in a poem that has just appeared in my aged mind. It is not my

own composition but a paraphrase from a lovely and playful poem by Kishu, a famous Japanese, Zen- Buddhist Poet:

Forty years here and there  
back in front of the old school,  
I never took a step.

Truthfully, with heartfelt fervor, people cherish their country, their native village or a local place somewhere. When we come back to the memory filled place it is as though we had never left it. That interval of time when I was not present is totally erased from my mind and seems never to have existed. Like awakening from a dream, I find myself returning to the old days of standing in front of the crowd of students who are attentively listening to their teachers explanations. Those same students whose minds, but a few minutes ago, were full of anxieties about poverty, military training, heart breaking love, and the pressures of the “peas and rice” districts where they live. I am ready to open widely my inner-most feelings to fit the new situation but the Mise-en scene has changed. The physical changes of the school, the indifference of the students who don’t know who I am, the inquiring look of the manager when I ask permission to go around the school...are all normal things, not worth telling. The thing I cannot stand seeing is how the new school staff, who live on school property in homes provided by the school, are vying with one another in enlarging their homesteads, thus occupying more and more of the schools land, contentedly tearing every piece of flesh and bone from the school. The house of the old supervisor no longer exists and many of the lots around the school have been sold and resold through many hands. You see? The iron fence encircling the school, the symbol of protection for the students from the chaotic society around them was gone. The new owners vie with one another in dumping their rubbish and fouling the back of their dwellings, pretending not to know that the backs of their homes face the school classrooms. I am most heart-sick over the decadent activities going on back there. All these activities involve men behaving too intimately with the women. It is an extreme nonsense when the students, while their teachers are explaining the lessons, can just look out the class windows and watch the billing and cooing scenes. The wise man the school was named for had this marvelous phrase, “It is better to be blind to preserve morality.” The morality here is responsibility. Vicissitudes come to every small part of the school because teachers do not have the same sense of responsibility as in the past. There are dozens of notices glued to the board reminding parents to contribute money to the school. How can the students believe what the teachers say?

Okay, stop here. Telling this old story is enough for you to hear. Complaining is a waste of words. Talking anymore only makes my eyes moist with tears. We, the elders, do not like such things because the youngsters may laugh at us. Returning after a long time is always a time of confusion for us elders. It is still heart-breaking to watch the youngsters wondering who we are. What am I talking about anyway? O.K., stop here! YOU stay here and observe all these changes. Some day other former teachers or students may, like me today, come back here and tell miscellaneous stories to you. Do try to listen patiently to their reminiscences with your heart open.

The tamarind tree rustles its branches when the sitter at its foot stands up and falters away. His appearance shows that he is still healthy but why are his steps so unsteady? The yellow tamarind leaves seem to be moved as they swirl in the air, falling one by one on his white head, seeming to say good-bye to the old teacher who has lost his native land as well as his beloved past.

*(Port Arthur, Texas, 12-31-1999)*

Translated from the Vietnamese version by the author.