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The Sympathizer

Written by Viet Thanh Nguyen

Published by Corsair

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THE SYMPATHIZER

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CORSAIR

First published in the United States of America in 2015 by Atlantic Monthly Press,
an imprint of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.
First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Corsair
This edition published in 2016

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4721-5136-0 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-4721-5138-4 (eBook)

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd., Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Corsair
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

For Lan and Ellison

Let us not become gloomy as soon as we hear the word 'torture':
in this particular case there is plenty to offset and mitigate that
word – even something to laugh at.
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

CHAPTER 1

I AM A SPY, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds. I am not some misunderstood mutant from a comic book or a horror movie, although some have treated me as such. I am simply able to see any issue from both sides. Sometimes I flatter myself that this is a talent, and although it is admittedly one of a minor nature, it is perhaps also the sole talent I possess. At other times, when I reflect on how I cannot help but observe the world in such a fashion, I wonder if what I have should even be called talent. After all, a talent is something you use, not something that uses you. The talent you cannot *not* use, the talent that possesses you—that is a hazard, I must confess. But in the month when this confession begins, my way of seeing the world still seemed more of a virtue than a danger, which is how some dangers first appear.

The month in question was April, the cruelest month. It was the month in which a war that had run on for a very long time would lose its limbs, as is the way of wars. It was a month that meant everything to all the people in our small part of the world and nothing to most people in the rest of the world. It was a month that was both an end of a war and the beginning of . . . well, "peace" is not the right word, is it, my dear Commandant? It was a month when I awaited the end behind the walls of a villa where I had lived for the previous five years, the villa's walls glittering with broken brown glass and crowned with

rusted barbed wire. I had my own room at the villa, much like I have my own room in your camp, Commandant. Of course, the proper term for my room is an "isolation cell," and instead of a housekeeper who comes to clean every day, you have provided me with a baby-faced guard who does not clean at all. But I am not complaining. Privacy, not cleanliness, is my only prerequisite for writing this confession.

While I had sufficient privacy in the General's villa at night, I had little during the day. I was the only one of the General's officers to live in his home, the sole bachelor on his staff and his most reliable aide. In the mornings, before I chauffeured him the short distance to his office, we would breakfast together, parsing dispatches at one end of the teak dining table while his wife oversaw a well-disciplined quartet of children at the other, ages eighteen, sixteen, fourteen, and twelve, with one seat empty for the daughter studying in America. Not everyone may have feared the end, but the General sensibly did. A thin man of excellent posture, he was a veteran campaigner whose many medals had been, in his case, genuinely earned. Although he possessed but nine fingers and eight toes, having lost three digits to bullets and shrapnel, only his family and confidants knew about the condition of his left foot. His ambitions had hardly ever been thwarted, except in his desire to procure an excellent bottle of Bourgogne and to drink it with companions who knew better than to put ice cubes in their wine. He was an epicurean and a Christian, in that order, a man of faith who believed in gastronomy and God; his wife and his children; and the French and the Americans. In his view, they offered us far better tutelage than those other foreign Svengalis who had hypnotized our northern brethren and some of our southern ones: Karl Marx, V. I. Lenin, and Chairman Mao. Not that he ever read any of those sages! That was my job as his aide-de-camp and junior officer of intelligence, to provide him with cribbed notes on, say, *The Communist Manifesto* or Mao's *Little Red Book*. It was up to him to find occasions to demonstrate his knowledge of the enemy's thinking, his favorite being Lenin's question, plagiarized whenever the need arose: Gentlemen, he would say, rapping the relevant table with adamantine knuckles, *what is to be done?* To tell

the General that Nikolay Chernyshevsky actually came up with the question in his novel of the same title seemed irrelevant. How many remember Chernyshevsky now? It was Lenin who counted, the man of action who took the question and made it his own.

In this gloomiest of Aprils, faced with this question of what should be done, the general who always found something to do could no longer do so. A man who had faith in the *mission civilisatrice* and the American Way was at last bitten by the bug of disbelief. Suddenly insomniac, he took to wandering his villa with the greenish pallor of a malarial patient. Ever since our northern front had collapsed a few weeks before in March, he would materialize at my office door or at my room in the villa to hand off a snatch of news, always gloomy. Can you believe it? he would demand, to which I said one of two things: No, sir! or Unbelievable! We could not believe that the pleasant, scenic coffee town of Ban Me Thuot, my Highlands hometown, had been sacked in early March. We could not believe that our president, Thieu, whose name begged to be spit out of the mouth, had inexplicably ordered our forces defending the Highlands to retreat. We could not believe that Da Nang and Nha Trang had fallen, or that our troops had shot civilians in the back as they all fought madly to escape on barges and boats, the death toll running to the thousands. In the secret privacy of my office, I dutifully snapped pictures of these reports, which would please Man, my handler. While they pleased me, too, as signs of the regime's inevitable erosion, I could not help but feel moved by the plight of these poor people. Perhaps it was not correct, politically speaking, for me to feel sympathy for them, but my mother would have been one of them if she were alive. She was a poor person, I was her poor child, and no one asks poor people if they want war. Nor had anyone asked these poor people if they wanted to die of thirst and exposure on the coastal sea, or if they wanted to be robbed and raped by their own soldiers. If those thousands still lived, they would not have believed how they had died, just as we could not believe that the Americans—our friends, our benefactors, our protectors—had spurned our request to send more money. And what would we have done with that money? Buy the

ammunition, gas, and spare parts for the weapons, planes, and tanks the same Americans had bestowed on us for free. Having given us the needles, they now perversely no longer supplied the dope. (Nothing, the General muttered, is ever so expensive as what is offered for free.)

At the end of our discussions and meals, I lit the General's cigarette and he stared into space, forgetting to smoke the Lucky Strike as it slowly consumed itself in his fingers. In the middle of April, when the ash stung him awake from his reverie and he uttered a word he should not have, Madame silenced the tittering children and said, If you wait much longer, we won't be able to get out. You should ask Claude for a plane now. The General pretended not to hear Madame. She had a mind like an abacus, the spine of a drill instructor, and the body of a virgin even after five children. All of this was wrapped up in one of those exteriors that inspired our Beaux Arts–trained painters to use the most pastel of watercolors and the fuzziest of brushstrokes. She was, in short, the ideal Vietnamese woman. For this good fortune, the General was eternally grateful and terrified. Kneading the tip of his scorched finger, he looked at me and said, I think it's time to ask Claude for a plane. Only when he resumed studying his damaged finger did I glance at Madame, who merely raised an eyebrow. Good idea, sir, I said.

Claude was our most trusted American friend, our relationship so intimate he once confided in me to being one-sixteenth Negro. Ah, I had said, equally smashed on Tennessee bourbon, that explains why your hair is black, and why you tan well, and why you can dance the cha-cha like one of us. Beethoven, he said, was likewise of hexadecimal descent. Then, I said, that explains why you can carry the tune of "Happy Birthday" like no one's business. We had known each other for more than two decades, ever since he had spotted me on a refugee barge in '54 and recognized my talents. I was a precocious nine-year-old who had already learned a decent amount of English, taught to me by a pioneering American missionary. Claude supposedly worked in refugee relief. Now his desk was in the American embassy, his assignment ostensibly to promote the development of tourism in our war-stricken country. This, as you might imagine, required every drop he

could squeeze from a handkerchief soaked with the sweat of the can-do American spirit. In reality, Claude was a CIA man whose time in this country dated back to the days when the French still ruled an empire. In those days, when the CIA was the OSS, Ho Chi Minh looked to them for help in fighting the French. He even quoted America's Founding Fathers in his declaration of our country's independence. Uncle Ho's enemies say he spoke out of both sides of his mouth at the same time, but Claude believed he saw both sides at once. I rang Claude from my office, down the hall from the General's study, and informed him in English that the General had lost all hope. Claude's Vietnamese was bad and his French worse, but his English was excellent. I point this out only because the same thing could not be said of all his countrymen.

It's over, I said, and when I said it to Claude it finally seemed real. I thought Claude might protest and argue that American bombers might yet fill our skies, or that American air cavalry might soon ride on gunships to our rescue, but Claude did not disappoint. I'll see what I can arrange, he said, a murmur of voices audible in the background. I imagined the embassy in disarray, teletypes overheating, urgent cables crisscrossing between Saigon and Washington, the staff working without respite, and the funk of defeat so pungent it overwhelmed the air conditioners. Amid short tempers, Claude stayed cool, having lived here so long he barely perspired in the tropical humidity. He could sneak up on you in the dark, but he could never be invisible in our country. Although an intellectual, he was of a peculiarly American breed, the muscular kind who rowed crew and who flexed substantial biceps. Whereas our scholarly types tended to be pale, myopic, and stunted, Claude was six-two, had perfect vision, and kept himself in shape by performing two hundred push-ups each morning, his Nung houseboy squatting on his back. During his free time, he read, and whenever he visited the villa, a book was tucked under his arm. When he arrived a few days later, Richard Hedd's *Asian Communism and the Oriental Mode of Destruction* was the paperback he carried.

The book was for me, while the General received a bottle of Jack Daniel's—a gift I would have preferred if given the choice. Nevertheless,

I took care to peruse the book's cover, crowded with blurbs so breathless they might have been lifted from the transcript of a teenage girls' fan club, except that the excited giggling came from a pair of secretaries of defense, a senator who had visited our country for two weeks to find facts, and a renowned television anchor who modeled his enunciation on Moses, as played by Charlton Heston. The reason for their excitement was found in the significant type of the subtitle, *On Understanding and Defeating the Marxist Threat to Asia*. When Claude said everyone was reading this how-to manual, I said I would read it as well. The General, who had cracked open the bottle, was in no mood to discuss books or chitchat, not with eighteen enemy divisions encircling the capital. He wanted to discuss the plane, and Claude, rolling his glass of whiskey between his palms, said the best he could do was a black flight, off the books, on a C-130. It could hold ninety-two paratroopers and their gear, as the General well knew, having served in the Airborne before being called on by the president himself to lead the National Police. The problem, as he explained to Claude, was that his extended family alone amounted to fifty-eight. While he did not like some of them, and in fact despised a few, Madame would never forgive him if he did not rescue all of her relations.

And my staff, Claude? The General spoke in his precise, formal English. What of them? Both the General and Claude glanced at me. I tried to look brave. I was not the senior officer on the staff, but as the aide-de-camp and the officer most fluent in American culture, I attended all the General's meetings with Americans. Some of my countrymen spoke English as well as I, although most had a tinge of an accent. But almost none could discuss, like I, baseball standings, the awfulness of Jane Fonda, or the merits of the Rolling Stones versus the Beatles. If an American closed his eyes to hear me speak, he would think I was one of his kind. Indeed, on the phone, I was easily mistaken for an American. On meeting in person, my interlocutor was invariably astonished at my appearance and would almost always inquire as to how I had learned to speak English so well. In this jackfruit republic that served as a franchise of the United

States, Americans expected me to be like those millions who spoke no English, pidgin English, or accented English. I resented their expectation. That was why I was always eager to demonstrate, in both spoken and written word, my mastery of their language. My vocabulary was broader, my grammar more precise than the average educated American. I could hit the high notes as well as the low, and thus had no difficulty in understanding Claude's characterization of the ambassador as a "putz," a "jerkoff" with "his head up his ass" who was in denial about the city's imminent fall. Officially, there's no evacuation, said Claude, because we're not pulling out any time soon.

The General, who hardly ever raised his voice, now did. Unofficially, you are abandoning us, he shouted. All day and night planes depart from the airport. Everyone who works with Americans wants an exit visa. They go to your embassy for these visas. You have evacuated your own women. You have evacuated babies and orphans. Why is it that the only people who do not know the Americans are pulling out are the Americans? Claude had the decency to look embarrassed as he explained how the city would erupt in riots if an evacuation was declared, and perhaps then turn against the Americans who remained. This had happened in Da Nang and Nha Trang, where the Americans had fled for their lives and left the residents to turn on one another. But despite this precedent, the atmosphere was strangely quiet in Saigon, most of the Saigonese citizenry behaving like people in a scuppered marriage, willing to cling gamely to each other and drown so long as nobody declared the adulterous truth. The truth, in this case, was that at least a million people were working or had worked for the Americans in one capacity or another, from shining their shoes to running the army designed by the Americans in their own image to performing fellatio on them for the price, in Peoria or Poughkeepsie, of a hamburger. A good portion of these people believed that if the communists won—which they refused to believe would happen—what awaited them was prison or a garrote, and, for the virgins, forced marriage with the barbarians. Why wouldn't they? These were the rumors the CIA was propagating.

So— the General began, only to have Claude interrupt him. You have one plane and you should consider yourself lucky, sir. The General was not one to beg. He finished his whiskey, as did Claude, then shook Claude's hand and bid him good-bye, never once letting his gaze fall away from Claude's own. Americans liked seeing people eye to eye, the General had once told me, especially as they screwed them from behind. This was not how Claude saw the situation. Other generals were only getting seats for their immediate families, Claude said to us in parting. Even God and Noah couldn't save everyone. Or wouldn't, anyway.

Could they not? What would my father say? He had been a Catholic priest, but I could not remember this poor man of the cloth ever sermonizing about Noah, although admittedly I went to Mass only to daydream. But regardless of what God or Noah could do, there was little doubt that every man on the General's staff, if given the chance, would rescue a hundred blood relatives as well as any paper ones who could afford the bribe. Vietnamese families were complicated, delicate affairs, and while sometimes I longed for one, being the only son of an ostracized mother, now was not one of those times.

Later that day, the president resigned. I had expected the president to abandon the country weeks ago in the manner befitting a dictator, and I spared him barely a thought as I worked on the list of evacuees. The General was fastidious and detail-oriented, habituated to making quick, hard decisions, but this was one task that he deferred to me. He was preoccupied with the matters of his office: reading the morning's interrogation reports, attending meetings at the Joint General Staff compound, phoning his confidants as they discussed how to hold the city and yet be ready to abandon it at the same time, a maneuver as tricky as playing musical chairs to the tune of one's most beloved song. Music was on my mind, for as I worked on the list in the nocturnal hours, I listened to American Radio Service on a Sony in my room at the villa. The songs of the Temptations and Janis Joplin and Marvin

Gaye usually always made bad things bearable and good things wonderful, but not in times like these. Every stroke of my pen through a name felt like a death sentence. All of our names, from the lowest officer to the General, had been found on a list being crammed into its owner's mouth as we broke down her door three years ago. The warning I had sent to Man had not gotten to her in time. As the policemen wrestled her to the ground, I had no choice but to reach into this communist agent's mouth and pull from it that saliva-soaked list. Its papier-mâché existence proved that members of the Special Branch, accustomed to watching, were ourselves watched. Even had I a moment alone with her, I could not have risked my cover by telling her that I was on her side. I knew what fate awaited her. Everyone talked in the Special Branch's interrogation cells, and she would have told my secret despite herself. She was younger than me, but she was wise enough to know what awaited her, too. For just a moment I saw the truth in her eyes, and the truth was that she hated me for what she thought I was, the agent of an oppressive regime. Then, like me, she remembered the role she had to play. Please, sirs! she cried. I'm innocent! I swear!

Three years later, this communist agent was still in a cell. I kept her folder on my desk, a reminder of my failure to save her. It was my fault, too, Man had said. When the day of liberation comes, I'll be the one unlocking her cell. She was twenty-two when arrested, and in the folder was a picture of her at her capture, and another one of her from a few months ago, her eyes faded and her hair thinning. Our prison cells were time machines, the inmates aging much faster than they normally would. Looking at her faces, then and now, helped me with the task of selecting a few men for salvation and condemning many more, including some I liked. For several days I worked and reworked the list while the defenders of Xuan Loc were annihilated and, across our border, Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge. A few nights later, our ex-president secretly fled for Taiwan. Claude, who drove him to the airport, noticed how the president's inordinately heavy suitcases clanked with something metallic, presumably a hefty share of our nation's gold. He told me this the next morning, when he called to say that our plane

was leaving in two days. I finished my list early that evening, telling the General that I had decided to be democratic and representative, choosing the highest-ranking officer, the officer everyone thought the most honest, the one whose company I liked the most, and so on. He accepted my reasoning and its inevitable consequence, that a good number of the senior officers with the most knowledge and culpability in the work of the Special Branch would be left behind. I wound up with a colonel, a major, another captain, and two lieutenants. As for myself, I reserved one seat and three more for Bon, his wife, and his child, my godson.

When the General visited me that night to commiserate, bearing the now half-empty bottle of whiskey, I asked for the favor of taking Bon with us. Although not my real brother, he was one of my two blood brothers since our school days. Man was the other, the three of us having sworn undying loyalty to one another by slicing our adolescent palms and mingling our blood in ritual handshakes. In my wallet was a black-and-white photograph of Bon and his family. Bon had the appearance of a good-looking man beaten to a pulp, except that was simply his God-given face. Not even his paratrooper's beret and crisply ironed tiger stripe fatigues could distract from his parachute-like ears, his chin perpetually tucked into the folds of his neck, and his flat nose bent hard right, the same as his politics. As for his wife, Linh, a poet might compare her face to the harvest moon, insinuating not only its fullness and roundness but also how it was mottled and cratered, dappled with acne scars. How those two concocted a child as cute as Duc was a mystery, or perhaps simply as logical as how two negatives when multiplied together yield a positive. The General handed me the photo and said, It's the least I could do. He's Airborne. If our army was just Airborne men, we'd have won this war.

If . . . but there was no if, only the incontrovertible fact of the General sitting on the edge of my chair while I stood by the window, sipping my whiskey. In the courtyard, the General's orderly fed fistfuls of secrets into a fire blazing in a fifty-five-gallon drum, making the hot night hotter. The General got up and paced my small chamber, glass