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**Translations from the Vietnamese:
"A Missing Person", by Vuong Tam**

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A Missing Person

by Vuong Tam

*Translated from the Vietnamese by Quan Manh Ha and Wayne Karlin**

Vuong Tam was born in 1946, in Hanoi, Vietnam. He graduated from Hanoi University of Polytechnic and started to write fiction as a child. He is a member of the Vietnam Writers' Association and currently is a news reporter for the *New Hanoi*. He is a prolific writer and has published both poetry and fiction. "A Missing Person" is anthologized in *Chien tranh cung mang guong mat dan ba (Women's Faces in War)*, published by Literature Press, Hanoi, in 2014. The story emphasizes how stirring up memories of war experiences is a way of healing, especially when a veteran feels being part of a group, a substitute family that understands and accepts him.

The very moment Thi, a nurse, stepped into his room, Mr. Thuat began screaming: "My mug! Give it back to me! Give it back to me!" He was deep in the throes of another nightmare.

She grabbed his shoulders, to keep him from falling off the bed. The cook, Mrs. Hanh, rushed into the room to help her. Hanh patted his forehead with a wet washcloth. "Don't fret; your son will come to visit you soon. You need to eat and get healthy."

At her words, Mr. Thuat stopped struggling, blinked and looked around, as if he were just waking up.

"Is he coming now? Did he call me?"

"Sit up and eat this bowl of porridge. As soon as recover, you'll be able to see your son again. Now, please eat, get your strength back"

With each spoonful of porridge, Mr. Thuat sputtered out the story both women had heard several times before. He was a veteran of the Dien Bien Phu battle. He had fought bravely, been wounded, returned home. Now he had been abandoned in this nursing home.

Mr. Thuat had come to them early one morning when the staff found him sitting on a step near the front gate, trembling and looking bewildered. In his hands he clutched a white enamel mug decorated with the image of a soldier holding a flag and the words *Victory at Dien Bien Phu*. A security guard ran out and looked around, hoping to spot whoever had left this strange old man at their doorstep. Nobody. He helped Mr. Thuat stand up and walk back into the

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common area. When questioned, Mr. Thuat was unable to remember anything. The staff was able to get his basic information—name, date of birth and so on—from a folded document they found in his pocket.

“At midnight, my daughter-in-law took me to the market to buy a shirt,” he told the director. “I had to convince her to let me take this mug with me. It is my battle keepsake.”

Mr. Thuat looked about sixty, but his personal documents stated he was seventy. When questioned further, he just smiled weakly and rubbed the mug with his hands. After examining him, the house physician concluded that both Mr. Thuat’s physical and mental conditions were “fragile,” and recommended he be admitted to the facility.

So it was that Mr. Thuat became the fortieth lonely elderly resident in the town’s nursing and rehabilitation center. Gradually, people came to doubt the story about him being abandoned by his daughter-in-law.

After some time, Mr. Thuat recovered somewhat, but he was still plagued by hallucinations and loss of memory. At times he told coherent stories and seemed perfectly normal. But then he would grow depressed and always blurt out the same phrase: “My granddaughter Ty will visit me soon because she loves me.”

On some days he would just stare out at the street, as if waiting for a figure to appear. But there were few visitors to this remote nursing home. People would pay the required fees for their parents, but would never come to check on them, or see how they were faring. Only a few children fulfilled their filial duties and came to visit their parents; when they did, the gifts they left were distributed equally among the residents.

Whenever Mr. Thuat was given a cake or a candy, he would ask, “Did Ty send me these gifts?”

Whenever residents were called to the office to receive phone calls, he would jump up and follow them, anxiously inquiring whether anyone had asked for him. Their denials appeared to baffle him. “Ty must be very busy,” he would mutter. “She will definitely call me tomorrow.”

Every day for a year Mr. Thuat awaited news from Ty. He would brandish the mug and tell people, “Ty would pour water into this mug for me. And when the drink was hot, she would blow on it to cool it down before she gave it to me.”

Mrs. Hanh would fill the mug for him, “Here. Ty brought you some water.”

“Really? It tastes good. She must be busy with school; that’s why she left right away,” he mumbled. His eyes brightened. He walked outside and just as suddenly returned. “Didn’t she send me any greeting?”

“Well, she said hello to you, but you were sleeping,” Mrs. Hanh said.

“That’s right. I completely forgot. Thank you.” Mr. Thuat smiled.

He marched to the yard and then back to his room, making everybody laugh as he sang old army songs: “Over the top of the trench we charge; let’s advance to Him Lam hill ...”

Often, though, he would forget the lyrics, mutter vague, meaningless phrases and laugh to himself, alone in his room.

It was the custom every night for the elderly residents to gather in the common room to watch TV. It was the happiest time of the day for them. One evening, as he was wont to do, Mr. Thuat fell asleep five minutes after the TV came on. When the staff came to take him back to his room, he woke suddenly and insisted he hadn’t been asleep, only thinking. Everybody laughed, embarrassing him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, listen; I just had a dream about Ty visiting me. I am so happy. She’s quite grown up now.”

As he was explaining passionately, one of the other residents tapped him on the shoulder. “Listen, Thuat,” he said, “did you hear the message they just announced on TV?”

A caption of words Mr. Thuat couldn’t figure out was streaming across the bottom of the screen. Suddenly a voice intoned: “Looking for comrades. Comrade Nguyen Van Thuat was a company commander at Dien Bien Phu. If anyone knows where he is now, please call Mr. Hai at this number 827. 6451. The Veterans Connection Association.”

“What,” Mr. Thuat shouted. “What?” He raised his voice. “Did anyone get that phone number? Hai was my comrade.”

But no one had paid attention. It was not that they had ever received any messages themselves through the television. The elderly men clucked their tongues with regret. Mr. Thuat had felt a momentary flash of happiness, but it quickly faded. He sat down and began weeping like a child. Hearing him, Toan, one of the security guards, quickly came into the room and helped him stand up. Everybody began talking at once, telling Toan about the message announced on TV. Toan took the old man back to his room. “Don’t worry,” he told him. “I’ll call the TV station and get the phone number for you.”

Mr. Thuat lay in bed, clutching his head, unsure why scenes from a war over half a century gone were reappearing in front of his eyes. He closed them tightly, seeing in his mind a night he and his comrades had had to make their way across treacherous ravines and mountain passes in order to deploy into their attack positions in the trenches around the forts. Back then he had lugged two heavy ammo boxes and a rucksack filled with medical supplies and dried food rations for all the other soldiers in his unit. He remembered wiping the sweat off his forehead, and turning his head to tell the file of soldiers behind him to try to walk faster when, at that moment, they first began to hear the distant sounds of gunfire. He remembered how those young

soldiers had whispered encouragement to each other as they slipped and slid over those jungled mountains, gripping each other's hands and pulling each other up the steep slopes, the entire regiment eager to close with the enemy.

He had been twenty years old.

He had enlisted at sixteen, tall and well-built enough to pass for eighteen.

A laugh burst from his lips. He had suddenly remembered how a grenade hurled by an enemy soldier had landed right in the middle of his squad and he had been quick enough to grab it and hurl it away. Saving everyone. Fragmented memories of the war flashed through his mind now in a flurry of disconnected images. He lay down and closed his eyes, trying to grip and hold onto his youth in the combat trenches of Dien Bien Phu. He smiled and fell asleep.

The next morning, Toan ran into Mr. Thuat's room. "I called the number of that guy from Veterans Connection who's looking for you. Somebody's coming here in a little while to pick you up and take you to a Dien Bien Phu veterans' reunion. Just wait."

Mr. Thuat grabbed his old mug from the table and held it against his chest. He looked bewildered. "Who's looking for me? My granddaughter Ty?"

"No," Toan said patiently. "Do you remember that someone was looking for you on TV yesterday? You asked me to inquire on your behalf."

Mr. Thuat thought he remembered it, but was uncertain. "Really? So who's this you're helping me meet?"

Toan stood to attention and saluted. "Mr. Company Commander, we are ready."

Mr. Thuat laughed. "Charge," he shouted.

The two men laughed.

A sudden rush of memories filled his mind. He tried to remain lucid. But he was troubled now not by memories of the war, but of the ugly behavior of his family. Ty loved him. She was the only one who took care of him when he was sick. As for his son, Mr. Thuat vaguely remembered how after a night of gambling, the boy had come home and taken the small amount of money he had managed to save. He had tried to stop him, but his son had shoved him out of the way. He'd hit his head on the bedstead. It was from that moment that he had become so confused and forgetful.

His granddaughter Ty had held his hands, cried, and fed him porridge. She had always been a good student; when she had grown up, she'd transferred to a famous university in the city.

He was delighted for her, but after she'd left there was nobody willing to take care of him. His son and daughter-in-law were too busy working and in any case were both addicted to gambling and alcohol. Eventually his son had been arrested and sent to prison and his daughter-in-law simply left. Mr. Thuat couldn't remember how he had ended up at the nursing home, where he had been born and where he had lived for most of his life. The only person he remembered was Ty. But the events of the past two days were making him strain to think clearly and restore his memories of the past

He heard the voices of people talking outside his room.

"So, where is our Company Commander?"

"Here. Please come in."

"Ty, here is your grandpa."

"Mr. Thuat, we are coming here to take you to the Dien Bien Phu veterans meeting."

"Mr. Company Commander, do you remember me? I'm Binh."

Mr. Thuat stood up and remained motionless. He could see Ty, her features assembling into her familiar face as she came towards him. He cried out, "My granddaughter, I am here, your grandfather. Please take me home. I am very sad."

Ty cried and embraced him. She had become a tall and beautiful college student. Grandfather and granddaughter clung to each other and wept. Soon everybody else in the room was crying as well.

A member of the delegation drew closer. "Hey Commander, save some of that love for your former soldiers. I'm cross-eyed Hau. I climbed over your body to cross a barbed wire barrier."

"Me too," said a skinny old man, clapping Mr. Thuat's shoulder, "You lay on your stomach on the barbed wire so that the entire company could climb on your body and get at the enemy."

A short man touched Mr. Thuat's shoulder more gingerly. "How's the wound? Does it still hurt?"

The memories of the past Mr. Thuat had begun experiencing began emerging faster now, with more clarity and coherence. He remembered all that he had forgotten. He laughed, feeling as cheerful as he had been when on the battlefield. He looked at each person's face and called out his name; he even remembered each of their hometowns—just as he had half a century ago. As he called out that ancient roll, the old veterans' eyes dampened with tears.

He turned to Ty. “You and these men have been my cure. Let’s stop crying.” He turned to his former soldiers: “Tomorrow, let’s have a reunion.”

Ten veterans stood straight to attention and replied in unison: “Yes, sir.”

Ty smiled like a blossoming flower. Mr. Thuat stood and quietly thanked these veterans who had brought him back to life. He smiled and let the tears roll down his cheeks.