



# stories yet to be told

Various Authors

*If you judge people, you have no time to love them.*

*Mother Teresa*



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## PREFACE

Since 1990, homosexuality has been excluded from the list of diseases classified by the World Health Organization (WHO). As of 2012, same-sex marriage has been legally accepted in 11 countries, including ones heavily influenced by religion like Argentina and South Africa. If territories are included, the number would be much bigger, because, in many places, homosexuality is accepted in certain regions and states rather than nationwide. Many countries have not legalized same-sex marriage but accept marriages which were conducted in other countries and/or allow other forms of same sex unions, such as civil unions, registered cohabitation, or unregistered cohabitation.

Although there has been positive progress in acknowledgement and acceptance of homosexual and transgendered individuals, many people, in many different parts of the world still suffer from discrimination and prejudice. Research shows that homosexual and transgendered people are four times more likely to commit suicide than heterosexual people.

Societal and cultural norms regarding gender and sex are strong factors in the discrimination and prejudice towards homosexual and transgendered people today. This helps to explain why families and schools, which are supposed to be shelters for people, end up being where homosexual and transgendered people suffer from the most discrimination, prejudice, and violence. Additionally, having been immersed in these norms since birth, many of those who cause abuse do not see their actions as such. Parents have been known to beat, chain, and starve their children, even going as far as to take them to mental hospitals, all in the name of what is best for their children. They cannot be blamed for what they have been taught is right. No one has spoken to them to give them reason to question and/or challenge the conventional values and standards.

Aiming to help people better understand experiences of homosexual and transgendered people who are bullied and discriminated against, the Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP) spent a year collecting and recording thoughts and experiences about this issue from a group of young men who have sex with men (MSM) in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The stories in this book are selected from 34 stories written down by none other than the group members themselves and everything in the stories happened to them in their life. We hope that this book will help readers, including family members, teachers, and friends of homosexual and transgendered people, understand these issues and have a more positive look towards accepting and promoting rights of homosexual and transgendered people.

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On behalf of the research group  
Hoang Tu Anh  
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CHAPTER I:

# A Stormy Childhood

# *A Fairytale Dream* *Tuong Vy*

The familiar road was shaded by lines of trees running towards the river. On the other side of a barren field some kids were flying their kites nonchalantly. Some vendors were selling snacks and drinks to the kids and people passing by. That was life in this outskirts town, quiet and peaceful. The rustling beats of life in the city center seemed to have not yet touched this place. It was rumoured that there would be some kind of development planning in a few years, but no one was certain.

Phuc was sitting behind Long, watching sweat running down his friend's back due to a long ride. For Phuc, this back was like a shelter which he simply needed to hide behind and would feel safe even if the whole sky fell down.

“Are you tired, Long?” - asked Phuc.

“Just try riding like me, you will see” - Long was clearly breathing his words out. The bike kept running smoothly on the road.

“Well, it is just because you are bigger and stronger than me. I would wear myself out if I rode like this” - he put his hand on Long's back – “Anyway, it's taking me home that helps you strengthen your legs, which gets you straight A for athletics, isn't it?”

“You are only good at making excuses”.

Phuc burst into laughter - crispy sounds of happiness just like yellow rays of sunlight pouring down the meadow. If someone asked him what happiness was, perhaps he would answer, “Just like this”.

Phuc jumped off the bike when it reached his house; and Long kept riding. Long's house and his were on the same road to school, which explained why, day by day, Long stopped by and asked Phuc to go to school with him. Of course, Long had to pedal.

Phuc had studied in the same class as Long since he entered high-school and now both of them were in the eleventh grade. One and a half years was just enough for a friendship to blossom. Having a weak and slim body, Phuc was usually bullied, but since he started hanging out with Long, few people dared to do so anymore. Long was quite macho compared to students his age. In Phuc's eyes, Long was a hero who was always there to protect and rescue him from any danger.

The dinner was noisy. His mother kept talking about their neighbours. She said that some lady who was walking dogs past their house let the dog shit right in front of the main gate and refused to clean it up. She and his mom had a serious fight. Then she told about a daughter of Grandpa Tu, whose house was at the entrance of the village, who married a aiwanese man in order to get five thousand dollars but then wasted it all shopping. Finishing the meal, Phuc ran straight to his room to have a rest before starting his homework. Phuc was a smart student; the exercises were just a piece of cake for him. It didn't take much time for him to finish it all. After, Phuc took out a big and thick notebook from his bag. This was a diary that he had spent nearly a year writing down everything in, from daily events to his secret thoughts and emotions. Only paper was generous enough to listen to what he could not share with anyone.

The weather after the Lunar New Year Festival was so relaxing. The warmth of spring and the joy of a brand new year together made the day beautiful. The school was filled with cheerful cries and calls of students who were seeing who had more lucky money. Phuc was cheerful as well because he could again sit behind Long on his bike. Phuc could not remember when it was that he started longing to see Long that much. Perhaps it was a long time ago when Long protected him from everyone's teasing, or when when Long asked “Wanna go home? I will give you a ride.” He could always visualize Long's appearance and kept in mind everything that happened between them and then wrote it down in his diary. Phuc had no idea of homosexuality then. He only understood that he liked Long and wanted to be by Long's side. Phuc kept dreaming that he was a princess and Long a knight who slew the beast to rescue him.



The sun was dazzling. The classroom was as quiet as a ghost town. Phuc was standing there rigidly. Tears were rolling down his cheeks yet were unable to soothe away the ruthless words his teacher was throwing at him.

“You are so sick. Never have I imagined that there was such a pervert in

my class. Tell me, is there anyone in this class like you?" - The teacher slammed a familiar notebook on the table, his diary – "If I hadn't read what you have written, I would have never dared to believe you were that disgusting. Your words give me goose-bumps."

"But... I have done nothing" - said Phuc in tears.

"You are disgusting because of who you are. Don't you agree that he is a pervert?"

"Yes!" - the whole class cried.

"I will report this to your family so that they can watch over you. I will report to the school's board of managers as well".

Ultimately embarrassed. In sixteen years of living he had never, ever, thought there would be one day like today. Each word was like a knife continuously stabbing at his heart. Phuc felt hurt and humiliated. He was seen as a contagious disease and everyone avoided him. Bad news travelled fast and soon the entire school thought he was a repulsive gay.



His dad chained him to the bed leg and said "Only when you get rid of your disease, will I let you go". It was very painful! The injuries on his back caused by the rods turned black and blue. His facial rash started bleeding and burning his cheeks. But nothing, nothing, was more hurtful than the disgusting look Long threw at him that day. The knight had left the ugly princess who was abnormal! His dad stormed out when he noticed this. He threw anything within his reach at Phuc because he was such a shame.

The window in his room looked out towards a very high and very far reaching sky. Phuc wished he could be a bird so he could fly high and far until he touched the sun and died from the heat. He would rather do so. Death meant nothing to him now. People said Phuc would never know he was just society's scrap, which deserved disgust and hatred. Fairy tales are never real, he thought, there is no ugly toad that can become a human and he could hardly become someone like everyone wanted him to.

For seven days and nights he ate, drank, and did everything in one place. No bathing was allowed, Phuc looked like a homeless beggar lying pathetically at a crossroads. Yes, he promised not to be like this, he promised to be a normal obedient kid, and he promised not to like boys and not to think about perverted and sickening things.

Finally, he was set free, but his freedom was under supervision by his family and school. In spite of ignoring the insults of neighbours and classmates, his heart kept aching. They had the right to beat him and to throw trash at him without getting any kind of punishment simply because he did not belong to this society. He was the ugly duckling abandoned by its siblings. Yet, unlike that duckling which one day transforms into a beautiful swan, he was destined to die in some corner unknown to anyone.

For the days after his confinement, Phuc lived in silence. He conformed to other people's wishes. He did not dare respond to any insult. He lived as a ghost. His dad forbade Phuc to do anything around the neighbourhood; he had to stay at home as soon as he came back from school. There were so many nights where Phuc found himself staring at the sharp knife in the kitchen. He imagined how his blood would flow out when he used that knife to slash his own neck, but he did not have the guts to do so. Tears kept rolling down after every choke. Why was he born this way, unlike other people? Why did everyone abandon him? Phuc had dozens of questions to which he could not find the answers.

He dropped out of school because he was unable to handle the pressure. Embarrassment and shame surged whenever someone looked at him. A balloon will explode if overblown and he was afraid that he would be the same. A half month had already passed since that disastrous day but Phuc felt as if it was a decade. He packed his things and left for his mom's hometown to hide there. His mom told him he should leave until his dad calmed down. Indeed, he didn't feel like living here anymore either.

The train began sounding its whistle to signal its departure. All the other passengers had their families there to see them off. Except for Phuc. He stood there alone with his luggage quietly observing the things which passed his eyes. Good bye to the school that he spent over a year with. Good bye to the age of innocence. He could never be a princess and of course there would never be a prince showing up for him to fight against witches and heartless gossips...



# A Sad Memory

*Tuong Vy*

The afternoon sun painted a long streak of yellow on the road. I dragged myself home with a bag on my back and a torn shirt wondering how I was going to explain it to Dad. Some bikes passed me by like bolts of lightning, but I did not bother turning my head. Youth is like that, nonchalant yet full of prejudice.

That night, Dad shouted at me for the shirt. He had to spend half a day patching it so that I could wear it to school. I had lived with Dad since I was small because Mom usually worked far from home. It was only the three of us - Dad, my little brother, and I - and we looked after each other. Every day, Dad delivered goods for clients until noon. He then came home to make food while I cooked the rice. At 13, compared to the kids the same age, I knew more about life and definitely lived a tougher one.

I was usually teased about being gay. I did not understand what the word really meant. I sensed it was an insult, but how could I stop the gossips anyway? At school I loved break time most when I could help the ladies in the canteen in order to get paid with a bowl of noodles later.

My shirt was torn by my classmates. I choked with anger then, but they were bigger and I was outnumbered. In my mind, "being a gay" had always been something disgusting and I was sure I was not one.

I had two best friends, a boy and a girl. We became friends simply because we lived close to each other, so we usually walked home together, gradually becoming closer. Having friends was much better than being alone. My friends often tried to teach me how to fight back but I didn't like that idea much. I preferred to stay silent and let bygones be bygones.

The breeze shook leaves off the branches. Only one month left before we said good bye to the school, classmates, and teachers. It is funny how we always wished to stay at home when we had to go to school and now we felt sad as a vacation was about to come. During the last days we only played and had parties.

"Have any plans for the summer?"; I asked my friend.

"Nah, I have to help my mom sell coffee at the market".

While classmates were happily discussing their summer vacation plans, I was thinking of what I had to do to earn money to buy a secondhand bike. It didn't make me sad though, because everyone had their own plans which they were excited for.

Back then I was too young to think about my future, family, and life. I simply lived, ate, and played. What people called me didn't bother me much because I kept thinking that one day, when I grew up, I would be just like everyone else. Dad sometimes did not feel comfortable as well when he heard people teasing me, but perhaps our hard life made him forget all about it. He had to take care of so many other things in his life.



One day, I passed a strange street. I had a habit of wandering around paying no attention to where I was going. This time, I bumped into a gang of four or five kids at around my age sitting on concrete pieces.

"Dude, here comes a gay!" - one kid cried out.

"Hey, castrated bastard!" - another said.

"He is deaf, man!"

I said nothing and tried to walk away as quickly as I could. I heard their footsteps running behind me.

"Hey, do you dare to look down at us, bastard?" - one blasted past me and blocked my way.

"No, I do not" - I mumbled.

“Liar! You didn't answer when I called you” - then he punched at my face.

And then continuous punches and kicks bombarded my body. I could do nothing but hold my head and hold myself.

“Let's send him to hell, man”.

“Still wanna act gay when getting hit huh? Kick his face, Dude”.

They kept kicking and swearing at me for a while until someone ran over. I just lay there, letting tears well up in my eyes and roll down my face. It was the first time ever I felt a vindictive hatred for the word “gay” being attached to me. Why did I get beaten? I could not find a reason. Was it just because I was called “gay”? I dragged myself to home with all sorts of black and blue bruises. My dad, however, did not realize because my face looked normal and I did not know what to say to him anyway. A few days later, my nose kept bleeding and, even now, it hurts quite often. I told myself, “Well, everything will be fine”.

Time passed and everything slipped away. I became quieter and rarely smiled. Afraid of being teased, I played alone or watched other students play. I kept wishing time would go by faster so that I could become a grown-up and nobody could tease me. That was my thirteenth summer. Not as much fun as others, but nothing could be done to change that.

The Flame trees were blooming, filling the streets with their colour. The city became red. I picked up a few petals from the Flame tree flowers to put in a notebook. Perhaps one day, when I open the book, these petals could remind me of my childhood. I wondered whether I would wish to be a kid in the future?



# Haunted

*Lo Lo*

He screamed out loud as he struggled to escape from the hands that were trying to grasp him. However, every effort was in vain when the last button of his pants was undone by some hand. The blue uniform pant slowly slipped down to his feet.

A string of laughter burst out. Resentfully, he heard each sound clearly.

“Haha, his penis hasn't grown hair yet”.

“Hey, his little boy is pinky”.

“Seriously? A gay also has a penis?” - A female voice rose up...

Another voice said, startling him.

“Let's press him down to see if he has balls”.

Was that really so? A bunch of his classmates were trying to take his pants off just to satisfy their curiosity? What did they see him as? An abnormal person without genital?

Held tightly by four or five guys, he just lay still. Surrounding him was a crowd of boys and girls who were thrilled to observe a god-damn hand touching him all over his penis and balls.

The school drum was beating, the classmates rushed off to their classes, leaving him lying there naked in ultimate humiliation. He picked up his clothes, squeezed himself into a corner, and cried.

After his classmates tortured him, he would cry every time. Often multiple times.

Perhaps, at first, they made him suffer just because of their curiosity. Gradually, though, this became an interesting game used to entertain some girls during breaks.



He had tried very hard to avoid this harassment, but his calls for help had never been answered.

Some kids just stood still looking at him from afar. Others turned their heads away or left for the class. None stood up to protect him.

He had reported these events to teachers multiple times, but the school supervisor just nonchalantly said:

“Who would play that weird game? They wouldn't do that unless you did something to them. Just go back to your class. If this incident keeps happening, tell a teacher then”.

That was all. And he kept waiting for a teacher's intervention. Teachers should have protected him from his classmates' nasty teasing, but even the homeroom teacher did nothing other than tell his parents that:

“It is just the kids playing around. There is nothing to be worried about. I will see their parents later”.

But then every day, that evil gang still waited for the break when they could torture him...

He always felt nervous when entering class. He found himself empty and lost, having no one to lean on. His marks started going down and he went from being a distinctive student for five consecutive years to being a truant with a disastrous marks.



The homeroom teacher invited his parents to come for a meeting:

“Recently, your son has been skipping class quite often. You should reconsider his attitude. If he continues behaving like this, I will have no choice other than to expel him”.

How could she understand the reason for my situation? All she did was just ask her student's parents to come to school and blaming them for his behaviour.

And how could he escape from being beaten by his parents? Though, he thought he would rather be beaten than be humiliated every day at school.

Time passes by but memories of those days remain fresh in his mind. Nosy looks still haunt him.

One year, two years, and even a decade later, he remains a shy and timid boy in front of the crowd. It frightens him to see curious looks directed towards him. He is afraid of bumping into familiar faces and he is terrified that people know he is homosexual. What if they came up with some game just to torture him?



# Fated

## Moon

He was an eighth grade kid who had a lot of dreams, loved playing, and was busy with schoolwork. At that age, he only dared to give quick glances to a classmate he liked. At that age, no one could imagine the harsh truth that would be revealed to him as he was destined to meet that stranger and destined to shed tears for the rest of his bitter life.

He was one of three people selected for the city's swimming team and, through this, he came to know a man who was 15 years older than him. This man took care of him and encouraged him to try to surpass over one hundred competitors to get into the final round with him! That man was a brother and a teacher, a man that he admired so much for opening up a future of passions and dreams - a beautiful picture that no one had ever painted for a kid like him.

The pool was dyed in the late afternoon sunlight. That man quietly walked towards him as he was fated to do so. They looked into each other's eyes and a light flashed... An intimate feeling gently surged. Startled, he ran away! He was scared. Scared of a love that was growing inside him.

Bang! That man pushed him into the bathroom. He fell down on the floor. The man kneeled down, hugged, and kissed him, and started touching him all over his body. Each finger glided on his body. He tried to get out but couldn't.

His image of the man collapsed at this moment. He felt only pain from the bottom of his heart. His body was filled with disgust. He sat in the shower, hoping to wash away all of the disgust, fright, and filthiness he felt from the person he had trusted most, only after his family! Lamenting? Blaming? Hating? Now he just wanted to forget it all! All that had happened and all that was happening inside of him.

He avoided the man who had once been his idol. He was scared of the pool and refused to be a part of the swimming team. He was scared of that man. His head was filled with questions about why such a handsome, macho man who was chased by many girls liked him and touched him - a fourteen boy. He was only a kid. He burst into tears for he knew he had lost his childhood.



One afternoon he went to the market to buy soya milk for his dear little brother. His brother was really cute. He loved his brother most because he was the only one who hugged him when his dad beat him. He loved that kid even more when he was worried that his little brother might be like him - be pushed into a life he had no choice over. He told himself that he would teach his brother to become a man that would never have to cry like him, who would be stronger, and who would especially never fall in love with men to end up like him.

Arriving home, he saw his mom standing at the gate. From inside the house, his dad threw a slipper straight at his face, but he quickly avoided it. His dad rushed out, grasped his hair, pressed his head down, and kicked him continuously. His brother ran out to hold his dad's leg back, yet his dad was so angry at the time that he pushed away the kid and scolded:

“Your brother loves men, kiddo! Why do you protect him? Such a sickening homosexual bastard! Had I known you were like this, I would have asked your mother to abort the fetus!”

Now he understood why his dad got so angry! His parents must have known about his relationship with a guy in the South. He was stunned; tears rolled down his cheeks. It was the first time he had cried in front of his father. Usually when he got hit, he was very tough and didn't cry. This time he cried for real. Tears deliberately kept dropping. His dad kicked him out of the house.

At school, he noticed people were gossiping about him. It turned out that his mom had given his diary to his homeroom teacher, who also happened to be the principal.

What happened on that Monday is still fresh in his mind as if it were just yesterday. The whole school gathered in the yard. After reporting news of Youth

Union activities and acknowledging students of the week, the teacher called out his name and said to the entire school that he was a sexual deviant and that every student needed to stop him from being tempted by evil things. The noise suddenly stopped and every eye was directed on him either annoyingly, astonishingly, or disgustedly. He felt like a UFO that had fallen down on earth.

His teacher and beloved family should have protected him. They should have understood the confusion of being a teenage boy. They should have answered his thousands of questions with love and knowledge. The teacher's call for help in the name of love was the cruelest thing that happened to him. Everyone looked at him as if he was an alien. There were no friendly gestures, instead, he only received only inquisitive looks as if people were trying to look at him discreetly to see 'what a gay was like'. He seemed to have no place to go. At home he was cursed and beaten by his family. At school he had no friends to play with. During breaks, when he was standing in the corridor, students from other classes flocked to see him. They pointed at him, discussing heartily, "Hey, that is the gay from our school - a sick one". A once truly hot boy now became a gay. He was like a ghost living among friends and teachers. He felt nothing but pain. Looking around, he could see no one. Among a sea of people he felt lonely and cold. Who would help him now?

No hand reached out to help him. His boyfriend was too far away to fully understand his pain. He could cry only at nights and when hugging his little brother.



He felt badly about his life after his family and others found out that he loved the same sex. He had no idea which way his life would turn to and he could not anticipate how miserable his life would become. He decided to leave when he had only a few cents in his pocket for he was unable to handle his parents' grumblings and his friends' indifference!

Certainly, a fifteen year old boy that had never travelled far away from his hometown or experienced life could hardly know what he needed to do when he left. He simply wanted to leave and that was it. With a bike and a few cents he left for some park. Dried slices of bread were his meals and sewers were his beds.

Days passed and he was hungry, dirty, and sad. He missed his brother. He missed the kid's pure looks and naïve soul that had no prejudice. Adults? They only said cruel and fake things which scared and disgusted him. Here, even being hungry, cold, and dirty, he still felt much more comfortable than he did at school or at home. But would his life be like this forever? Would his childhood end with sad memories and pain that no one could understand? Life was so unfair! The land where he was born was so heartless! People use each other just for their own gain, like his uncle, a notorious gambler.

The hirelings dragged him to his uncle's house. There, his uncle asked him to look at himself in the mirror. He couldn't believe the ghost-like tiny, dirty figure in front of his eyes was him. His uncle shouted at him cruelly and ordered his men to take him to a room on the fourth floor and chained him there. Every morning, his men came to the room, cursing and beating him. Every day he was given a bowl of rice with fish sauce and a bottle of water. He was raised just like an animal. He could only cry and cry until he was too tired and he slept.

His uncle kept him in the room for days. He was tortured and sometimes even starved. Everything from eating to defecating was done in the room which was lit by candles and had nothing but a chamber pot, some tissues, a plate of rice that sometimes his uncle brought in, and the sound of the iron chain around his ankles.

On the seventh day, his uncle entered the room and asked: "So, do you want to live as a dog or as a human?"

His instincts told him to leave this place as soon as possible, or to accept what life offered him. He promised his uncle he would not love men any longer. He promised to be a "normal" person.

He came back to school, leaving one dark world to enter another one, and lived like a ghost in the cruelty and apathy of teachers and friends until graduation.

His soul was empty and hardened. He felt like his world was a thick night that no light could shine through. He begged his uncle to let him live with his parents and little brother. At home, at least, he felt somehow in peace and love when staying near his brother.

Bad news spread around just like a virus. He could not escape gossips and humiliation at high school either. He was forced to sit at the back of the class. No one was willing to share his desk.

He used to be a talented student. Few students could be good at both literature and chemistry like he was. Yet, now he was a soulless body in class. When he failed to answer a question, his teacher mocked him, "Look what a straight A chemistry student has done". The exercise was a piece of cake for gifted students but he couldn't solve it. The class burst into laughter and he felt ultimately embarrassed.

He lived even more quietly at home. Words of love were replaced by blunt commands like "Eat" and "Wash dishes". For six months he stayed at home as if he was invisible after his love had been discovered. He could only hug his brother and cry. Adults seemed to chase after their ambitions and desires, forgetting all about love, care, and generosity for their children. His brother, upon seeing him cry, would hug him back and cry: "Don't cry, bro!". He felt so sorry for his brother that he tried to fight back the tears.

Having no friends, he usually wandered around alone. His favourite place was a certain park. He didn't want to talk to anyone. He just kept walking to soothe away the pain surging inside him. His family didn't care about how he was living. His mom was busy earning money and bearing a grudge against his dad for hindering her career. His dad hated him because he brought bad luck and headaches. His uncle was no better. He used to think his uncle's cruel acts at least showed that his uncle cared about him. Bitterly, he found out that they were just part of his plan to snatch away his mom's inheritance. His uncle kept records of every expenditure he spent on his nephew. To pay back that debt, his mom had to give up her share of the house inherited from Grandpa and Grandma. Money and lust make humans so heartlessly scary!



That night, he strolled in the park as usual. He didn't bother to look around. He could only feel a miserable feeling which was rising higher and higher inside his heart. He had no idea it was his indifference that would hurt him more. He had no idea of the verse by Nguyen Du, "It's up to God's will that you

are destined to lead a pride-worthy life or a shameful one" would be so well-applied to his life. Why did God have to be so harsh on him?

As he was sitting on the bench lost in his thoughts, a young man came out of nowhere to sit next to him. "You look handsome, dude" said the man. He didn't bother to reply. Suddenly, the man hugged him and said, "Come with me!"

"No way!". He pushed the man away and stood up.

He walked away without noticing that the man called someone. He didn't understand that it was his sad look and wandering alone at night that caused him danger. Bad guys always know miserable people have no power to defend themselves. Only he was too naïve, thinking a simple refusal could save him. Not until he overheard someone saying: "This brat looks yummy!" and his head was hit hard, did he realize he was prey for two scoundrels. They pressed a knife to his waist and forced him to sit on their motorbike to go to a deserted place.

Once again he had to suffer from humiliation and pains. His shirt was torn apart. His legs and arms were scratched because of his struggling and he was pressed down onto a nearby brick edge. One scoundrel held his arms and legs tightly while the other raped him. There was no sound except the sounds of punches and kicks, the murmurs of insects at night, and the rascals' cold-blooded threats: "We dare you to yell out! Dare you to let the whole world know you are a gay!"

After satisfying their lust, the two rapists disappeared, leaving him lying alone in pain and covered in blood. His clothes were wet and as crushed as his soul.

He didn't wish to live any longer. Dragging his body to the lake, he dove into the water.

Cold water froze his blood. He couldn't die. A good swimmer like him couldn't die in this lake. God didn't want him to die but to live to be tortured.

Was he born as a criminal? What could he do to change? Chi Pheo, after killing his archenemy Ba Kien, had to kill himself as well. Was that tragedy because of the society or because of Chi Pheo? Was his dark life a result of destiny or of human prejudice? What a fate!

CHAPTER II:

# Daunting Norms

# Miss Hoi'

*Hoa Ho*

Days ago, I went to my close friend's house for her birthday party. The party was small, with only about ten people, yet was filled with laughter and talking. After hanging around for a while, we decided to watch a movie, a kind of routine in every get-together of ours. Finally, we chose a movie named "De Mai Tinh"<sup>2</sup> to watch.

From the moment the character named Pham Huong Hoi appeared, every scene involving 'Miss Hoi' made all of us burst into laughter. From his appearance and make-up to his facial expressions and lines, even his unique blazing red car, Miss Hoi seemed to send out something very humorous and funny.

Even I laughed too. Yet my laughter was smaller and smaller. I found myself lost in the surrounding laughter, empty and I just wanted to squeeze myself into an invisible shell.

I sat a bit backwards, quietly observing the friends sitting around. I was watching, listening to, and feeling them laugh heartily. I wondered if they were laughing at Miss Hoi, or at me, or at all homosexual people. And behind the laughter, what could it be?

It could be that "Miss Hoi represents many homosexual people living in this world".

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<sup>1</sup> A good-turned-bad man that is the protagonist of a short-story of the same name by Nam Cao, an eminent Vietnamese short-story writer and novelist whose works were well-known for thoughtful description and veracious reflection of the society in the 1945 era.

<sup>2</sup> A Vietnamese box-office hit in 2010 directed by a Vietnamese American director Charlie Nguyen. The English title is 'Fool For Love'.

Or that "Homosexuality is that peculiar, weird, and ridiculous".

Or perhaps it could be something else that even I have no idea of. It is indeed a personal feeling. Yet there is one thing I can be sure of, that the image of 'Miss Hoi' will be remembered by each movie-watcher and will, more or less leave a notion of homosexuality.

And, from a perspective of an LGBTI, I find this notion incorrect.

'Miss Hoi' may have many characteristics that we can notice in many homosexual people. This role is just a simple sum of many, even too many, homosexual people.

It is the "too many" features extracted from a biased and naïve understanding that has made the role more bizarre, outrageous, and strange even to me, a transgendered person.

In other words, I have never seen a homosexual person like 'Miss Hoi'.

With its reputation and popularity, 'De Mai Tinh' must have reached many cinema goers and thus, unintentionally, constructed an image of homosexual people in society. With such an imprecise representation given to the audience, negative impacts are probably unavoidable.

Undeniably, the character 'Miss Hoi' is constructed to make the audience laugh. It is not a new thing in movies or dramas to have a homosexual character portrayed as a satire. We can see such an image in any play, television episode, or article column. Like any homosexual person, I usually look forward to a new publication on homosexuality. I want to read to understand more about what society is thinking about people like us. And so, many times, I hope and then am disappointed by the image of homosexual people again being described as merely a joke or as something sold in the market.

The society paints us, the homosexuals, with a colour that they want rather than sincerely learning what colours our world has. If they are patient and enthusiastic, they will realize our world does not only have the black colour, which is ugly, ridiculous, and disgraceful as they usually think.

'Laughing just for fun' seems not to be the ultimate goal in creating a

character or scene in a comedy. I remember someone said 'Laugh and think'. Thus, when writing a character like 'Miss Hoi', does the writer or anyone think about the potential impacts on the audience and on homosexuals? Or does he or she simply create without thinking about the effects and then wait to see the audience 'laugh'!

The movie ended and I temporarily stopped my flow of thoughts to see my friends discuss and make fun of 'Miss Hoi'. I felt frustrated when thinking that many other people also watched the movie and chattered heartily and unintentionally laughed without thinking of the consequences to homosexuals.



# Proving Himself

*Dinh Nhung*  
*written as told by Hoang Hai*

“Hey, where do you go, Lady Hai?”

The guys in Class 10A started teasing him as usual. Whenever possible, they always teased him and, the stronger he reacted, the more excited they became.

On March 8<sup>th</sup>, the guys arrived earlier to prepare gifts and flowers to give to teachers and girls in class. He also came. When everything was done and no girl had arrived yet, the guys started harassing him and took off his pants.

“Give back my pants to me!”, he screamed.

His pants were thrown out the window of the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor and landed on the ground.

Embarrassed, he had to sit under a desk until some guy realized their act was unacceptable and went down to get the pants.



Soon after that incident, he beat the whole class in macho games. He wanted to prove that he was not 'a lady'. For a boy, in order to not be teased or attached to such creepy words as 'girly' or 'gay', he had to choose a suitable lifestyle that could help him immerse himself in the boys' world. This included playing their games, which he considered to be a waste of time sometimes. The feeling of being cut-off from the boys made him scared. After a few times of being harassed, he made a promise to himself that he would show them he was not gay and he could overtake any of them.

The guys in grade 10 started secretly talking about and passing around stories for adults. He started skipping breakfast in order to save money to buy provocative things like sexual CDs and cards with images of sexy girls. The boys had to respect him. He clipped his finger nails and cut his hair short whenever someone mistook him for a girl. He didn't even dare to wear his favourite flared pants, a style that many other guys also loved. To prove that he also knew how to pick up girls, he flirted with the most beautiful girl in class using his sensitive observation. Although he was tired of the girl's princess syndrome and had no interest in being her boyfriend, he felt had no other choice. That girl was a victim of this game of love but it was not his fault. Instead it was the other boys' fault. It was them that forced him to do such things.

Few people understand the pressure that a guy suffers from when he has to prove his masculinity. Guys have a lot of silly and stupid games and he was the silliest one when trying to prove he was as manly as any other boy. Drinking, hanging out with girls, gambling, and fighting; he involved himself in every game not just as a member but as a leader. It is the rule: whoever is the most experienced and the most stylish will be respected by the whole gang.

That was the way he earned his respect. He became a hero in his class in many aspects. He tried to be good at studying only to let classmates copy his work. He tried to be good at being bad so that no one could consider him a girl.



In grade 11, the boys in class made fire-crackers. They only made a small one which they used a long fuse to connect with another bigger one put in the toilet. Then they fired the fuse and ran back to the classroom waiting for the explosion. Teachers went wild, but they could not catch the culprit. His turn came. He made a really big fire-cracker with a short fuse. Setting the fuse, he threw the cracker into the air. The cracker exploded and pieces fell everywhere.

The whole class was stunned. He had actually made two crackers, but he was satisfied with the successful performance and intended to put the second one away. Yet TA, a son of a teacher, insisted on trying as well. The cracker also exploded but, because the boy could not throw as far as he could, an accident occurred.

The teachers were determined to catch the culprit. His class was interrogated but no one said anything. The teachers threatened, "Whoever fired the cracker should stand up or else TA and his parents will be punished".

The whole class remained silent. They told each other that if everyone said nothing, no one would get disciplined. But he looked at the classmate and felt sorry for the guy. No only would TA be punished but his parents' reputation would be badly affected as both of them taught at his school.

He stood up and admitted fault. He was expelled then.

His dad scolded him for being a quixotic hero because the school only wanted to find out who the real culprit was. He didn't do it, so why would he have confessed?

The whole class considered him a hero and he ranked first in every game among the boys. No one knew that he was tired everyday from having to act as a MAN. Also, no one knew that he actually loved delicate things and that he was in love with the class monitor.





# *A Story from the Past*

*Trai Mien Bien*

***It is said that to be born with a healthy body is already happiness.***

I love volunteering and social activities. This love has been in my blood since I was a kid. Besides studying at university, I spend most of my free time, heart, soul, and mind on volunteer work. When I started learning about LGBTI people who are just like me, I gradually got to know more about my nature and, moreover, I learned to accept it.

I knew Ray via the Internet and we have become good friends since then. We hooked up with each other quickly, right after our first meeting as both of us shared so many things and life philosophies. Ray and I are homosexual and we understand like no one else the cruel discrimination people like us experience from society.

Hoping to improve the attitude of society towards our world, Ray and I decided to establish a forum for LGBTI people living in a coastal city. This forum was a common place for us to make friends, share, console, and encourage each other. We did charity work and conducted exchange activities to connect everyone involved.

Ray and I did achieve that goal after over one year running the forum. We had more new friends, even heterosexual males and females. They understood and empathized with us. They came to us to share, to help, and to love as they also had family members who were like us.

I was only 20 then, not old and tough enough to face sudden storms in life. Given the strong growth of the forum, I had to deal with ugly gossip about us. Some were very spiteful and cruel, showing strong discrimination against us. People looked down upon us, bore grudges against us, and made up things to harm our reputation.

Since then, wherever we went, from fundraising events to volunteer activities or offline meetings, we have received harsh insults or been spoken ill “They are gays but act as if they are some great saviors. Who knows if they cast a spell on someone? What a shame it would be to receive their presents. It would be better to throw them away”.

Bad things did not end there. Some people even sent anonymous letters to the police. They used cruel and heartless words to insult us. In other cases, perhaps the senders should have been sued in court, but we did not receive any empathy from the police or from the majority of people. The police also saw us as a group of morons and me the leader.

Once, a robbery was taking place in my city. It was rumoured that a group of homosexual people had killed their partners to steal three suitcases of foreign currencies and escaped. The detectives immediately put me on the list of suspects despite having no evidence to show I may have been involved in the crime. They even assumed that I was the gang leader who manipulated and directed it all from behind the scenes. I heard these things from my dad.

My father works as an official and he has a lot of social contacts. I do not want to mention his current position but, given his title, everything I do in this city will be reported to him.

I remember at that time, a friend of his who was directly in charge of the case investigated me. He accused me of extremely unreasonable crimes that I had never done. He said that I led a homosexual gang which had a sick lifestyle; that, although they complained many times, the gang still organized events that were not approved by the municipal government and created negative impacts among the community; and that it was my deviant lifestyle that affected my dad. The investigators tried to look for evidence to prove I was a criminal. They even talked to my dad about sending me to a rehabilitation center for ruined youngsters.

I collapsed. I felt like I lost my dignity. If I were a murderer or a robber or had committed unforgivable crimes, I would have deserved such ruthless comments and accusations, but I was a 20 year old guy who received so many rewards for academic achievements and for having a good lifestyle and who always wholeheartedly contributed to the society and considered volunteering a philosophy of life. So, was it fair to me? Yet, the most unbearable things for me at that time were the changes in my parents' attitudes towards me.

My mom cried all day while sitting at a corner and didn't care about her appearance. Every night she burned incense on the altar and intentionally prayed loudly so that I could hear what she wished, "Oh heavenly ancestors, her Lord Buddha Avalokiteshvara, what crime has my family committed to suffer from such karma? Please listen to my sincere prayer and remove the curse cast on my son so that he can soon realize his wrongdoings, or else I can hardly live".

Each time she prayed and cried I felt as if my heart was being stabbed by thousands of knives. I couldn't say anything and I had no excuses to make either. Had I said to her, "I am gay, I am not sick, and what I have done is right". would my mom then have accepted and understood me?

Such a tough person like my dad could only cry silently. I still remember the looks he gave me during meals. They were sad and full of disappointment.

I had to live in sadness and fear for seven months. I could neither go out nor talk to anyone. I could only stay alone and be quiet. Every day, I received many calls from my relatives, mostly uncles and aunts. They knew about my situation and had called to scold and advise me. They didn't fully understand me, though. After each call I just banged my head against the wall and cried. The tears unintentionally burdened my heart even more. I felt overwhelmed as if I had to carry a thousand tonne mountain and a hardened heart that could not endure any more pain.

Until now I can hardly understand how I could live such a life. I said nothing and listened to all sorts of cries, complaints, and blame from my immediate family and relatives. I suddenly felt ashamed and afraid of people. I was afraid that someone would know that I was gay. I was afraid of everything. Nightmares came every night, waking me up in the middle of the night. And I

cried again. Tears kept rolling down but could not soothe away my pain or what I had to suffer from. Yet I knew that I had to cry for, at that time, tears were the only friend I had.



That happened two years ago. Yet now, after recovering from it, this incident is still a stigma in my family. Thinking of Dad and Mom still makes me tired. So many times I want to die but it is the images of Mom crying in the middle of the night or Dad looking at me sadly and disappointedly that force me to try to live a better life in order to win back the trust and faith from my family.

However, in order to do so, I have to trade off so many things. I lose myself who is optimistic and loves life. Now I find myself closing my heart to joys in life. I have lost faith and expectations, and accidentally created a stain of myself in my family's eyes. I have never wanted such a thing to happen, but I am forced to compromise.

I am, once again, a normal son in my parents' eyes. I know, upon accepting to live this life, I have to give up many other things. Yet, I don't know when this society will see homosexual people in a proper light with an open mind. We are simply those whose hearts love differently.

*“Any kind of difference deserves empathy, why not a difference in a heart?”*

# *The Gay' and an Almost Death*

*Bin*

I was born to a family of six members: Dad, Mom, two elder sisters, and one little brother. I don't know why I have loved playing girls' games, being coddled, and have been loved the most since I was small. I also cry very easily, just like a girl. My childhood was a series of long and sad days. At school I usually played with girls and thus, the boys and those who knew me all called me 'effeminate'. Every time I heard them call me such, I felt hurt and sad but I couldn't say anything to anyone because I didn't want my family to know about it. Everyday in class was a hard day for me as I had to suffer from my classmates teasing me. They pointed at me and threw rocks or sandals at my face and back whenever I went past them. They burst into laughter regardless of how miserable I was, saying things like: "Look, the gay is coming", "What an effeminate freak!" These sayings and laughter surrounded me whenever I went to school and haunted me in every dream. I didn't dare tell my mom and sisters, let alone ask for their help, because my family rarely had a peaceful day. We always had to suffer from deadly beatings by my dad each time he returned home empty-handed from gambling. I was beaten the most just because Dad felt even more annoyed upon seeing his effeminate son. Mom had to work really hard to support the whole family. All she could do after a long working day was cry and avoid her husband's anger. She obviously had no time to care about the hidden corners inside my soul.

I grew up in physical and mental pain. All I could do was silently endure it until the pain grew to be so much that I couldn't handle it. During an evening when I was in eighth grade, the idea of death started smouldering inside me. At that time, as a kid I heard that if someone wanted to die, they just needed to take some sleeping pills. Yes, only in that way could I escape from this life. If I died, I

would never be teased or beaten by Dad. I should die so that everyone, including Dad, would regret mistreating me. Yes, I had to die and, after dying, my spirit would be around watching people repent what they had done. I planned for my death. I bought 30 sleeping pills and left for Hanoi to my sister's house to perform my plan. When my sister was out, I took all the pills. After a while, I started feeling dizzy and getting extreme headaches. I crawled around the bed and banged my head on the floor, but couldn't feel better. I writhed and started vomiting until I no longer had any strength left to push out whatever was left inside my stomach. I fell unconscious. When awake, I felt a bit dizzy but I understood the Death God did not welcome me.

It was not as easy to die as I used to think. I had to continue living and face my scary reality. I came back home and managed to finish my lower secondary education. Yet, I remained the victim of whimsical jokes from my classmates. Memories of those dark days prevented me from stepping ahead to enter high school as many other kids my age did. I had to give up my dream of being a teacher, which I had once shared with my close female friend. I dropped out and left for Hanoi to learn a trade.

A few years passed but I still had no courage to return to the village where I was born, to go back to what had been with me during my childhood. The nicknames people attached to me have always stopped me from coming back. Yet, one time I had to because my dad was sick. He was my father either way. No sooner had I reached the alley than I bumped into a neighbor with some old classmates. Hardly had I smiled and given them a long-time-no-see greeting when they said, "Look, my lady has finally come back" and burst into laughter. A smile disappeared as soon as it began. How sad and hurtful!

I said nothing, trying to fight back the tears. I wondered why such people like me are teased and looked down on that much.

I felt insulted. I don't understand what I have done wrong to be treated like that. It is probably because I am transgendered. Is it a crime, though? It is not our intention to be like this. We are simply born that way: a female soul trapped in a male body. It is just because we were born to a wrong body. I have cried so many times, questioning why my mom gave birth to me differently than other people and why God is so unfair in giving me a life but not allowing me to have happiness. I only hope that everyone will accept us as who we are and consider us normal like other people so that we can devote ourselves to the fullest for a better life and that we can enjoy our happiness as others do.

CHAPTER III:

Things that  
could have  
never happened

# *A Story About Love Among Humans*

*Trai Mien Bien*

Often, I think I should compose a great song to give someone I love. Or, if I were a singer, I would sing happily in order to bring smiles upon everyone's lips. But I cannot do such things. I can't even draw a joyful picture to give to that person. Now, all I can do is just tell the story of a not-so-happy memory. I hope that my words that can bring about smiles and happiness. I also hope that he would be generous enough to forgive this society - one that is filled with prejudice.

It is difficult to share certain memories with people and, with sad memories, it is even harder. Sometimes these memories are so deeply buried in a corner of your heart that, when you recall them, you tear up as if they were fresh.

It is now two years after his death. Had it not been a my promise to write a story about him, I would never release this pain. "Bro, I do hope that what I write about you will help people see things correctly and thus respect you more. Though I know it will take me a lot of time, it is okay, right?"

He was homosexual. I knew him through Youth Union meetings in our ward when I was in grade 7. Like most kids, when I met him for the first time I teased him because of how effeminate he was. As kids, we were naive and were

just imitating the adults. Even though he went through all this, he always smiled. It was not until later that I realized there was sadness behind those smiles whenever someone mocked him.

I don't know how long he worked in the ward Youth Union for. I only remember that, since I met him and until he passed away, he was always a devoted union officer. I never saw him unhappy or without enthusiasm for his job. He was always passionate, especially in volunteering and musical initiatives in the city and provincial Youth Unions. It was his energy and commitment that motivated us to follow in his footsteps.

My friend was always a good student. Even though he graduated from law school with a credit degree, he was turned down by almost every position he applied for because of his effeminate appearance. Sometimes he would say, "Every job is a good job. My job isn't easy, but it brings joy to other people, which makes me happy. My life is rarely happy, so I try to make other people happy instead. Get it?"

I remember it clearly because he suddenly started crying in the middle of saying it. The words have been ingrained in my memory ever since.

As I grew up, I to began to better understand the discrimination he suffered in the hands of society, which made me respect him even more for how he handled it. I once beat up a guy because he looked down upon my admiration for him. He said "... that gay is of no good. Anyway, he only does what no one else wants to..."

My friend was a perfectionist in his work, but what did and contributed to society was never acknowledged. Was it because of his gentle appearance and effeminate mannerisms? Why did they have to look at him with contempt and take what he did for granted?

These people were selfish and obnoxious. Is being homosexual so morally wrong that everything a homosexual person does, even for the community, deserves only negative responses?

I still remember one night in a mountainous village; he played the guitar for us kids. The familiar songs were so sad through his voice:

“If everyone chooses easy work, who will do the hard work?”

Or another song, 'Dust', during which he always cried while singing:

“Which dust has transformed into my soul so that one day I will return to it...”

The last song that he sang exclusively for me was a strange one with an unbelievably soft melody. He only smiled looking at me and said, “Listen kid, this is just for you”.

“... You will come and you will leave for the other side of the mountain

Each saying is a sail filled with the wind setting to the horizon

Only laughter, only tears are left in the midst of life...”

It was the last time I saw his smile - pure and innocent. The next morning, during a campaign against HIV, he was stabbed with used syringes from some people living with HIV while he was trying to remove the syringes with blood from banana trees.

If people had held no prejudice against him, if he had not been homosexual, things would have been different. Despite our insistence, the doctors, who are supposed to live up to their code of ethics: “Doctors are like mothers”. Intentionally refused to provide him with HIV prevention treatment in the first 24 hours. If they had been moral doctors, would they have abandoned a patient in desperate need whilst saying heartless words?

“Who asked him to do such a silly thing to get stabbed? Anyway, he deserves it!”.

I saw that he was hurt, even though he was trying to smile and remain silent. It was so unfair. I even overheard them speaking badly about him: “That guy looks effeminate. Being gay is contagious and he must be HIV infected. Don't touch him...”. These people claimed to save lives.

Of course, if we had made a fuss, the whole ordeal would have made headlines. Finally he got treatment and care. Yet, his misfortune was nowhere near over. After he returned to our ward, someone spread the rumour that he was

exposed to HIV. His neighbours, who already had a grudge with him because he was homosexual, began attacking him frequently and isolated him.

I hadn't known anything. One night, when I was in Ho Chi Minh City for my studies, I received a text message from my friend: “Dear T, C passed away. He was beaten until his spleen was ruptured. He died in the ER for aortic rupture...” My heart was frozen. I was speechless.

Why? Why is this life unfair and cruel? Does a person who was born gay deserve such mistreatment? I wished those who attacked him, those who discriminated against him, and those who are like him had seen his mother hold his photo screaming before she fainted. Those of us who loved him could only glance at his photo and cry.

He was still there, smiling gently. In that photo he looked happy and more generous than any one. And from somewhere I heard his voice singing the melody filled with sadness:

“... You will come and you will leave for the other side of the mountain

Each saying is a sail filled with the wind setting to the horizon

Only laughter, only tears are left in the midst of life...”



# Once Famous

*Mein*

Perhaps only a few want to be different from other people. Certainly no one wants to live with HIV. Neither do I. I have never wanted to be in that minority. Feeling isolated and lonely even in my own family made me cry. Saying that I was completely out of my mind is not an overstatement when I saw that my face and my life story were revealed in the newspaper.

What happened that day is still fresh in my mind. "I will only write what you tell me, but, first and foremost, you have to sign an agreement saying that you agree to let me interview you and use your name as well as your photo". She said to me in a soft voice, "It is just part of procedure". Her nodding and her empathizing words and looks made me feel safe. How comfortable it was to have a person there to share what I had been through with.

"About A Depraved Gigolo"

What a headline! How pitiful it was!

And being reviled was the ending for my story:

"Fuck you, you uneducated bastard! What the hell did you do? Do you have any idea how much you have humiliated your whole family? Are you so proud of being an HIV infected male prostitute that you have to put your face in the news like that? Do you think your life is that interesting, bastard?"

What she wrote about me was so 'real' that extent I couldn't even see myself in her story. I couldn't find myself in words that she used. What did she mean when she used such awful words? 'Tranny', 'belated repentance', 'led a loose life', 'a predictable ending', 'no hope at all'... Yes, it was her that made all of my hopes disappear when she wrote that article.

Indeed, I didn't predict the consequences of the article. I also don't know if she could have known what would happen to me because of her article. I agreed to let her interview and write about me simply because I needed empathy and understanding. I also thought that my story would probably be helpful for other people like me. I had no idea that the article would be such a shock for my family and relatives.

Unable to overcome the overwhelming emotions that the article brought, I isolated myself from the outside world for 30 days. I didn't talk to anyone. I only ate and slept. I did nothing besides locking myself in four walls.

A slap on my face and a chain of questions. It wasn't insults nor care nor consolation.

"You got what you deserve".

"It's just because of your stupidity".

"You chose not to follow the right path? Now there is only shit waiting for you! It's no one's fault but yours".

There was no beating or cursing. Yet why did I feel like I was being tortured? Day by day, I looked at the emotionless faces around me and listened to the sighs about karma. My life felt like a living hell. It was even worse than the days I had spent as a prostitute, which I thought would be the most terrifying stage in my life. Yet, as an old saying goes, "One cannot predict surprises", in as little as five years, I kept going from one 'surprise' to another. I could not have predicted that one day I would have to drop out of school at 17 to work when I was so into studying.

I could not have predicted that I would be living with the so-called 'disease of the century' when I was only 18. I also could not have predicted that my family would treat me as they did. How could they have been like that? Their attitude and harsh words made me feel worse than being raped by my employer and other male prostitutes ever had. It made me feel worse than I felt when I was treated like a toy by my customers, a flesh tool for them to use to satisfy their desires.

I also could not have predicted how much letting her interview me would

hurt me. Or how what she promised to write about me would turn out that way. I didn't need her to pity me in her article. What I needed was an empathetic conversation between her and me. Instead, she emphasized all I had done wrong as a 'male prostitute'. She focused on the bad rather than talking about how much I struggled with this life, wanting to live well and to help others like me. Why did she call that 'belated repentance'? Would it be belated if I had continued taking vengeance on life and then died in regret? I believe that nothing is 'belated', especially for repentance and atonement. I once bore a grudge against life, but I don't want to any longer. Yet, in the ending of her article she said my repentance was too late. She took hope away from me and people like me who want to live and to do something meaningful no matter how short our lives are. Her senseless words nearly killed me. If the pills I took had been strong enough to end my life that night after my family confronted me about the article, would she have had any 'belated repentance'?



# *What if*

*Moon and Hoa Ho*  
*(based on Phi's Story)*

12 PM. I woke up in a cold sweat.

For nights the movie had lingered in my mind. The storyline, the death of a character, everything seemed connected with me. They reminded me of memories deeply buried in my heart - memories that I had never told to anyone.

And now, out of nowhere, they started coming out more and more clearly...

Back then I was in my final year of high school. Unlike other kids the same age, I had other, bigger concerns besides the common worries about studying and examinations. I felt uneasy about myself and my small differences in feelings which grew bigger as time passed. I knew I was different but from what, how, and since when, I could not answer. This made me feel lost in my own life and blocked me into an isolated corner.

I might have remained confused if I hadn't known him: a childhood friend whom I always trusted. It was our differences that drew us close. I still remember the surprise and outburst of feelings and warm looks we gave to each other. We saw ourselves in each other. We could see in each other every feeling, from loneliness to isolation, doubt, confusion and exhaustion for hopeless efforts. Perhaps misery loves company.

That was the nature of our relationship then. We got closer to each other, shared many things with each other, especially our common differences.

Together we sought information in articles, newspapers, on the Internet, and from websites on homosexuality. We read, heard, and saw ourselves in these resources, which helped is to gradually understand more about ourselves. Inside



our heads. we started forming a different world where there were people who thought differently like us. Both of us felt that we were less lonely, happier, and more comfortable when realizing and living with our own feelings.

The moment we acknowledged our homosexual orientation was also when we started worrying and fearing the prejudiced attitudes of other people. Being the only son in each of our families, both he and I were very afraid of our two families finding out about our secret. Thus, we both understood we would have to be careful in everything we did and that only when we were alone could we be true to ourselves. Luckily, our houses were in the same alley, which gave us many opportunities to share and encourage each other. As for me, he became my mental pillar where I could express my deepest thoughts and feelings, things I could never tell anyone else.

Our final year passed quickly. If nothing had happened on that day...

It was when he and I were careless. We thought our voices were soft enough and that no one could hear us talking about our homosexual feelings. His father overheard our story. I still remember him looking at us, half angry and half disgusted. His lips trembled as if he wanted to say something but failed. Then, opposite to his usual gentle manner, he rushed between us, slapped my friend's face hard and yelled at him 'Go home now!' He dragged him along. I felt lost and speechless.

Everything happened to us so fast. I stood still in astonishment. I remember he did look back; his eyes were filled with pain. His look was like he was asking for an impossible change. He felt useless and he cried then. So did I.

Since then, he hadn't come to my house. I knew his parents forbade him to hang out with me. I was worried about him, about anything that could happen to him and simultaneously I was worried about myself in case his dad talked to my parents. Things weren't as bad as I thought; his parents didn't say a word about me to my family. I tried in every way to contact him but it was in vain. He was under a strict home arrest.

Not until a week later did I get a chance to see him. He looked emaciated. He told me about the previous days when his parents shouted at him and forced him to change. What mental torture. They said words to him that he had never

thought they would. He could hardly believe that love could disappear as quickly as smoke and now only cruelty was left. His parents thought that because he was born in a male body he was supposed to be one and they wondered that how he could be so sick. They felt disgusted by him. Those days he lived in suffocation in his house amongst those he loved. He said he was exhausted and that he was bored with this life. He wanted to be released from everything by death.

I was in shock. The friend that I had known and played with since we were small was not that weak, hopeless, or at least not someone that looked for death. Hugging him, I tried to console him and advised him to try to move on and share with me parts of his burden. I did not know what else I should do. I saw him cry; his looks were filled with tears. I remember his lips trembling, failing to utter anything. He was hungry for understanding from his family, yet no one empathized with him! He was pushed to the end and had no way out. Looking at my friend, I also wanted to cry but I told myself to be tough for him, so he had someone to lean on.

What I did not dare to think about did become real though.

The image of my friend hanging in the alley at dawn still haunts me, even now. It was the alley that we usually took as a short cut to school every early morning. That morning, I stood there in astonishment seeing my friend was no longer alive. I saw his eyes wide open and looking at me. There was no pain and sadness in those eyes! Was his death a release for his soul or for everyone? My friend's death was so unfair and pitiful. I was down on my knees and crying in vain. I cried out wishing to save him. Yet everything was too late. Just too late!

I lost him forever. What if I had consoled him more and stayed by his side more. What if I had known that my friend was thinking of doing this? What if... So many 'what-ifs' suffocated my soul. His death was a great loss for me. I felt like I lost myself. I became almost senseless, disoriented, and indifferent about anything. Nights passed and I was drowned in nightmares. What I saw that morning kept returning to me. Sometimes I could not convince myself that he was dead. I tormented myself for months: why I had failed to stop him from killing himself? Why? Why and why?

That time was extremely hard for me. My studies were really affected by

it. Sometimes it seemed that I could not get past it. Yet, thanks to encouragement from my family and friends, I finally calmed down and did not let it affect my studies.

A while after his death, his parents came to my house. They talked to my parents and advised my family to be more sensitive and take good care of me. Perhaps they regretted creating too much pressure on their son and felt they indirectly pushed him to suicide. His family now has more open-minded viewpoints towards homosexuality.

Although my parents currently know I am homosexual and try to avoid mentioning this fact, they never put any pressure on me or force me to change. I know the story of my friend has also been carved deeply in my parents' souls.

# Crazy People

*Tieu Nhat*

Curses stormed a cold day in the mid summer. Dat held his face, staring at those who were standing in front of him. There were a lot. His father, mother, relatives - all surrounded him and looked at him attentively. I thought Dat would cry as a normal people would do, but Dat muffled. He stressed each word:

“I-am-not-crazy!”

The people angrily looked at him. They intended to give him another slap. *Smack!* Dat bent over for the slap. He cried furiously.

“I am not crazy! I am not! Love! How can loving a boy be crazy? If so, everyone is crazy too! Everyone is crazy!”

“Lock him up!” A woman yelled, and then the 'normal' people took Dat, no matter how hard he struggled and screamed. They took him to the psychiatric ward.



“He is not crazy,” I cried and clutched at Tuan's shoulder. “He is not crazy indeed”.

“I know”. Tuan gently held my shoulder, “I know. Do you want to visit him with me?”

I choked, “Let's go!”

“Ok, I'll come with you...”, Tuan stroked my hair. “To prevent you from seeing crazy people”.



Not until arriving at the hospital did I know Dat was discharged and sent home. I came to his house. The road was so bumpy that I had to lean on Tuan to get rid of my unease.

Dat's family gave me the cold shoulder when I greeted them. Knowing that I came to visit Dat, they were even colder. They took Tuan and me to a

shabbily built house in the backyard and left us there. I looked around and then saw Dat...

“Dat!” I nearly cried out loud. “Son of a bitch!”

Dat gave me a pale smile and weakly hid away his chained legs. He tried to cover the sound of the metal clinking together. Yet he could not hide his arms. I squatted down, cursing:

“Crazy! They are a bunch of crazy people! Crazy indeed!”

“You...are using your sharp tongue again”. Dat giggled. “Forget it. I can take it”.

“They are crazy!” Tears rolled down on my face, “You...”

“I can take it”. Dat smiled and affirmed. “My body is just a bit tired”.

“For how long have you been chained like this?” Tuan shot me a look.

“For two weeks. No, only one week”. Dat corrected himself.

“I will call the police”. Tuan took out his phone.

“No, I don't want that”, said Dat. “They are my parents”.

“What happened then?” I shivered, holding his thin hand.

“I decided to come out to them”. Dat snorted. “I told my parents that I love boys. That's all”.

“Are you out of your mind?”. I cried, “You knew what would happen but still came out?! Do you know how other people will treat you?”

“Have you ever felt tired of living a lie like this?” He looked down, sadly.

“You are crazy too, bro”. Dat continued saying when I stayed quiet. “Living as you do is also crazy”.

I was about to say something but I had hardly started when a furious voice rose up, stopping me.

“Get lost! All of you!!!”

The woman appeared that day. She shooed Tuan and me away from the house. Curses filled the air and I could not hear what Dat was saying. I only saw his tormented eyes and his withering smile.

“Crazy assholes! Freak gays! Get lost!!!”

For a long time after that day I didn't see Dat. It was a very, very long time. I only heard that he had run away. To where, I had no idea. I still checked my email and kept my Yahoo chat available to wait for him. I still transferred money to Dat's account. I kept hoping that, in some place, Dat was living a good life.

During those days, I also found myself growing up and I starting thinking about Dat's, mine, and everyone else's craziness. I no longer felt anger and hatred. I forgave everything. We humans are all crazy at some point. I used to go wild when Tuan broke up with me. I used to be angry about being lonely. I used to be crazy when thinking of Dat, a crazy person. Yet I used wine to be crazy. What about Dat, Tuan, and other people?

We often go crazy just because we feel lonely in this life. Or because finding someone that understands us (even when we cannot understand ourselves) is difficult. It isn't easy to explain why we tend to hate that which is different from us while we love that which is similar to us. It is because we are afraid of so many things, and unaware of too much. We choose to only stand still and look at those 'scary' things from afar. We make crazy judgments of too many things. We cannot empathize with or accept 'non-normal' things. Being crazy is a way to avoid what we hate, what we fear, and what we desire.

And finally I realized that neither Dat, nor me, nor other people are crazy.

We are all are sensible to the our vulnerabilities. Humans are surprisingly vulnerable. Perhaps it is because we desire happiness for ourselves so much that we can hurt anyone that may hurt us? Perhaps it is because we are human?

I waited for Dat for a long time. Finally, I found Dat in stories by a writer in some newspapers that I usually read. I planned to wait for him for a few more days as my Yahoo chat was still available, but then I was unable to do so. I missed him so I sent him an email:

“I miss you, a crazy person”.

And as I wished, Dat was leading a good life...

“You are also crazy, fool! I miss you too. But now I am not that crazy as I am not alone anymore. See you one day. Just keep your Yahoo chat available. One day, I will come back to see you”.

I laughed, and clicked the mouse to delete Tuan's Yahoo ID from my contacts. Now it was my turn to find someone to rescue me from all this craziness.

CHAPTER IV:

# An onward Journey

# *There are Clouds in the Sky*

*Tieu Nhat*

“It’s cloudy”, said his mom while she sewed a button on his shirt. “Dozens of the Japanese cedars your dad planted will die. This winter is too damn cold”.

He sat there, giving a blank look to everything. The sky he saw through the window was a dim piece of gray light. He stared at the rust on a big and heavy lock on the window frame. His eyes scanned the smeared yellow walls dotted with peeling plaster. He visualized in his head the slim figures of ever-green Japanese cedars with spiky tops rising towards the sky. Yet the trees died out as well. So did his heart.

'Linh!'

He was startled and turned back to see his mom. She bit off the last of the thread and grumbled. He was usually daydreaming when she spoke to him, spoon-fed him, or when she shouted at him for being an undutiful son. She placed too much expectation on him, and he disappointed her too much.

“You have to forget all those sick things!” Her voice was louder. “Even that bastard!”

“I gave birth to you as a boy without any disability. Don't you dare do such sickening things!”

There was a slight spark in his eyes. His lips tightened. Mom seemed to realize how much her words had affected him. She lowered her voice, insisting.

“It's because you have to learn so much, dear. It is our fault too. We did not care about you and let you stay away from us when you were still too small. I am like a tree grower waiting for a harvest season, but now you let me down. You humiliate me. Don't you know how much people look down on the homosexual freaks? Every time I hear the word 'gay' I feel hurt so much. They intend to humiliate me. You humiliate me.' And then his mom sulked, 'You are a boy. How could you be in love with another boy? Oh my son...’”

His mom went out to buy him some porridge. Slowly he walked to the window. There were eight cold iron bars. He touched the bars, gently pressing. He could see rust falling down on his feet. The trees outside were casting gloomy shades over the whole quarter. Next to him an old lady was wandering around picking up leaves on the porch. She then put the leaves in her hair, giggling like a young girl. Taking a small mirror out from her pocket, she looked at her reflection, smoothing her hair and posing. He chuckled.

The building where he stayed was on a small hill. Looking from above one could see two four-storey blocks of the biggest hospital in the province. He saw his uncle in a white shirt walking next to his mom. Thanks to his uncle, his mom didn't have to do any administrative procedures to get him in here. He burst out laughing. His uncle was a director of a renowned hospital but he was as close-minded as his mom was.

He wanted to hit his head against the wall. He wanted to find something sharp to slash his wrists with. He wanted to take a dose of rat poison so he could writhe and die as a rat. He wanted to simply disappear. He was in so much pain that he wanted to scratch off his face. He felt cramps. Sleeping pills for sure had scraped his guts.

“Linh, it's time to take your pills”.

A nurse came in. Her voice sounded cold and her face looked cold too. Two whites. Three pinks. He knew those were sleeping pills and sedatives to force him to sleep for eight hours. No dreaming, no crying, and no laughing. The patients in the two previous rooms must have taken the pills. He heard no screams or continual bangs at the walls. His face was distorted. He hated pills.

“Wait for a moment”, his mom rushed into the room. “Let me feed him a bit or else his stomach will hurt”.

He swallowed two spoons of porridge while tears rolled down his face. He shook his head, refusing another spoonful his mom tried to feed him. He put all the pills into his mouth at once and fell down on the bed. He blamed his mom, his dad, and his uncle. He blamed everyone. He lamented his life. Then he fell into a drowsy and weary sleep.

At midnight, when the effects of the drugs faded, he opened his eyes half awake and half asleep. What time was it now? 3 AM? 4 AM? The sky dimly grew bright. From the room next to his came an old man who must have been immune to the effects of the sedatives. He was marching. 'One two, one two. Freeze!' He screamed, 'Salute!' Every dawn the old man marched like that. He was scared. He was scared of the man. He was scared of the marching command. He was scared of the gloomy building packed with sensible people whose faces were saddened and crazy people who were laughing and screaming all day long. His tears rolled down in silence. He was not crazy but people thought he was. Surrounding him were mentally ill people. He cursed. The entire world was mentally ill!

The sun rose. His mom gently cleaned his face. He felt the warmth from the towel and from his mom's hands. He just wanted to cry. And then to laugh. He loved his mom but also hated her. She didn't let him explain. She didn't hear him beg. She only called a taxi, dragged him into the it, and threw him into a room of nearly seven square meters with two creaking beds, four plaster crumbling walls, and a heavy iron door turning noisily on its hinges. Each of his days started and ended with two whites and three pinks. Time seemed to stand still in this place. The world became so small, isolated, and cold. He didn't hear the vehicle engine roaring up. He didn't see many people come here to visit the other patients. He was totally bewildered to find himself locked up like a wild animal.

"I just want the best for you, son", his mom whispered, "This life doesn't accept differences. You had better not go against the flow. Boys have to act as boys and girls as girls. Being half boy, half girl is unacceptable. You have to be stronger. You have to fight against those sickening thoughts".

He wanted to cry for his misery but he knew he could not anymore. His mom was also miserable, even more so than him. So was his dad; his hair was already turning gray. He was such an undutiful son. Terribly undutiful. He

should have been a 'normal' son like the other sons who grow up, chase after girls, get married, and give birth to a kid who had better be a son to carry on the family's name. Yet he had no interest in girls, and had never dreamt of getting married to some girl one day. He only thought of other boys and his loves that led to nowhere. But is love a crime? It is simply love, isn't it?

"I just want the best for you, son. One day you will have to marry, to pursue your own happiness. Your father and I only have you to rely on".

His eyes were blurred with tears and his heart was choked with pain. His mom wanted to be happy, his dad wanted to be happy, and so did he. Of course he desired happiness. But what is that? If being happy means being loved, loving, and able to live as he wished, why didn't his mom and dad understand? That he would never be happy if they didn't love him for who he was. That if they only loved the socially constructed version of him, should he doubt their love? Parents' love for their children should be unconditional, but this society is only in favour of the majority and against those who are different. If parents know their children are different, their children must suffer from great miseries.

"I am sorry, Mom". He cried, "I was wrong".

At the end of the month, he was discharged. His mom ran to every room to announce it and people congratulated her happily. His mom gave an apple to a couple who the husband of which had autism and usually mumbled meaningless things. The wife was moved to tears. His mom even visited the old man who marched every morning and the old lady who loved adorning herself every afternoon.

His mom wished for them to get well soon and be able to go home. Then she packed his things and took him down the hill, leaving the grey buildings under gloomy trees. He turned his head to see the old man stiffly standing to salute. He smiled back but still felt afraid of the man.

He was allowed to return to his school, but he lived a quieter and more depressing life. Every night in his dreams he still heard screams of the autistic husband and the marching song of the old man. Sometimes he could not sleep, which he guessed was a counter-effect of the sleeping pills he took. His family was normal again; everyone avoided talking about what he had experienced. Yet

he knew there was something that had changed in the way his mom and dad loved him. He could only smile sadly.

He grew up and went far away from home to study. Sometimes, when he came home, his mom still reminded him that she could erase all 'sickening' and 'evil' things in his mind. Yet he still secretly loves boys and is happy and sad silently. Sometimes he turns his back to this world, but soon feels regretful. He knows he was born to be loved. If he has to suffer from a bit of misery, it is a challenge he has to be tough to overcome.

He also encounters many heart-breaking things. He has been betrayed, cheated on, humiliated, and beaten. He, however, no longer cries as much as he used to. He now looks at life in a calmer manner and he never loses his hope. Whenever he feels desperate, he reminds himself of words his mom usually says:

“There are clouds in the sky”, smiles at him.

“As clouds keep flying, life keeps going”.



# *After the Rain*

*Mong*

The afternoon rain finally stopped. After a few claps of thunder, he took his bike out and rode slowly along the familiar street. He was wondering. What would await him in the future when his sexual orientation remained as unsolved as a mathematics exercise?

Looking across the street, he accidentally caught the glimpse of two female students in pure white 'ao dai' going the opposite direction. His heart was beating along with their steps. In his mind flared a desire that he could be a girl and that he could wear 'ao dai' even once in his life.

Coming back to reality, he looked at himself. He was covered with dust and smoke after a long hard day working with broken cars in the vocational school. Seeing people on the street made him even sadder that he could not be true to himself. The wheels kept running along the road. Thoughts surged up and wandered in his head. He had to do something to change his current life. 'Something' that he had been afraid of and hesitant to do until now. He had been scared because never had he dared to think himself as a homosexual. While clearly identifying who he was and what he needed, he was still scared of being beaten like before and of being forced to learn mechanics to prove he was a strong man.

Yet this time he would be different. Taking a deep breath, he rode home as fast as he could to spit out what he was thinking. It was time for him to set himself free from the cover his family had tried to build for him.

Arriving home, he didn't bother to take his rusty bike into the house. As for him, right now, there was another thing which was more important than ever. He needed to prove to his family that homosexuality was not a disease.

“Mom, I have something to say! Up to now, I have always wanted to make you happy. I have wanted our family not to see me as a freak. I have tried to live as someone I am not”.

“Son, what's wrong with you today? What are you if not you?”

“Well, it has not been me because I am gay, Mom”

No sooner had he finished the sentence than a slap hit his cheek.

“Shut up! If you dare to say any more, you won't be my son!”

“But Mom, you don't understand me. You, my brother, and my sister thought I was sick and made me learn mechanics. Can't you see that I don't like that job?”

“Shut up! I've been raising you and that's how you repay me? You jerk! If you want to as a with gay freak, get out of my house! I will not have a child like you!”

His mom was so angry that she attacked him with no mercy. He could do nothing but cry. He wanted to die as soon as possible but then had no guts to do so.

He just wanted to be true to himself at least once, but he was abandoned by his family that day. His siblings saw him as a pathogen. Parents did not allow their kids to come near him as they were afraid their kids could learn bad things from him.

Home was no longer his warm shelter. He didn't know where else to go because he had no money.

He still can still clearly remember the first time he left home. He met an older guy who agreed to help him for a few days. In return, however, he had to become a gigolo for that guy. He gradually got used to that sort of exchange. He had no fixed home and lived as a tramp. He entertained other people for money and for basic necessities. Then, one day, he realized he couldn't live off this job any longer. He missed his family, his small nieces and nephews. He longed to call 'Mom', a word that he thought he had forgot.

Cruel waves of life constantly run into each other. Yet 'one good turn deserves another' and he lives on that saying. He has been to many places and experienced many things. There are strangers who treat each other better than biological brothers. Travelling builds a young man and he grows by struggling to live. Perhaps the sky remains cloudy, but he believes there will always be sunshine after the rain.



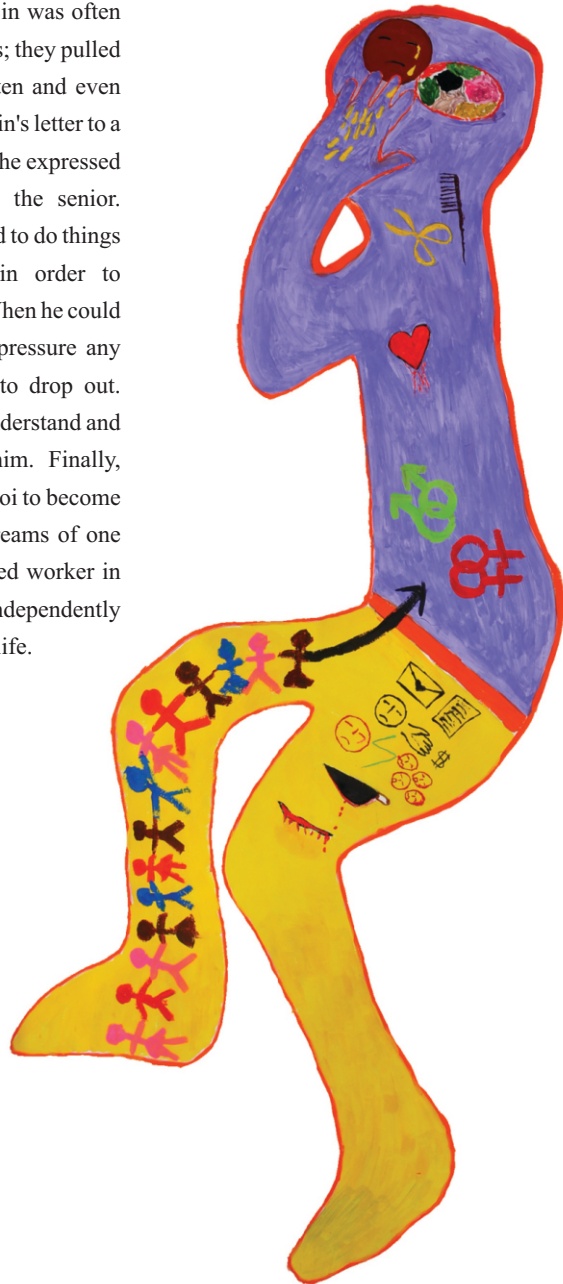


CHAPTER V:

# Final words

<sup>(1)</sup> *Participants' names are in alphabetical order*

**BIN**, born in 1991, Bin was often teased by schoolmates; they pulled his trousers down often and even threatened to reveal Bin's letter to a male senior, in which he expressed his feelings towards the senior. Consequently, Bin had to do things he didn't want to in order to appease his friends. When he could not suffer from this pressure any longer, Bin decided to drop out. Bin's father did not understand and frequently scolded him. Finally, Bin left home for Hanoi to become an apprentice. Bin dreams of one day becoming a skilled worker in order to be able live independently and to decide his own life.



**DUONG DI**, born in 1991, Beaten by parents and sister, Duong Di was sad and lonely because he thought nobody understood him. Nonetheless, he never allows anyone to use his love of men to insult his family. Therefore, when his teacher insulted his mother due to his sexual orientation, Duong Di decided to quit high school. Duong Di is happy to have an auntie who loves him, listens to his stories, and encourages him. He is now trying to live independently, to earn his own living because his parents are getting old and often falling sick. To him, despite the fact that his father may beat him black and blue, he is still his father.



**DAT NGUYEN**, born in 1989, student. Having a manly appearance, Dat is not treated badly by his family or friends. However, problems in his relationship with his boyfriend tire him and he is unable to share with anyone.



**HOANG HAI, born in 1977**

When friends teasingly called Hai 'lady', he was hurt a lot. Hai tried to show that he was as good as anyone, which however ended up bringing a lot of trouble to Hai and his family. Hai was confused and disoriented when he realized that he did not have any feelings towards women. This gave Hai a hard time and he even did things that badly affected his health and his spirit.

Nevertheless, Hai's family and especially his father encouraged him a lot. His father even said that if Hai wanted, his father would be willing to take him to Thailand to have a gender reassignment surgery regardless how much money it would cost. Hai was very happy to hear that and explained to his father that he did have feelings towards men but did not want to become a woman. Hai takes part in social activities that support media in the promotion of preventative measures against AIDS and STDs (Sexually Transmitted Diseases) among street children. He is also involved in the MSM community in Hanoi.



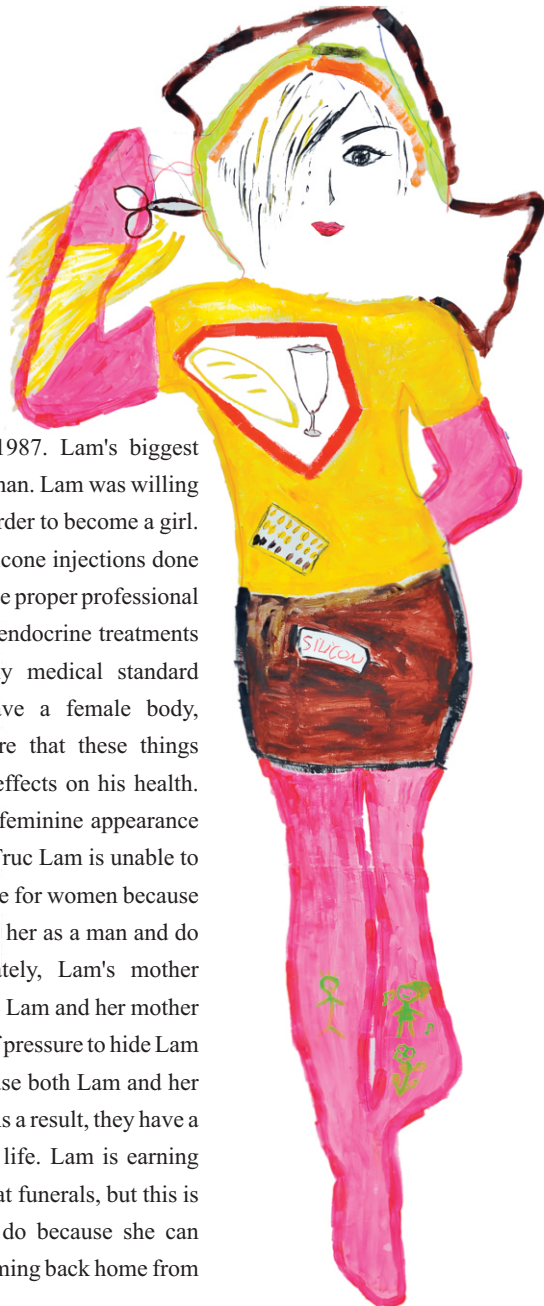


**HOA HO**, born in 1986, graduate. He was not beaten, but people's discriminatory teasing has left a deep scar in Hoa Ho's heart. Confusion about his own identity as well as his innocence caused him to be abused for many years. Nevertheless, Hoa Ho has never stopped loving life and has stayed tolerant. Hoa Ho is looking for a job in social and public health sectors in order to contribute more to society and the community.



**KIU KIU**, born in 1989, student. What makes Kiu Kiu saddest is complicated relationships in his community of gay people, especially his feelings for his boyfriend. Conflicts which cannot be shared with anyone can only be discussed among his friends who bear the same sadness and concerns as Kiu Kiu. Besides, the best consoling that Kiu Kiu finds is his passion for design. Kiu Kiu designs his favourite clothes and even organizes fashion shows with his friends. Kiu Kiu is trying non-stop to help change in at-risk behaviours among homosexual communities.

**TRUC LAM**, born in 1987. Lam's biggest dream is to become a woman. Lam was willing to pay the whole cost in order to become a girl. He even agreed to get silicone injections done by people who did not have proper professional training and to go under endocrine treatments which did not meet any medical standard requirements just to have a female body, despite being fully aware that these things would have detrimental effects on his health. However, even having a feminine appearance with women clothes on, Truc Lam is unable to find a job which is suitable for women because people can still recognize her as a man and do not accept her. Fortunately, Lam's mother accepts her. Nevertheless, Lam and her mother have to suffer from a lot of pressure to hide Lam from their relatives because both Lam and her mother depend on them. As a result, they have a number of difficulties in life. Lam is earning her living by performing at funerals, but this is not what Lam wants to do because she can easily be abused when coming back home from work at midnight.



**LO LO**, born in 1979. Lo Lo graduated from Teacher Training College, but, due to his slim and slender lady-like applications, he had his job application turned down by many places. Lo Lo had to suffer being insulted by none other than his own family and friends. Lo Lo was forced into an arranged marriage to satisfy his family but he was not successful in making a home as he expected. Lo Lo confessed to his wife, freed her, and decided to become a monk. However, he was not accepted to be a monk because 'men who have feelings towards men' are not allowed. Lo Lo enlisted in the military, but he was discharged earlier than he was supposed to be when they found out that Lo Lo had feelings for men... No matter how unfair it is, Lo Lo has realized the value of life, particularly after he unsuccessfully committed suicide. Since then, Lo Lo has become more tolerant. Lo Lo thinks of leading

a simple life. If people do not allow Lo Lo to be a monk, Lo Lo will become a monk on his own. He will not keep the hatred inside himself and will always do good deeds. Currently, Lo Lo is a collaborator for an educational program dedicated to preventing HIV among men. He is also taking part in a number of activities to help society and the community better understand gay, lesbian, and transgendered people. These activities even have changed Lo Lo's father's views towards him. On his 33rd birthday, Lo Lo received a present from his father together with his sincere wishes.



**MEIN**, born in 1986. Mein has been through all the ups and downs and thick and thins in life. At the age of 16, he had to quit school and was forced to become a male prostitute. When Mein was about to give up on life, he found out the way to live his life and to move on: writing about people who were in the same situation as Mein, meeting them, and helping them.



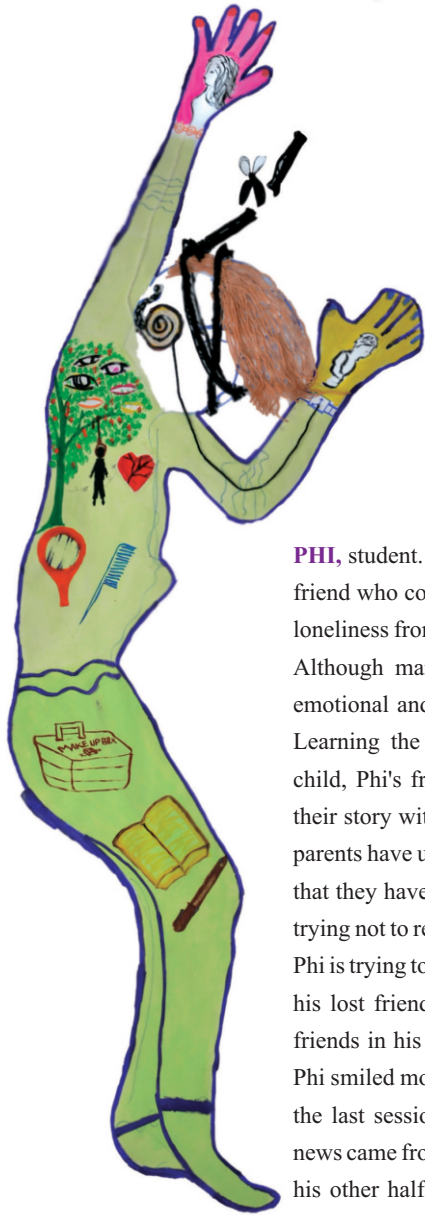
**MOON**, born in 1989, student. Being handsome, sporty, and using brandname stuff, Moon has the appearance of a playboy. A charming smile with sparkingly white teeth, nobody would ever realize that behind those beautiful smiles are Moon's falling tears. Having a dream-like relationship with his teacher, Moon thought that what he had dream of for so long finally came true. However, his boyfriend, due to pressures from his family, informed Moon that he was going to get married. It is the same old story for men who have relations with men. Everything was broken. Moon thought of committing suicide. Waking up after 81 days in the hospital, the first thing he saw was his father and his younger brother, who he loves dearly. Moon has now got a different view about life. He is determined to live and study. Moon will still live the life he chooses because he cannot make it different but he will not make his dear people bother about him any more.



**NANG**, born in 1995, pupil. Nang's family discovered that he had a relationship with a male friend; therefore, he had to suffer a thrashing from his father as well follow harsh regimens which, according to his father, would make him become a real man. The sadness of being unable to share his feelings with anyone forced Nang to use a razor blade to cut his wrist in order to forget everything. In contrast to his manly and strong appearance, Nang is very shy, especially in the crowds. The first time Nang participated in a group meeting, he was really shy when telling his story. Only when people got closer and Nang listened to other people's stories, did he become more confident and share more about his story.



**TIEU NHAT**, born in 1991, student. When he was a student at a Specialized School in the province, his relationship with his boyfriend was discovered and his family took him to a psychiatric hospital. Only when Nhat accepted that he was wrong and promised not to love men anymore, was he allowed to go back to school. However, the loneliness, rejection in love, and anger when his friends kept teasing him, threatening him, and hitting him due to his baby-like appearance really affected him. Nhat used many ways to hurt himself in order to forget his pains. Fortunately, Nhat found a foster-sister who understands and loves him. That sister showed Nhat the way to live the life he wanted. Gradually, Nhat become stronger and the greatest thing is that Nhat can forgive people who used to hurt him before. He knows what he should do to avoid unnecessary conflicts with his family but still be true to himself.



**PHI**, student. The shock from an early age when a friend who could not suffer the discrimination and loneliness from his family died is still haunting Phi. Although many years have passed, Phi remains emotional and has to stop while telling this story. Learning the painful lesson of losing their own child, Phi's friend's family came over and shared their story with Phi's parents. Thanks to that, Phi's parents have understood him more. Despite the fact that they have not fully accepted him yet, they are trying not to recall the pain in his heart. Meanwhile, Phi is trying to live well not only for him but also for his lost friend. After sharing his story with other friends in his group, Phi felt much more relieved. Phi smiled more often after each group meeting. In the last session of the program conference, good news came from Phi. He informed that he had found his other half after many years of hiding and not loving anyone.



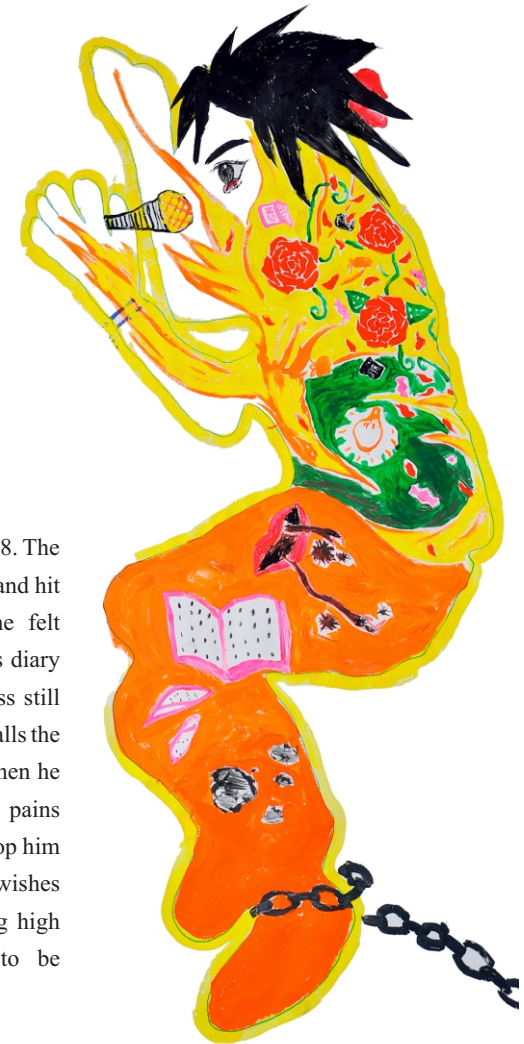
**MONG**, born in 1986. Born into a poor family, Mong had to quit school at early age and was often teased by classmates and neighbourhood kids. Mong was not properly taken care of by his mother and she even hit him out of anger at rumours from their neighbours. When Mong got older, he participated in different charitable and social activities, which helped Mong to no longer feel embarrassed about himself. Mong understood who he really was and felt proud because of what he had contributed to the community, while the kids who used to tease him drowned themselves into drugs and other bad things. The pride that Mong carries and the social activities that Mong participated in throughout the years helped change people's view about him. His mother also felt prouder of him. She no longer thought of him as a disgrace of the family.

After many years, Mong's mother finally accepted him as one of her daughters and she even took Mong to buy cloth for a dress. Even though he can no longer wear that dress, Mong treasures it as a great memory that he shared with his mother. Despite difficulties that Mong faces in his life, he is trying his best in order for him and his friends to have their own place to share their desires and dreams of becoming women.





**TRAI MIEN BIEN**, born in 1991, student. Born into a civil servant family, his parents put a lot of hope in him, but their hope hurts him even more. Nevertheless, he is trying to be useful and live a happy life. Together with his friends, Trai Mien Bien created Radio online to share his love. He is also writing short stories about life from his perspective. His ex-girlfriend is now his close friend and she truly understands him. He knows it takes time, lots of time, for his parents to finally accept him and he is hoping for that day to come.



**TUONG VY**, born in 1988. The pain when friends teased and hit Vy and the bitterness he felt when the teacher read his diary in front of the whole class still haunt Vy whenever he recalls the incident that happened when he was 15 years old. Those pains can never tie him up or stop him from being creative. Vy wishes he were a phoenix, being high and mighty and able to be reborn.

Vy and his friends created a forum for boys who want to become girls to share and encourage each other. Tuong Vy also organizes many charitable activities and performances.

## CHAPTER VI:

# Messages from readers

This book was sent to nearly 100 people for feedback before being published officially. Some of these people are related to the characters mentioned in the book. The editing group would like to publish some of the feedback that we received.

Readers are encouraged to send more feedback and comments on the book to [ccihp@ccihp.org](mailto:ccihp@ccihp.org)

### **FEMALE, 10 YEARS OLD, PUPIL**

I think homosexuality is common nowadays. We should not be too harsh towards them. I am scared of the adults in the stories in this book. Don't they love those gay and lesbian people?

### **FEMALE, 23 YEARS OLD, ACCOUNTANT**

I have contact with homosexual people and it is not scary at all. Everyone has their own dreams and desires to live their lives and be their own selves. I will always support them if they are positive.

### **MALE, BORN IN 1991, TECHNICIAN**

I used to criticize this issue due to my lack of knowledge and understanding about you. However, after reading this book, I understand more about your world. I am very sorry for my behaviours and actions in the past. I was really surprised after reading this book. I did not know that you had to suffer that much. I will raise my voice, together with other people's, to protect your rights. I hope that Vietnamese law will soon have specific rules to protect your rights.

### **FEMALE, 25 YEARS OLD, OFFICE WORKER**

Words people use like 'visible gay' have already carried the discrimination people have forward. For me, it is not right to them by their somebody 'gay' or 'lesbian' because everyone has their own names. Please call their names!

### **MALE, 62 YEARS OLD, TEACHER**

I am the father of a homosexual child but I am confident to say that I do not discriminate or use violence against my child. I am doing what a father is supposed to do which is warning my child of wrongdoings in life. Will I have peace of mind if I just leave my kid to be depraved by their own life. I keep myself updated with news about homosexual people on media. I am surprised to read similar situations to my child's in this book. It is very interesting and very true! Being a father sometimes requires being that harsh.



## CHAPTER VII:

# Terminology

### SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The term 'sexual orientation' refers to each person's profound emotional and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, individuals of a different, the same, or both sexes. For example, gay is attracted to and able to have sexual relations with other men. Lesbian is attracted to and able to have sexual relations with other women. Although sexual expression and cultural acceptance in non-heterosexual relations change through time and different cultures, it is obvious that homosexual relation is neither new nor originated from Western countries.

### HETEROSEXUALITY

The term 'heterosexuality' refers to people who are attracted to people of the opposite sex.

### BISEXUALITY

Bisexuality refers to people who are attracted to both men and women.

### TRANSGENDER

A transgendered person has a gender identity that is different from his or her sex at birth. For example, a person was born with male appearance but always considers him a female and desires to be a woman. However, not all transgendered people would like to have sexual reassignment surgery or other gender surgeries.

### TRANSEXUAL/TRANSSEXUAL

A transsexual person is in the process of or has undergone surgery and/or hormonal treatment in order to make his or her body more congruent with his or her preferred gender.

### INTERSEX

Intersex refers to individuals who are born with both male and female biological attributes: primary and secondary sexual characteristics. Intersex people have different chromosomes from the standard definition of male (XY) and female (XX).

## HETERONORMATIVITY

Heteronormativity is the cultural bias in favour of opposite-sex relationships of a sexual nature, and against same-sex relationship of a sexual nature. In heteronormative culture, opposite-sex relationships is considered normal, natural, and ideal.

## HOMOPHOBIA

Homophobia is fear, rejection, or aversion, often in the form of stigmatising attitudes or discriminatory behaviour, towards homosexuals and/or homosexuality.

## LGBTI

LGBTI is an abbreviation that covers Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Intersexed.

## MSM/WSW

MSM is an abbreviation standing for 'men who have sex with men'; and WSW for 'women who have sex with women'. These terms are often used in public health to refer to behaviour rather than identity.



## References

1. International Commission of Jurists. 2007. Sexual orientation and gender identity in Human Rights Law.
2. Intersex Society of North America. <http://www.isna.org/>
3. UNAIDS. 2011. Terminology Guidelines.

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