

A flicker of excitement shot through my body on seeing my name among ten short-listed candidates for the National English contest. Yet, my exhilaration was stifled shortly when it dawned on me I was the only junior in the team. My eyes were shadowed. How in the world was I going to compete with seniors one year ahead of me? Baffled, I let my thought lead me back one month ago...

I was in my eleventh grade when a screening examination, primarily for last-year students, was held in my school to select ten outstanding English majors to represent Ho Chi Minh city in the final nationwide competition. Such was my adventurous streak that I signed up for the exam immediately after reading about it. At first, all I thought was to gain some experience, for I would be in level twelve the following year. Never had I envisaged being able to outgrade 490 twelfth-graders to reserve a spot in the selective team. But it was true and my name was written there, on the list, in clear black ink. I was to compete with seniors from all over the country on behalf of my city. Such realization snapped me back to reality. Which magic would help me cover the workload, supposed to be handled in a year, in just three months left ?

Despite the intimidating prospect, I decided to take a risk. After all these years, it turned out to be an invaluable chance for me to fulfill my potential and seek a truly challenging environment. Before, like every other friend in Vietnam, I followed predetermined curricula and only attended general courses. Now, my opportunity to be immersed in an intensive course had knocked and I was not going to let it pass. I was lucky to have surpassed 490

contestants in three previous tests. Nevertheless, Luck would not smile on me again if I ceased to set a firm goal and apply myself completely to that goal.

I began to establish a rigorous schedule, trying to squeeze in as much study time as possible. Only three months and my biggest dream would be realized. Three months meant challenges and satisfaction; I was determined not to waste a single second in that race against time. My daily classical music hour was replaced by CNN and VOA news reading, while on my bus route to school, friends would find me burying my head in Times or the Economists. Sensing it was not enough, I instructed my fashionable Swiss watch to give way to an odd “vocabulary bandage”, over which tiny new words were scribbled and highlighted. Then, during every coffee break in my swimming coach morning, my teammates would stare at me with curious eyes, wondering why I occasionally glanced at my wrist. Not a single mnemonic was missed by me in the attempt to amass a greater word stock.

At that time, all I had in mind was Victory. It was hard to remember how many times I sprung to my feet at the blaring of an alarm early in the morning to grasp my Oxford dictionary. Equal times were my seemingly sleepless nights spent struggling with writing and critical reading. It became my obsession to achieve the national prize. Just when I thought I could not go on anymore, about to give in to my weary eyes, a strong voice deep inside kept on shouting to my ear : “Never give up. Never.” And I did not give up, for surrender was not a word contained in my dictionary. It was not my nature.

Three months passed so quickly. The road I went through no longer seemed that

intimidating, for not only did I grapple with it, I also lived it. Standing on the stage in the graduation ceremony, amidst the wild cheering of my friend, I knew the sweat I had shed was worthy. Besides academic advancement, what it offered me was way much greater : the knowledge that I could obtain any goal, however far and difficult, by determination and hard work. That sunny morning, drown in happiness and pride, I took off my sweated hat and threw it into the sky above; it soared.