

Perilous Waters: Stories from a Vietnamese Refugee \*



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“I rubbed as much grease and dirt on me as I could to make myself ugly and undesirable, I could see the pirates’ faces,” Thanh Nguyen told me as she used her hand to rub the top of her head. “It was pitched black and we were at sea, I could only see their faces from the flashing light on their boat. The captain was confused as to why they were able to track us but he realized the motor light was still on so he turned it off and we went a different way.”

Not once but twice, the pirates came. She thought that she had escaped the pirates but as morning came, they emerged once again, this time bearing AK-47s and

talking loudly in a foreign language she did not understand. “They chased us again, this time we could not use the night to hide us. But, thank god there was a bigger ship in that harbor.” Thanh told me of the huge Russian ships that towered above the water and how they scrambled to get as close to the ship as possible. Of course, those ships would not help them escape, but they were intimidating enough to scare away the pirates.

This grim story that sounds so fictional is a sad reminder of the hardships of the Vietnamese boat people. Pirates in Thailand’s bay were notorious for plundering ships, killing the men, and raping the women escapees. She was lucky to have made it to the refugee camp in Indonesia unlike millions of other escapees who died at the hands of pirates, starvation, sickness, and ultimately, the sinking boats. Thanh Nguyen is now 45 years old and resides in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. She owns a small nail salon and has 5 children. Her story sparked both fear and relief inside of me.

During the years after the U.S army left and communism infected Vietnam, millions of people suffered. Children of soldiers who fought against the communists were looked down upon. They were refused jobs and higher education. Soldiers who fought for the allied forces were arrested and forced into “re-education camps” in which they were never heard of again. People speculated that they were tortured and killed. Thanh was 18 when she decided to flee the country with her brother. Her decision to flee was an illegal act under communist rule.

“I told my father I had to leave,” she said, looking to the side as if reliving that moment. “He made me calm down and told me I have to think about it and that there was a 50% chance I would die. He didn’t try to stop me though, but he wanted me to

scare me. He told me to think about it for 3 days. That night I told him I would go even if I only had a two percent chance of survival because if I stayed I would already be dead.”

The trip cost her family a huge fortune and her family was already poor. “We had to scavenge money and borrow what we could,” she said. It cost 12 ounces of gold to buy the trip for her and her elder brother. “We were on a small boat one and a half meters wide and seven meters long with 22 people, and two thirds of the boat was submerged underwater because it couldn’t handle the weight. I couldn’t lay straight. I thought the boat would take me to a bigger ship, but we were on it for 3 nights and 4 days.”

She was fearful for her life, she told me. There were so many things that could have gone wrong. She fled her country in March. The storm season was approaching and the small fishing boat was not equipped for the open sea. “The waves were like 10 feet tall and I was sure that we were going to flip over,” she said. The second time the storm hit they were close to the coast of Malaysia. The wind and water blew in the opposite direction of the island so the captain had to sail with the wind in order to pass the storm. Thankfully, she landed in Malaysia but her journey did not end there. The bad news was that Malaysia had stop taking in refugees so Nguyen was forced to start another journey to Indonesia.

The second journey proved to be no less scary than the first. The boat provided by the Malaysian government could only hold about 100 people. They were given some water and food for the journey and sent on their way. “About 5 pm that day, the motor died and the people’s spirit died with it,” Nguyen recalled. She told of the panic people felt

and the never ending waters that surrounded them. Stories of motors dying never ended well. People talked about those who had to turn to cannibalism because they were adrift for at sea for days without food or water.

Nguyen and the other 99 people were at the mercy of nature as they drifted on the open sea not knowing what would become of them. Panic arose and the captain sealed off access to the water supply in fear that all resources would dwindle. “The women sat there moaning and crying while the sun beat down on us relentlessly. Some people passed out from dehydration.” She said a few men claimed to be mechanics but none of them were successful in repairing the damaged boat. “I remember this old man sitting there and saying that he was old and it was okay for him to die, but all the young people shouldn’t have to die at sea, I remember tears coming out after that.”

Miraculously, her salvation came one day later when an old man came forward. He sat humbly in the back as the other men worked. “He went into the motor room and came back out. He asked for a metal nail file or something similar and thank god I brought one on the trip. I gave the file to him and a couple hours later we heard the motor sputter back to life.”

They were back on their way to the unknown future. They had been sailing for days now with no land in sight.” At that point, the boat could only go straight because of the way the old man fixed it. She told a story of the boat running onto coral reef and almost sinking. She had to swim to a nearby uninhabited island and live there for a few weeks. “A few people got really sick on the island,” she said, as if describing a scene from an episode of *Lost*. When the boat was fixed once more, they were back at sea. “We didn’t know when we would see land, it was so scary. We didn’t see any other

ships.” She looked at me half smiling and asked, “have you ever been happy to see trash?” I told her no. She explained that trash meant a sign of civilization, and that day, she crash landed on the shores of Indonesia.



Her journey proved to be fruitful in the end. She now lives a quiet life with her family, as well as she extended that she has successfully sponsored to come to the U.S. Many times I was on the brink of crying as I listened to her story. It forced me to undergo a sense of humility and thankfulness that I would not have to endure the situations she encountered. When asked how the journey has affected her today she answers, “It taught me to be strong, and that I could overcome anything if I went through that. It taught me to work hard for what I want.”

Three pages are never enough for such stories but it has opened up a small window to allow a glimpse of what life was like during times of war. Stories like this one are

relevant now more than ever as the world is dealing with a humanitarian crisis. One thing we must all remember is that humanity is very important and I am thankful Nguyen, my mother, was a refugee and able to give me the life I live today.

\*quoted material was translated from Vietnamese into English by the author.