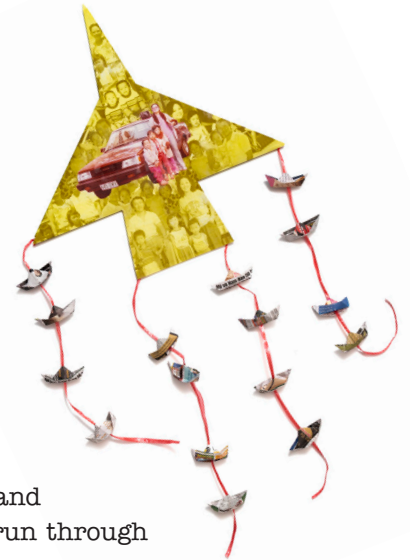


Dear Reader,

My family's from Vietnam, we're all from South Vietnam. We left separately during the Vietnam War. I was born in '81 and my dad left just before I was born, so I never met my dad until I was about five. He got permission to leave the country, so he couldn't take anyone with him. I don't really know the exact details, but he left and he came over to Australia to create a new life for himself. We were stuck back in Vietnam, my mum, older brother and older sister and the rest of our extended family.



We tried to become boat people in the early 80s. My mum had plans. She sold all her jewellery. She sold everything to get on a boat. The day came and we go to the boats. We didn't get on the boat though because you have to run through the ocean to get to the boat and we got caught by the North Vietnamese.

The story goes that I was dead for a couple of minutes or so because of running through the ocean. By the time they got caught, I wasn't breathing because all the sand in the water was in my face. When we got caught by the North Vietnamese my mum got sent to jail and she pleaded to take me with her. She later tells me she wanted to take me because she feels like a lady with her child, they won't do much to her. So she took me with her to jail and they let the rest of the family go - my sister, my brother, my uncles and cousins. They just took my mum. We were there for eight months. I would have been a couple of months old and we got out before I was one. Then we went back to our village. We had to stay there until '86. In '86, my dad managed to sponsor us over to Australia - to Brisbane.

Growing up, my mum tells the story but all the dates change and growing up, I guess that's why I didn't really take it too seriously. Every time the story would change, saying it was two months, saying it was six months we spent in jail, telling me how bad it was, and the severity of it just kind of changed. So it didn't make me take it too seriously.

As you get older, I think it changes. Even before I had a family, I started thinking, I think she's been through a lot. And the reason she doesn't want to talk about it or makes light of it is it is a traumatic thing for her.

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At first it was only my direct family that came over, my mum, my brother, sister and myself. Then as the years went on, we managed to slowly sponsor cousins and uncles and people like that over. My dad did come over first with his brother, they chose to come to Australia and his other brother went to America. I think they landed in Sydney first and then they moved to Brisbane.

We haven't really spoken about why they chose to come to Australia but I think it was just anywhere that would take them. Anywhere outside of Vietnam was going to give them better opportunities. They were happy with anything because they would have been considered refugees. My uncle, who my dad came with, he had no family, so I guess he had nothing to lose. Whereas my dad had all of us. That's why I think it must have been something he had to do. It wasn't like he chose to leave and things like that.

He would have been over here, and he would have had to go through the process of sponsoring us to come over. He would have just spent those five years saving the money up to eventually fly us all over.

The rest of the family came over when I was five. I remember landing and not feeling excited or anything like that, but just feeling really out of place. I remember wearing these woollen coats, which you would never wear in Brisbane, because they were really super thick. And we all had matching ones, me, my brother, my sister. I remember that very clearly, and I'm just laughing about it each time. But that just makes me think, my mum had no idea what Australia was like. My dad would have sent letters and he would have said it's colder than Vietnam, so wear the warmest things we could find.

I was five when we arrived in Australia, my brother would have been seven and my sister would have been nine. When we got here I remember it being very barren, but I guess when you come from Vietnam, it's very congested, whereas here there's so much space. My dad was working in a factory. My mum had to work in a sweatshop, sewing and things like that. That's how we got our clothes. She would take offcuts and make us whatever clothes she could make. So for them to work, we had to be sent to school.

We had no English, we didn't have anything. Apparently I was too young to go to preschool, but they just pushed me into preschool. They put my brother into grade 1 and my sister into grade 2, even though she was supposed to be in grade 3. They just kind of put us together as much as they could, but that was our first schooling experience and with no English. That was at West End State School. I was there from preschool, grade 1. Then we switched to Dutton Park State School when I was in grade 2. I was in ESL for a year. And then in grade 3 I won a spelling bee, so I was pretty good at English by that time.

We didn't really have many bad experiences in West End. There's so many instances where we didn't know what we were doing. Like, my parents would send us to school in pyjamas, and we wouldn't know any different. Teachers would laugh about it, but we didn't think it was anything unusual. I remember in grade 1, I didn't know what togs were. I remember going to school and they were saying, "It's swimming time. Make sure you bring your togs." I remember taking my sister's togs. We didn't know English, we didn't know the difference. We were told togs. I knew my sister wore togs to go swimming. So I would wear my sister's togs to swimming. It was a big learning curve.

I think I was maybe too young to realise, but once I went to Dutton Park, I did definitely feel like a big outsider there. I felt like maybe because the kids were a bit older, they knew. You would feel it. Looking back, it probably was comments like, "You're different. Your name's different." At Dutton Park, there were not very many immigrants, it wasn't as multicultural. In West End I felt like there was more diversity and more kids who couldn't speak English. So I think I wasn't the outsider there, whereas at Dutton Park, I did feel like the outsider, the weakest link in the school.

Winning the spelling bee was a big thing for me. Becoming smart was a big thing. Once I went to Dutton Park, everything about me was different and was not fitting in. First of all, my name's Huy, so being in grade 2, telling your name's Huy, which sounds like "wee", and being a little child – kids are horrible. They would call you "wee wee", and that name has stuck with me all my life – which is fine, I've embraced it now. But at that age, it was not pleasant. And then associated with that, you're the kid who can't speak, who can't talk, who can't spell, who can't do anything. I didn't take ESL as a bad thing. I just thought it was a special class for special children, not thinking it was, like the special needs children. But once I started winning, I kind of felt like I was more winning in life. I found a place and a role that I could fulfill, whereas before my role was the outsider. Now I was somehow better than the locals. For us, it was always if you want your place in the world, you had to work for it. We always felt like work harder and you get to take up more space in the world.

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I didn't feel like I had a bad childhood. It wasn't a good childhood, by any means. It was tough. But I really enjoyed my childhood. We didn't have that much, but we weren't poor. We never struggled for food on the table, but we were not comfortable, I would say. I don't remember it being bad, I just remember enjoying everything that I had. Even Christmases where we didn't get presents, it didn't bother me because I guess I didn't know any different. It wasn't our norm. And we were happy with our norm. We weren't allowed to go to other people's houses, apart from other Vietnamese families, so we had nothing to compare to. And the other Vietnamese families had things similar to what we had, so I never envied things until I got older.

It wasn't until high school when I started to feel envy. I think going into high school, people would talk more about what they have, and that's probably when I realised that we were poor. And it probably hit a little bit harder then. And once I realised, that's where it made me think, okay, well, I want these things. I can't get them naturally, so maybe we have to do something about this. And that was to work harder. It's still something that drives me now.

As much as people say that Australia is super welcoming – which we are. But I do think, as an immigrant, you still have to prove yourself a little bit harder, as opposed to somebody who was born here. I feel like it's always going to be something that I live with but I'm okay with it. It is a motivating factor for me. It's something that probably my parents instilled in me at a young age. Coming to Australia, they would've come here and just fought to survive. They never got to thrive; everything they did was literally survival mode. For me, I get to thrive now, but at the same time, I feel like I still have things that I owe to the community, to my family, to my culture, to everything, so it's always still a survival mode for me.

I still feel indebted to my family. In Vietnamese culture, you have a lot of elder respect, so you're always owing to your parents. On top of that, my parents are immigrants who gave us this opportunity. So when you are given an opportunity to live and now that we're doing well, it's like you're owing your parents always. They had to survive. They didn't get to thrive. They didn't get to live their dreams. So if we get to live our dream, we're living our dream and their dream together. And even if those paths diverge and your dream becomes bigger or becomes different, I still feel like I owe it to take them along and to let them have their dream too at the same time. I feel like I will never completely live my own life 100 per cent. I don't mean like we get to live our dream and we have to drag our parents along with us, but we'll always factor them in, regardless.

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I definitely felt the conflict between my two cultures growing up. From grade 2 probably all the way till mid-uni, I always wanted to be more white in everything I did, everything I thought. I was thinking, I want to be more mainstream. But now I'm getting older, I'm the opposite – I value my Asian traditions, my Asian values. I'm just respecting things a lot more as I'm older. I definitely embrace my Asian culture and my Asian heritage a lot more now. And now fighting convention for me is fighting Western conventions.

I do feel differences with my Caucasian friends. Like, I have to give disclaimers to them because Caucasian culture is very different. Just little things like, when they've come over to meet my family and they come in the house, just make sure you say, "Hi, Mr and Mrs Tran," very simple things like that. Don't walk in and just say, "G'day," and don't call my parents by their first name. And it's polite to bow. You don't have to bow, but if you can, that'd be great. And when you leave, do the same thing. That's all you have to do. That's being polite. And it's not a big deal, but I feel like that's something you have to tell Caucasian people because they don't realise it leaves a really bad impression, and once they get that impression, it's never changing. They're always going to be "that white kid who never said hello to me"; "clearly, he's got no manners."

Now I do feel like I belong in Australia. I think Australia is much more multicultural now and much more accepting, and I definitely feel like I've created my space. That's what I've always kind of fought for, to find a place and a space for myself and make sure that space is something that you hold yourself. You don't owe somebody else to do it. And I feel like everything I've done in my life, I've done on my own, to make sure it's my space nobody gets to take away from me. But at the same token, I feel like I have to fight for that part of Australia, it's not naturally given to me. I feel like you have to earn it. And probably with a lot of immigrants, I feel like they have to earn it, it's not a given right.

I have children of my own now and I hope they don't ever have those feelings of never fully belonging in Australia. I'm hoping as the years get on they'll have someone like me to back them up. They'll have me to fight for their space for them because when I was younger, I always did it myself. My parents couldn't speak English, so how could they defend me. And being a child, you don't really have that much of a voice, so it was always a struggle. But I feel like, with my children, if they're feeling like that and don't have that space or they are picked on for any reason, I'll have their back, so they'll feel supported to flourish in other ways.

Huy