

~ Life begins when we choose to live... ~

Chapter 1 The Journey

What are you willing to sacrifice for the sake of your children? Would you be willing to risk your own life and your children's lives to seek liberty, freedom and justice?

My parents believed if we were to die, at the very least we would die together, the family as a whole. If we were fortunate enough to be given a second chance in life and survived the rough seas, the rewards would be endless for the children.

There were nineteen of us on this journey: Dad, Mom, my oldest sister Fong, ten, my older brother Kuang, nine. I was the middle child of the family and following me was my sister Anh, three, and my twin sisters, Kim and Ngan, barely two. There were eight of us in the family. The family's motto was that each and every one of us was a leg of the table. Without one another, the table would crumble.

Then there were Dad's parents, Grandpa Tang and Grandma Ho, Dad's niece Phuong and nephew Cong, Mom's younger sister, Auntie Tam, her husband, Uncle Yi Jieng, their two children, daughter Chi and son Quy, Mom's two younger brothers, Uncle Dony and Uncle Chu, and Uncle Chu's fiancée, Ah Kieng.

I remember the evening when it all began, the sky dark and starless, and the weather cool and pleasant. It was early June, 1979. My family, extended family and some of Mom and Dad's closest friends and loyal workers were seated around our long polished antique mahogany table which was loaded with exceptional food: shark fin soup, abalone with sea cucumber and giant black mushrooms, steamed chicken, steamed fish, roasted beef steak, roasted duck, roasted pig, and fried prawns, among many other goodies. It was like we were at a wedding banquet. There was loud chatter and laughter.

Mom and Dad stood with their glasses of beer held high and all the other adults followed. "Yum sing," (Cheers) Mom said. "May all our dearest dreams come true."

Everyone was cheery, displaying smiles as wide as the horizon. One of the male workers shouted, "Likewise! Best of wishes to you and your family. May all your dreams be fulfilled, and your family be showered with riches and the best of health." They laughed boisterously. They took gulps of beer from their glasses.

As soon as the glasses touched the table, Dad announced, "We'll be leaving Vietnam in a few days. This dinner is to be the farewell party." Upon hearing the news, we stopped eating. With our chopsticks poised in our hands, we stared at Mom and Dad, thunderstruck and speechless while Mom and Dad casually sat down in their chairs.

After some seconds of silence, murmurs and whispers began. Various relatives began to ask questions. It was then I realized where our destination would be. *America! Where is America? Why do we want to go to there?* I didn't need to ask Mom and Dad. As young as I was, I was well aware what my parents' answer would be: "You're too young to ask adult questions. You're to eat the lovely food that's set in front of you, and listen without interruption. Kids have no business opening their mouths when the adults are having a conversation." So there I sat like an angel, too young to comprehend the significance of their decision, with no way of knowing that from that night forward the course of my life, along with everyone else's in the family, would be drastically changed.

Since the end of the Vietnam War, there had been limitations on economic activity following reunification of the north and south. The communist government confiscated privately owned land and forced citizens into collectivized agricultural practices. Vietnam's approximately two million ethnic Chinese (about three percent of the population), constituted its largest minority

group, concentrated mostly in the south. Long essential to the country's economy, Vietnamese of Chinese ancestry had been active in milling, rice trading, banking and real estate in the south, and mining and stevedoring in the north. Increasing tensions between Vietnam and China, as well as Vietnam's stagnant economy, contributed to a massive flight from Vietnam of half a million ethnic Chinese. Later, hundreds of thousands of other Vietnamese nationals escaped as well, seeking temporary refuge in camps throughout Southeast Asia.

It was a blind journey. No one knew exactly how long it would take to reach American soil or if any boat had successfully crossed the perilous seas to land in America. What they did know was that it was illegal to flee Vietnam and if they were caught, they would automatically be placed in prison, where it was not suitable for animals let alone human beings... and the length of prison terms strictly depended on the government's mood.

A few days later, we arrived at the dock of My-Tho City. I was impressed by the size of the vessel that would be taking us to America. I didn't realize that it wasn't big at all, and could not possibly weather the angry seas.

At that time I was only seven years old, and was thrilled to see a real boat, which the captain had named *217*. It was of simple construction, twenty feet long and fifteen feet wide. There were two cabins, a small pilothouse, and two makeshift bathrooms in the stern. Railings of hollow steel pipes lined the edges of the deck.

More than two hundred people stood patiently in the gloomy darkness on the dock amidst a heavy wind. Waves crashed loudly into the pier sending spray high into the air. The violent wind swept my hair into my face, blocking my vision.

As I stood on the pier envisioning our conquest of the majestic sea, loud and desperate-sounding wails brought my dreams to an abrupt halt. Turning my head, I saw Mom, Auntie Tam, and the uncles bawling vociferously as they bade farewell to our relatives. I did not understand the reason for their tears. Why were they crying when, after all, they were the ones who had decided to leave? Suddenly, tears began to flood my own eyes as I thought of my handicapped grandmother, Grandma Vuong, Mom's mother, who would now have to watch television all alone.

Other people around us wept. Grandfathers cried, grandmothers cried, fathers cried, mothers cried, sons cried, daughters cried, brothers cried, sisters cried, uncles cried, aunts cried, nephews cried, nieces cried, fiancés cried, fiancées cried, boyfriends cried, girlfriends cried, and friends cried. The peaceful night had now become an unbearable river of tears flooded with despair, melancholy and grief. It was a heart-wrenching mess... a huge mess. My heart pounded faster and I sobbed as loudly as everyone else. When I noticed that my older siblings Fong and Kuang were also crying, I grabbed hold of their hands, and felt compelled to cry along, adding more thunder to my voice. We gave each other support yet my heart was still aching and I didn't know why it ached. I thought the adults had said that children were not supposed to have heartache. If that were the case, and children were supposed to be happy, then why did my heart hammer dreadfully?

The captain spoke into the speakerphone. "It's time to board the boat."

At these words, the cries became deafening. We exchanged final embraces with our relatives, unwilling to let go of each other. These partings were more difficult for the poor families, who were unable to emigrate together. Those parents had made untold sacrifices: some giving their life savings, pawning jewels, selling lands and homes, while others borrowed money from loan sharks to help their children achieve a better future. They remained in Vietnam without a thing, some even roofless, yet they believed it was worth it. At least there was hope. Without that, there

was no difference between life and death.

Such was the case with Dad's older brother, Ah Yeh, the eldest in Dad's family. A day after our farewell dinner, Ah Yeh's wife, Di San Por, came to our house and pleaded with Dad, "Please help bring my children to America. They have no future here. Your brother's in prison and I have no means of bringing in any money to support the family. The children will surely die if they're to remain here with me." She held onto Dad's hand and her eyes glistened with tears. "If you can help me and your poor brother — who as you know is suffering in prison — with this huge favor, we would be forever grateful. And may God watch over your family and bless your family with good health and prosperity." Her sad puppy eyes spoke volumes.

Dad reasoned with Di San Por. "As you're aware, I have sold all my businesses. I have six children of my own... and most of my money is exhausted, spent on the trip. It's impossible to bring all six of your children with us. I can possibly help pay for the three eldest children to travel with us. I'm so sorry but that's all I can do. There simply isn't enough money."

Di San Por accepted Dad's offer as tears fell from her face. "Yes. Three... three is good. Thank you! Thank you so much!" She was thrilled. As tears continued to fall from her face, she smiled broadly, gratefully bobbing her head.

When the time came to embark, brave and heartbroken parents were on their knees, crying and grasping at the hands of their children, unwilling to let go. Mothers and fathers, trembling as they spoke, reminded their children for the hundredth time, "You have to take very good care of yourself now that we are not going to be by your side."

"As soon as you set foot in the United States, you have to remember to write and report to us on your safety so we need not worry," one parent requested.

"You have to always remember to dress warm and do well in school," a mother advised.

"You're to find Americans to sponsor us and bring us over to America so the whole family can be together again," another parent said.

While some children listened to their parents, especially kids who were in their early teens and older, they still sobbed with their eyes facing the floor. Yet they were following obediently their parents' orders, and traveled along with their aunts, uncles, older brothers, sisters, or even distant relatives. Those that were close to my age were in an awful state.

"No! Mommy! Daddy! I don't want to go. Please, I don't want to go with uncle." One of the young boys my age or maybe a year or two older screamed. He clung to his parents like a snail to a rock as his uncle tore him away from his parents. The boy swung his hands and kicked at his uncle which only made the uncle walk even faster. "Mommy, please! No! I don't want to go... I want to stay. I want to stay here with you and daddy. Please!" the boy screamed at the top of his lungs, yet his cries fell on deaf ears.

No matter how painful it was, the parents stood their ground. "It's for your own good. You'll have better education, a better future and life," the father shouted to the boy.

"We love you," the mother reminded the boy.

Tears streamed down their faces. The parents hugged each other tightly but that was not enough to stop them from blaming themselves for being such terrible parents. They brought their son into the world, yet they could not care for and provide for him. They sent him away to a foreign land and expected him to survive with his uncle.

Other boys and girls who misbehaved were hit. Some blows were as gentle as a smack on the bottom. But others, especially the fathers who were doing the disciplining, grabbed hold of the children's shoulders and forcefully shook them, demanding their immediate obedience. Now and again, the children would get smacked on the face and their ears pulled. They were to be angelic

and walk on that boat with their aunts, uncles, older brothers or sisters. They would be better off in a foreign land with their relatives. At home with their parents, the children would surely get more beatings.

With tears streaming from their eyes, the crestfallen parents released hold of their precious children. There was nothing left to do or say but wave good-bye. The children, in sadness, hurt, guilt, and ignorance, with heads bowed down, lifelessly, plodded onto the boat.

I felt truly blessed when I compared myself to the boys and girls whose parents would not be traveling with them. There was a sadness that I didn't understand but at the very least the entire family was departing Vietnam as a whole, and my older sister and brother were there holding onto my hands, protecting me from what we were about to face as we inched forward toward the boat.

The 217 pulled away from the pier and started out to sea. Along with all the other families, we stayed on the deck of the boat to yell our last good-byes and throw our last kisses. As our loved ones faded into the distance, we proceeded into the cabin. Everyone was still overcome with emotion. Some had ceased to cry while others continued to shed tears. All had red, puffy eyes. Some placed their heads on their knees, others clung to their lovers, parents, children, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters or friends.

My family was given a small seating area in the top cabin located near the entrance. We were privileged to have this location because Dad knew the captain, who was also the owner of the boat. Although the boat looked enormous from the outside, more than two hundred people were crammed into it, forcing us to sit shoulder-to-shoulder. Dried food was stored in fishnets that dangled above our heads. But what made the room even worse was that we could not walk or stand upright because of the low ceiling. We had to remember to stoop to avoid injuring our heads. And soon the odors of vomit, the ointment to treat queasiness, and urine were suffocating.

About an hour after we set out, the boat began to bounce dangerously in an unexpected high tide. At first we managed to stay calm and quiet, even as our bodies were rapidly thrown this way and that. When the water began to wash into our cabin, people really got scared. The screams became deafening. As the boat proceeded, the rocking became even more extreme. So much water entered our room that we all got soaked. I guess being placed at the entrance was not so wonderful after all. Everyone moved closer together. My parents stretched out their arms and held all six of us tightly. I felt my parents' fear in the strength of their embrace.

Considering the little space that we had, amazingly, some of the passengers were still able to shift to a kneeling position with their hands clasped and their eyes shut, begging God for mercy: "Please let this be a safe journey... the seas, the wind, the rain... be calm and peaceful," one passenger pleaded. "God oh God, for a safe journey, I promise in return not to eat meat for weeks or even months," another passenger bargained a trade with God. "I swear I'll never in this life kill a single living life form," another person said in tears... as one of the common Buddhist practices is that every single life form should be treated with respect. "I promise to hold a great thanksgiving feast in Your honor, with abundant meat and fruit," another mother pleaded. "In return, I ask that you get the family to dry land safely. I've not committed any evil in my life. I beg You to spare mine and my family's lives." But God didn't hear us. The boat continued to bob perilously in the thick fog and heavy wind.

The captain decided to return to shore. As the boat turned around, the prayers increased in volume as even more water splashed through the passengers' quarters. When the boat finally stabilized and the flooding subsided, we relaxed a little, but our fists were still clenched in fear. Hours later, the boat safely reached the dock. Everyone took deep breaths and gave thanks to

God for granting this miracle. As we proceeded down the gangplank, we clapped, cheered and thanked the captain for bringing us back unharmed.

The captain was in his early thirties with a medium build, and had short, dark hair that framed a handsome face. Standing five-feet-eight, fairly tall for a Vietnamese man, he cut an admirable figure. He was dressed elegantly and was apparently well educated. He was also well mannered, wealthy, and charismatic. He instructed us, "Please remain calm! Within a few days, I'll figure out why the boat rocks so much and I'll fix whatever is wrong with the vessel. You need not worry. I assure you that the next trip will be a success."

His speech was comforting for many of us, although others were skeptical of his ability. After our narrow escape from the sea, people muttered that he was not really qualified for such an undertaking. We should not have had so many problems. Moreover, he was blamed for naming the boat 217. The digits added up to ten, an unlucky number. Some passengers accused the captain of being greedy. The reason the boat was unsteady was clearly because there were too many passengers; he had over-packed the boat. "If the boat sinks, the damned captain can bring his gold pieces with him down to the bottom of the ocean and spend it there," some disgruntled passengers remarked sarcastically.

We stayed at a motel close to the pier while the captain's crew labored on the boat. We fell into a daily routine. We would wake up, watch television, wander around the motel, eat delicious food, and await the captain's commands. It was a carefree life. Not having much to do was a rare luxury. Mom and Dad had always been busy tending the family's many businesses. We spent more time with our nanny than with them. So we enjoyed this rare occasion to spend our time together in leisure.

After a couple of days, in the middle of the night, the captain decided that the boat was ready and we could attempt a second departure. He said, "You shouldn't have any concerns. I have fixed the problem that caused the boat to rock. You must have faith and trust me. We are going to America!" Our trust was renewed and we boarded the boat on My-Tho pier. A calm sea and favorable winds promised smoother sailing.

The 217 was heavier this time. We had purposely taken on additional cargo: bags of rice, weighing from ten to a hundred pounds had been loaded into the boat's lower cabin. According to the captain, the previous instability was caused by the boat being top heavy, due to the large number of passengers in the upper cabin. With the extra weight in the bottom, the boat would be more stable.

But the failure of the first attempt had frightened more than thirty people who preferred to have half of their gold pieces returned than risk their lives again. Ah Yeh and Di San Por's eldest daughter, Ah Yin, was one of those who had decided to remain at home. She said she was too frightened to risk another trip. Family gossip, however, had it that she did not want to leave her boyfriend behind. But her sister Phuong, eleven, and her brother Cong, nine, listened to Dad and left with us. Those families with high hopes and ambitious dreams were willing to try again.

A calm tide eased us into the night's shiny sea. This time there were fewer people and yet there was still insufficient room to stretch out. Obligated to sit very close together, it was difficult for us to fall asleep. The sky was dark, the sea was peaceful, and only the rhythmic lapping of the waves could be heard. Gently pushing against the boat, the water made a soothing sound.

Just as I was starting to unwind, Dad burst into the cabin. He announced to Mom with an air of excitement, "The captain has spotted a gigantic ship steaming toward us. We must be prepared to leave. It may be a United States ship that can escort us to America." Mom and Dad quickly gathered up all of our baggage. The captain turned on all the lights so that we might be spotted

more easily.

As the huge ship drew closer, a voice bellowed from the speakers. The captain shouted into the microphone, instructing everyone to be quiet. "The approaching vessel belongs to the Soviet Union, *not* to the United States," he said. The lights were quickly turned off and the engine picked up speed. The increased velocity caused the waves to crash loudly against the sides of the boat. People huddled together in anxious silence. Nothing could be heard on board during the high-speed flight but deep breathing and the pounding of our hearts.

At the time, I did not understand the change from hope to fear. Later I was told that if the Russians had captured us, we would have been shipped back to Vietnam, where we would have been severely punished by the government. We would have been placed in prison for years. Fleeing Vietnam was illegal.

After some time, we slowed down and resumed normal cruising speed. Although the captain made no announcement and the lights remained off, I figured we had escaped successfully. I felt totally drained, yet thankful. I fell asleep.

The First Day

When I awoke, I saw people vomiting into brown bags and smelled the strong scent of *bak far zhou*, a Chinese herbal ointment used to treat nausea. The combined smell of the vomit and the liniment was so strong that I felt like I was about to puke myself, and I was sore all over... the lack of space had forced everyone to sleep sitting upright. My entire body ached as I crawled out of the cabin. Once on deck, the smell of the fresh ocean breeze revived me instantly. I joined my parents and siblings as we enjoyed the exhilarating view. I could see flying fish, sharks, seagulls, whales, dolphins, and many other fascinating and exotic sea creatures.

Astounded at these sights, I could not contain myself. With breathless excitement, I shouted the name of every new sight, giving them a name whether or not I recognized the species. Fong, Kuang, and I chattered endlessly about the strange features of each animal, pointing out their colors, shapes and sizes. And I would try to convince them that what I saw was more fascinating than what they saw.

The captain came out of his little office to thank us for being so cooperative during the previous evening's encounter with the Russian vessel. He looked horribly worn out. He had stayed awake to guide the boat, and the strain of the sleepless night had taken its toll.

While most of the passengers were on deck appreciating the marvelous view, Fong, Kuang, and I, along with our older cousins Phuong and Cong, decided to explore the sleeping quarters. We tiptoed to avoid stepping on people who had taken this opportunity to get a good sleep, and sleep fully extended. We grabbed our crackers and water bottles. We slouched cautiously due to the low ceiling, and food hanging above us as we walked toward the back of the boat.

There was a circular glass window located at the rear of the boat near the entrance to the lower cabin. From this porthole, which could not be opened, we could see outside. There we stood marveling over the great strength of the ocean. As quickly as we were seized by the mysterious and powerful ocean, we were tired of the same view. We climbed down into the lower cabin where all the single men were relegated, through the only access, a square hole twenty inches in diameter. It smelled musty and was dimly lit with lanterns rattling in the corners. We coughed and were having difficulty breathing since the only ventilation in this compartment was the single hole through which we had climbed down and which opened into our quarters. We did not stay long. There was nothing to see, except numerous bags of rice and water bottles scattered about. There were no dried crackers in sight. We felt sorry for our mother's younger brothers, our two uncles, Chu and Dony, who had to suffer in the lower cabin.

As overcrowded as we were in the upper cabin, at least we could open the sliding door to enjoy the fresh ocean air.

We joined our parents on the deck. We roamed about, chatting and eating. The day passed quickly and soon dusk descended. For the first time, I saw the sunset at sea with the entire family. The music produced by the gentle wind and waves created a dream-like atmosphere. The joy, warmth and love I felt could not have been expressed in words. I wish I could have frozen that precious moment forever.

Once the sun had set, we walked back to the cabin. With the door closed the room was dark, the only illumination coming from the glow of the stars shining through the porthole at the rear of the boat.

As I had gotten used to the room already, falling asleep was easier. I awoke suddenly at the sound of someone peeing. Opening my eyes, I made out the shape of a woman using a Chinese portable urinal in the room. It was not a big deal, considering we all had them at home. But I was embarrassed when the woman saw me watching her. I quickly averted my head and closed my eyes.

The Second Day

The day began with a heavy rain that kept everyone inside. Looking out the circular window, I was awed by the lightning, thunder, and the pounding of the turbulent ocean against our little boat. Terrified, I moved closer to my mother. She was busy comforting the three youngest children: Anh, the twins, Kim and Ngan, who were crying with fright. So I squeezed between Fong and Kuang and toughed it out. Although I felt better having them by my side, I was disappointed to miss a day on deck.

To my great relief, the rain stopped around noon. The sky was still a little gray and cloudy, but we went out anyway. The deck was slippery. We were extra careful as we inched about. Much to our delight, we spotted more spectacular sea creatures. Suddenly, beyond the marine life, a green island came into view. The captain sailed the boat closer to the island, then brought the boat to a stop. He discussed with the crew whether we should land, since we had no idea what we might find there. He decided to send some men out to explore before bringing the boat in any closer.

A few men volunteered. They took off their shirts and dove into the blue sea. They swam swiftly, as if in a race to see who could reach the island first. As they neared the beach, people came running out from behind the trees. They carried guns and began to fire at our men without warning. The men swam back to the boat as fast as they could. One by one, they climbed the rickety ladders dangling off the side of the boat. Upon reaching the deck, they collapsed, and gasped for air. To our relief, no one was hurt. The women ran out of the cabin with towels, and water for the swimmers.

The islanders were not too bright. They continued to fire aimlessly from a great distance, obviously wasting their bullets. It was their way of letting us know that we were not welcome. The captain ordered a speedy departure.

Hours later, we saw a dark mass of water spinning out of the sea and funneling ominously toward the sky. I had never seen anything so enormous and powerful, and could only stare in awe. My parents spoke intensely about the phenomenon known as *lone gin fone*, dragon sucking wind. From the tone of their voices, I understood the peril we were in. Images of the dragon sucking wind spinning our boat up into the sky filled me with horror. I felt my stomach churn. I wanted to be sick but could not. I headed back into the cabin, hoping to take a nap. As I neared the cabin, I heard the captain's request, "Everyone please return to the cabins. It's too dangerous

to be on deck at this time.”

With bad weather and the *lone gin fone* in our path, the captain had no choice but to alter our course; yet our final destination was still America. Later that evening, the boat suddenly accelerated. Confined to such close quarters, this caused panic to spread among the passengers. Everyone was afraid that it was the Russians again, that we might be captured after all. Once again, fervent prayers asked that we be delivered from whatever was pursuing us.

When the boat slowed down, we thought ourselves lucky. Our prayers had been answered. Everyone was relieved and thanked God for His quick response. However, the worst was just beginning.

The boat stopped dead in the water. A few moments later we heard the sound of feet stomping on the deck and voices barking orders. Our sliding door burst open to reveal the faces of evil-looking strangers. They looked at us and scanned the room. My parents clutched all six of us children in a protective embrace. Their nervous and worried expressions told me we were in trouble. Mom whispered to Dad, “God, oh God! We are being robbed!”

The pirates had boarded. Crop-headed, swarthy and stick thin, their torn clothing, foul smell, and loud shouts in a language we didn’t understand made them even more frightening. They carried an impressive array of weapons as they entered our cabin, which included long knives, machine guns, and axes. The pirates, whom we believed to be Thai, stormed through the boat. They pointed at the young and pretty women and dragged them out of the quarters.

As they approached my family, I could feel my heart pounding against my ribs. Mom clutched us tighter. Aunty Tam pulled her two-year-old daughter, Chi, to her side. She was already holding her infant son, Quy, in her right arm. Since Uncle Chu’s fiancée, Ah Kieng, had no children, she clenched her hands on Phuong and Cong, to give the impression that they were hers. The three of them lowered their heads.

Their ruse worked; they were not hauled outside with the other women. Everyone took deep breaths once the pirates passed. All at once I heard laughter, crying, and screaming. “Don’t touch me! No! Please, no! I beg you! Get away from me! Please, let me go!” The women screamed in Cantonese and Vietnamese. Their pleas were terrifying; I hugged Fong and Kuang so close that I could hear their hearts racing apace with mine.

The pirates didn’t go down into the lower compartment where the single men were, but a few of them guarded the narrow opening. With guns, axes, and daggers at the ready, they would have killed anyone who tried to climb up. Even if there had been strong young men on deck during the invasion, they would not have fought back because of the horror stories we had heard about Thai pirates. Dire consequences might have resulted from any show of resistance. We might have been massacred down to the last person. We had even been reminded, upon boarding, that if we were attacked, we should give up our belongings without a struggle.

The pirates pushed and kicked the rest of us out of the cabin and onto the deck. The women being raped by the frenzied pirates were helpless; their clothes were torn, their faces were bruised and their hands and legs were pinned down. It reminded me of how Phuong, Cong, Fong, Kuang, and I used to play with frogs. We would have fun flipping a frog over and watching it wiggle and thrash, struggling to get back on its feet.

At that young age I did not understand what rape was, but from the painful cries, the screams and struggling, I knew it was terribly wrong. The women cried desperately, as their legs were forced apart. One by one, these pirates violated their victims. Mom and Dad told us kids, “Don’t look!”

As if repeatedly raping the women was not enough, the pirates pinched and bit them until

blood gushed, just to see which of the women would cry out the loudest. They laughed maliciously while licking the blood that dripped from the sides of their mouths as if it were honey. Other pirates watched and laughed while waiting their turn.

One desperate woman preferred death to rape and threw herself over the railing into the ocean. For some reason, the pirates jumped into the ocean to rescue her. She was left in one corner of the boat, all by herself, drenched and weeping pitifully. She wrapped her arms around her knees, shivering, as if she hoped to shrink herself so small that she would not be spotted and tortured. She quivered violently, overwrought, not daring to make any sound crying, snot bubbles coming out of her nose, her eyes watering profusely. She was a mess, unattractive, downright ugly... her hair disorderly, and her face ghostly pale. The pirates did not bother her and not a single passenger dared to inch toward her to give comfort.

The brutal sexual assault was only a part of the pirates' agenda. Piracy was their profession, and when they had satisfied their desire, they began to ransack the boat. They searched every corner of the small vessel, ripping open luggage, shaking water bottles, and dumping dry food onto the deck in their quest for hidden gold.

Most of the passengers, including my parents, threw their valuables into the sea rather than surrender them to the barbaric pirates. If they had nothing to turn over, the men would be bludgeoned with machine guns or axe handles and the women would be beaten until they were on their knees begging for mercy. The pirates kicked and slapped at the women, laughing demonically as the husbands looked on helplessly. If they had made a move to try to rescue their women, the pirates would have inflicted even greater torture upon them. The men could only close their eyes.

Suddenly the pirates began to rip the tops off of the women with large breasts. I thought they were going to rape them, too. This was not their intent. The pirates were not interested in the women's bosoms but in what they might have hidden in their undergarments. The women's bras were yanked off and thrown down on the floor, to be hacked to bits by the pirates' axes. I was astounded at the gleam and glitter pouring out of those mutilated brassieres: there were gold ingots, rings, necklaces, earrings, diamonds, rubies, and jade.

The women paled and began to tremble. What fate would now await them for the crime of hiding their valuables? The answer came swiftly enough. For keeping hidden these jewels, the pirates pummeled the offenders with the ends of their machine guns. Blood sprayed in every direction. The cries of the women went unheeded. The pirates did not distinguish between the young and old, the sick or handicapped... if we were to give them all our gold and jewels, possibly they would spare us more suffering.

Although the rampage lasted an hour or so, it seemed an eternity. After everyone on the deck was searched from head to toe, the pirates returned to their own boat by way of a rickety wooden ladder. Their vessel was slightly larger than ours and also constructed of wood with one difference: theirs had a cannon on the prow. Who would be brave enough to test if that cannon worked?

The pirates sped away, cheering so loudly that we could still hear them from a great distance. They kept their machine guns trained on us until they had made their escape.

When we could no longer see their boat, we heaved a sigh of relief. Family and friends consoled the rape victims. "Whatever happened has happened. We must accept it as fate." At these words, the victims wept even more loudly.

We listened sadly while searching for our belongings. The devastation was too overwhelming. By nightfall we gave up. It was too great a mess, and it was impossible to

identify the clothing without light. We just pushed everything into one big pile. Exhausted and depressed, we filed slowly back into the cabin, wishing only for some rest and peace. It was difficult to fall asleep. For the first time I heard arguments. The emotionally drained, humiliated passengers vented their frustrations upon each other. They pushed and yelled for more space to sit until finally collapsing into slumber.

The Heat

The third day began with hundreds of seagulls flocking around our boat under a hot, humid, windless sky. We passed several spouting whales. They didn't arouse anyone in the family to talk about them though our eyes remained on them. Because we had been robbed, we felt especially vulnerable and were easily irritated. Under normal conditions, families would have lounged on the deck to appreciate the mystical beauty of the ocean, but due to the disaster that had befallen us, we had to devote our time to cleaning up the boat and finding our belongings.

By noon, the temperature was boiling hot. Our bodies were dripping with sweat. We perspired to the point that we began to smell; not showering for the past three days did not help. Suffocating in the stifling heat, I still did not complain. It was not the right time to moan. My older siblings and cousins would have laughed at me. I had to fake a smile as I helped gather our belongings.

Phuong was now very pale and looked as if she were going to vomit. Mom quickly handed her a plastic bag. She threw up instantly. We took her into the cabin so she could get some rest. As we walked her to the room, she continued to get sick until only yellow bile came up.

While Phuong cried, Mom comforted her. She rubbed her temples with *bak far zhou*. The combined smell of her vomit and the liniment was so strong that I felt like I was choking. I asked permission to leave the room, and Fong and Kuang came with me.

As soon as we left, Mom screamed for help. The three of us rushed back into the room. Phuong had fainted. Mom shouted to Dad, "Quickly, carry Phuong to the deck. She needs some fresh air." As Dad rushed, carrying Phuong out of the room, Mom continued to rub *bak far zhou* on her temples, neck, chest, and under her nose. They laid Phuong's head in Mom's lap, and Aunt Tam joined Mom in massaging Phuong's hands and legs.

Minutes later, Phuong slowly opened her eyes. Mom asked in a maternal voice, "Are you feeling better?"

Phuong nodded her head and whispered that she wanted some water. Cong ran into the room and came back with a bottle for his sister. Mom removed the cap and cautiously poured water into Phuong's mouth. "Why don't you try to sit up straight and to take deep breaths of the fresh air," Mom said to Phuong. Closing her eyes, Phuong inhaled and exhaled several times. Soon the color returned to Phuong's face and lips.

With the worst over, Aunt Tam went back to the room to clean up the mess that Phuong had left behind. Just as I was beginning to feel relieved that Phuong would be all right, I heard Aunt Tam scream. Once again, Dad rushed toward the room. Uncle Yi Jieng, and Uncle Dony were carrying an unconscious Uncle Chu out of the room. Dad was quick to assist them. They pushed through the crowd, yelling for a path to be cleared. They laid Uncle Chu on the deck. The adults began rubbing *bak far zhou* on Uncle Chu's bony body, hoping to relax his rigid muscles.

Uncle Chu had a seizure. His body twitched and jerked. He was trancelike, unconscious, and his fingers twisted and contorted until they looked like the feet of a grasshopper. The tears pouring from his eyes, along with his incoherent mumbling and the trembling of his body as white bubbles ran out of the side of his mouth, were disturbing and terrifying. I stuck close to Fong and Kuang; their presence gave me courage.

Despite the liniment and massage, Uncle Chu was showing no sign of improvement. Dad tried to straighten his hands and fingers, while Uncle Dony and Uncle Yi Jieng tried to do the same with his long, skinny legs. Mom and Aunt Tam massaged his neck, chest and temples. As they frantically tried to revive him, Uncle Chu continued to mutter but I could not make sense of a word he said.

Ah Kieng, Uncle Chu's fiancée, was wailing hysterically. She knelt close to him, frozen, not knowing what to do or say other than to cry.

"Everything will be fine," Mom said confidently. "You have to stop talking silly. We are on this journey together and no one is allowed to leave without my consent! You hear me?" Mom rubbed on Uncle Chu's temples harder showing Uncle Chu she was not worried. He would come out of it soon.

Again, Uncle Chu gasped for air, his jaws opening and closing uncontrollably. So Uncle Dony took off his shirt and stuffed it in Uncle Chu's mouth to prevent him from biting on his tongue.

"Relax and breathe deeply," Mom encouraged Uncle Chu as tears streamed down his cheeks.

Uncle Chu seemed to respond to Mom's word. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. Mom asked that he try to breathe deeper each time. Gradually he began to look better. His hands and legs unlocked. He opened his eyes a little at a time, blinking like a newborn baby. He could not recall what had happened. Mom told him, "Don't ask any questions, and try to get some rest."

First it was Phuong. Then it was Uncle Chu. We had had enough. Fong, Kuang and I decided to head back into the cabin for food and water. There, a fragile old woman was complaining bitterly about the journey, saying, "I hate this trip... I wish the boat would hit a big rock to end our misery." As a result, I was horrified that her wish would come true... the boat would hit a rock and we would all perish. The fear of the boat sinking terrified me so much that I was angry with the old woman and wished that someone would tell her to shut up. But no one said a word. She was outraged because everyone was ignoring her. In order to attract attention, she would swear a blue streak when anyone looked her way.

We were tired of her swearing and of watching people throw up. We returned to the deck and resumed the search for our clothes, but the humidity made us too irritable. We joined the rest of the family to take in what remained of the hot and humid day.

With night coming on we returned to our room. Dad wanted to sleep on the deck with the twins, Kim and Ngan. He told Mom, "The room's humid and your brother Chu is sleeping in my space. There's nothing to worry about. It's good for the twins to get some fresh ocean air. I'll sleep with one eye open." She didn't like the idea but gave in, leaving the door open.

The walkway was narrow with a protective railing around the perimeter. There were wide gaps between the rail posts. Dad positioned himself at the extreme edge of the walkway, while the precious twins slept on the side closest to the captain's office. Still concerned, Mom told Dad, "It's too dangerous, you'd better remain vigilant."

Dad cockily brushed her off. "I'm a light sleeper," he said, "Everything will be fine. Can you stop worrying about this and that all the time!" With Dad's assurance, Mom turned to us and extended her arms, lovingly wrapping them around me and my younger sister Anh. She pulled us near, allowing us to rest our heads on her chest. It was a very pleasant feeling.

Luck

At the break of dawn, a woman shouted in Cantonese, "Hey! Whose children are those? Watch out!"

Mom was horrified to see Kim walking aimlessly up and down the aisle and Ngan sleeping

with one of her hands dangling over the edge of the boat. Mom ran out and caught Ngan with her right hand and lifted Kim with her left. She embraced the twins and kissed them over and over again. Her alarm and the force with which she picked them up had frightened the twins. They bawled loudly. "There, there... lovely," Mom said affectionately, "There's no need to cry. Mommy is here. There's no need to be afraid. Everything will be okay." She embraced them tightly, kissing them again and again.

Dad now awoke from his sleep. He was still lying on the deck looking at Mom in confusion while she stomped angrily past him to bring the twins inside. She set the twins down and told us to watch them. She went back out. With her face bright red with anger, she stood her hands on her hips, and loudly cursed Dad. I had never seen her so mad. "You stupid idiot, you pig brain," Mom called Dad other names that defy translation. "You goddamn promise me that you'll keep an eye on your children. And what did you do... sleep like a pig. You could have gotten them killed. And idiotic me to have listened to you and let them sleep out here with you. Sleep with one eye open, my ass!" He lowered his head and did not respond. Given his short temper, this was very unlike him, especially when Mom was embarrassing him in front of so many people. He had lost face.

Mom's veins protruded from the side of her neck as she continued her tirade, not stopping until she was out of breath. She stormed back into the room and slammed the door shut behind her. Dad did not dare to come in. Mom grabbed the twins and gave them some crackers and milk from a powdered mix. Years later, every time Mom recounted this story she would cry and then smile, thanking God for having watched over her children.

Knowing Mom was upset, we dared not speak. We ate crackers. "Stop being so angry, you're going to frighten the children even more," Auntie Tam said, trying to clam her down. Dad did not come in to apologize for his carelessness. For this reason, we were stuck in the cabin. We did not venture to go out and join Dad, which would have made Mom angrier that we had gone on his side. At first, staying inside seemed like the best alternative but it soon became increasingly difficult when the same cranky old woman began her complaining again: "There's no damn room to sleep. Can you shut those babies up? Shove a goddamn cloth in their mouths, will you! I can't rest... Lord oh Lord, I hope the whales will crash into the boat and end our suffering." She was so old that I felt a little sympathy for her, but I still disapproved of her mean spirit. We had already endured so much hardship, she was just adding to our troubles. Again the fear of our boat sinking terrified me and I wished that the adults would tell her to shut up. But again, none did.

The old woman looked as if she were going to collapse. She appeared to be in her late sixties, with a wrinkled face, white hair, and a withered body. I later learned that she was a widow, her husband died young and she had single handedly raised her two children... remarrying was not a possibility. Women with children and women in her generation would not have considered remarrying anyway. The culture whether, Chinese or Vietnamese, greatly discourages it. Gossip would spread and a remarried woman would be forever tainted, called a disloyal whore who could not keep her pants fastened, and dishonoring the husband's family. But widowed men, now, that would be a different story.

The old woman probably had wanted to die in her own country, but her children must have felt guilty leaving her behind and thought that bringing her to America would make her happy. It was not an easy journey for anyone, and the elderly were more prone to suffering. This was one of the reasons why Mom left Grandma Vuong, who was paralyzed, back home with her oldest brother Di Cou Foo. As Mom looked at the miserable old woman with compassion in her eyes, she whispered to her younger and only sister, Auntie Tam, "We did the right thing leaving Ma

home... at least she doesn't have to suffer. With her condition, she probably wouldn't survive to see America." Aunty Tam forced a smile.

Illusion

Late in the afternoon, Dad bolted into the room. I thought he had come to ask for Mom's forgiveness. Instead, with a big smile on his face, he told us with exhilaration, "There's a big ship heading our way. It's flying an American flag. Quickly grab your belongings, go out to the deck, and prepare to board the other ship." With the good news, Mom almost forgot what had happened earlier that morning. She picked up the twins, Dad took Anh, and we all met on the deck, with our belongings in hand, and clothing wrapped in sheet fabric.

While waiting anxiously for the American ship to arrive, I saw Dad surreptitiously remove a lemon from the open end of a metal pipe that was part of the railing. He eased two fingers into it and fished around for a while before cautiously removing two small black pouches. One of them he handed to Mom. As the other ship drew closer, we could see its crew standing attentively on deck. I did not know how Americans were supposed to look, but these men had dark complexions and black hair. When the smiles around me disappeared and gave way to looks of fear, I knew another pirate ship was approaching.

With their machine guns, cannons, and axes pointed at us, and with our engine already turned off, our boat was a sitting duck. Their ship was much bigger and better outfitted than ours. It was made of metal and we could see fishnets dangling off the side. We were probably the biggest fish they had ever caught.

The pirates leapt over to our boat and shoved everyone around, searching for valuables. Since everyone had been fooled by their masquerade, they did not have to look very hard to find jewelry.

While the pirates searched the people in front of us, Mom sneakily dropped her black pouch on the floor, and used her foot to push it to one side. When the pirates got to her, they were disappointed that she had nothing to offer. They grabbed her breasts and searched her entire body. Since they found nothing on her, they smacked her and shoved her to the side.

Dad saw that Aunty Tam was surreptitiously touching on her blue jade bracelet. He was afraid Aunty Tam would suffer the same treatment as Mom if she had nothing to offer. Dad talked to Aunty Tam out of the side of his mouth in Cantonese, which the Thai pirates would not understand, "Don't be stupid and try to hide the jade bracelet. It's not worth getting roughed up over a bracelet."

Likewise, Aunty Tam talked out of the side of her mouth. "But I successfully hid it the first time. I'm sure I can do it again."

"We're out in the open, unlike the last time," Dad reminded Aunty Tam.

Aunty Tam glanced around. Pirates were everywhere. They were using all the force necessary to get what they wanted. Dad was right that it was not worth being assaulted to protect the bracelet. Aunty Tam had a hard time removing the bracelet from her wrist, perhaps because she was nervous. She had to smash it on the side of the boat until it broke.

The pirates no longer wanted it; broken, it had no value. They didn't beat her even after they found nothing on her body. They just pushed her to one side and headed to the next person.

Dad voluntarily gave up his black pouch when it was his turn. A pirate opened it and poured out its contents. Diamonds! Lots of them! The jewels represented our parents' life savings. They were satisfied and spared Dad the torture.

They searched everyone and those who acted suspicious were strip searched, especially the children... spreading their ass cheeks and all. They took everything of value, including gold

teeth, which they pulled out with rusted pliers.

I was relieved when the pirates were finished with my family and glad that they did not rape any of the women. My sense of relief was premature. These pirates were more evil than the pirates who robbed us the first time. They emptied our water bottles and scattered our dried food on the deck to look for hidden jewels. Even worse, they plunged their axes into our fuel tank, tore up our maps, and broke our compass. These animals wanted not only our money but also our lives. When the rampage was finished, they climbed, one by one, back to their ship. We looked at them with hatred as they sped away, screaming and laughing out their pleasure.

I despised them. I wanted to remove their skins with a dull scalpel, layer by layer. I would pour salt over the openings, a little at a time, to let them endure the pain. I would leave them to burn helplessly under the humid sun, just as Mom had taught us to make anchovies. I would make them wonder what I would do to them next. I would want them to feel desperation as they clung to life. Death would be too light of a sentence. I wanted them tormented every second, as they had tormented us. I believe most of the passengers of 217 would have gone along with this line of thought. These evil men purposely shoved us into the angry ocean and took away our floats and lifejackets. Why wouldn't we want to kill people who had robbed, beaten, and intentionally tried to drown us?

We were devastated. All our hope was gone. I saw around me only frustration, anger, and tears. The crew ran to repair the leaking fuel tank as the battle for ultimate survival intensified. By jamming rags into the holes they managed to slow the loss of fuel, but they were unable to stop the flow completely. People now were having doubts that they would ever see America. Angry and anguished muttering reflected a growing frustration and lack of control over our plight. Screaming and shouting broke out. And soon there were fights.

Hours later, after darkness fell, we sought to escape the horror of the day through sleep but sleeping became tougher. People were no longer polite. "That's my space. Fuck you! It's my space..." Elbows were flying to secure a sitting space. The babies didn't seem to stop crying. Well, not all babies were misbehaving. The babies in my family were drinking their cold milk peacefully. Every time Mom recounted this story, tears would fill her eyes, and she would thank God for having watched over sister Anh, three, and the twins, Kim and Ngan, barely two. The pirates had broken the thermos we had brought with us. Feeding cold milk from a powdered mix to the children, they could easily have gotten sick. It would have been a big problem since a simple illness could prove to be fatal when you were at sea, especially the young ones whose immune systems were not fully developed.

I was soon awakened by a mysterious sound. I did not dare to open my eyes fully, but I squinted to see what was causing the noise. I saw Mom sneaking out the door, crawling on the floor. She swept the floor with her hands, searching and searching. At first it did not occur to me what she was looking for. She picked up a small black pouch, turned her head to the room, and looked around a few times before she stuffed the pouch into the open end of a pipe. It was then that I recalled the pouch she had kicked aside while we were being robbed. She crawled back in and saw me watching her. She whispered, "Don't say anything." She smiled warmly. "Go back to sleep." I closed my eyes. Mom wrapped her warm, loving arms around me. I felt safe and was soon asleep.

Land

By the fifth day, we were so drained and demoralized by the two robberies that most of the passengers refused to wake up early. By afternoon we went outside to clean the deck in the hope of locating our scattered clothes, belongings. Irritated by the high humidity, people resumed their

arguing, which escalated to fighting. The captain had to come out of his office to break up the fights. Mom and Dad tried to comfort us by saying, "Things will improve." They smiled warmly and encouraged us to look at the sea creatures that had once caused so much excitement. "Aren't they beautiful?" Mom looked at us. No one responded, though we did smile.

Later in the afternoon, while the family was back in the cabin, we heard a good deal of shouting. Everyone rushed out onto the deck. Land! Delighted, we thanked God for His miracle. The captain proceeded with full speed toward the island, which we later found out was Malaysia. As the boat approached, we saw people with dark brown skin aiming guns at us. Physically, they resembled the pirates, but these men were in uniform.

The islanders signaled us to go back but they did not open fire. Due to the piracy, the boat was no longer equipped to continue the journey to America... and the captain took a big risk. He acted as if the boat was out of control and deliberately smashed it into the pier. We hit the wall with such force that most of us fell down on the deck. Children began to cry. To my surprise, our little wooden boat was unharmed.

The guns were still aimed at us. A man, who appeared to have some authority, walked to the end of the pier. He spoke in a language none of us understood. Our representative, Jo Vinh, stepped forward and communicated with him in English. Even though I could not speak English then, I was able to figure out that Jo Vinh was begging for permission to land. The Head of Police was shaking his head, he looked mean, making it obvious that our request was denied.

There was still no progress by the time night arrived. Jo Vinh begged louder, making pitiful faces. Whatever he said finally worked, as the Head of Police walked over to his jeep, picked up a metal block and spoke into it. At that time, I did not realize the 'block' was a CB radio; I had never seen anything like it. I thought he was crazy, talking into a block. This officer came back to exchange words with Jo Vinh, who was soon smiling broadly. He excitedly told the captain, "The children, women, the handicapped, the sick, and the elderly are allowed to sleep on the pier. The healthy men are to remain on board." In the morning, we had to depart the island and seek refuge elsewhere. There was no exception!

The captain readily accepted the offer and demanded that we climb up to the pier. But it was a blind trust given to complete strangers... once separated we might not see our fathers, brothers and uncles again. What if they were like the pirates who had tricked us? What if they were luring all the weak on to the pier so they could easily rob us?

The strong men positioned themselves using their shoulders as ladders. They told us to step on them... the elderly were to go first, the sick to follow, the children, then the women. Some were reluctant to leave the boat. Women clasped their husbands' hands and pleaded to be left on the boat, as tears poured freely from their eyes. They would be forced to depart the next morning anyway, they reasoned, what was the difference between remaining on the boat or being on dry land?

The men comforted their loved ones. "It'll be easier for one person to escape than two," they said. Dad told Mom the same.

Mom would not budge. "If we are going to die," Mom said, "we should all die together."

"Don't be stupid!" Dad shouted. "If you and the kids stay here, you'll only be a burden to me. Fewer people on the boat would mean fewer worries for me. I promise you that I'll find a way to reunite with the family." Mom, like many other women, did not want to depart, but had no choice because of the safety of the children. There was nothing to do but pray for God's mercy.

The uniformed islanders, I later learned, were actually military police. They grabbed our

hands and pulled us, one by one, onto the dock. When all had gained the pier, they pointed downward. They did not give us time to grieve or say our farewells. We were to sit or sleep right that instant. We were not allowed to talk, nor were we permitted to cry. The sound of our weeping was too damaging to their ears. Some stood in a guarding position with machine guns in hand. Others patrolled the area. Those of us who could not stop crying were jabbed with the gun's head and hushed. Despite their threats with the guns, they could not stop the crying completely.

We laid out our straw mats and slept. Those without mats rested on the planks. My family slept close together, which brought some comfort to me, as we shared the blankets. It was the first time in five days that we could sleep stretched out. Even though tiny stones protruded into our mats, still, it was better than sleeping in a sitting position.

I was scared and was unable to sleep. I kept worrying that I would not see Dad and all the uncles again and the sound of painful weeping here and there made me feel worse. Admirably, Mom had been strong throughout all this and did not cry like the other mothers. If she had wept, we would all have been bawling. The police would not have appreciated that. I tried to be strong, too. I prayed and asked God to protect the men and to bring them back to us in the morning.