

Còn Nước, Còn Tát

Like any normal day, the sun peeked over the city and barged its way into my family's small apartment. I'm always the first to be greeted by this unwanted visitor, and as such have created a ritual-comprised mostly of groaning-to meet my nemesis. Today, however, is different. It's the one time a year I jump out of bed, brush my hair without a fuss, and meet the sun with a smile. After all, today is Tet, Vietnamese New Year, a holiday where our worries are drowned out by laughter and song (Ly).

I am Hang Le, a 17-year-old resident of Little Saigon in Orange County, and before I was allowed to celebrate Tet as a time of lightheartedness, life was extremely taxing. When I was 14, my family lived in Vietnam. My father, who taught English at the local secondary school, had joined a political group that advocated on behalf of the local Christian indigenous people, called the Montagnards (Crane). Such support of religion and free political thought practically guaranteed him a run-in with the government. I remember my father recalling something a colleague of his had said: "It's not the old guerrilla battlefield—South versus North. It's religion versus communism, freedom versus control" (Kenning).

My father's job, which he had held for two decades, was terminated almost instantly. "Rough economic times" had been the excuse. Shortly thereafter, a man in a uniform knocked on our door and seized my father. A week later, he returned—battered and bruised. I couldn't bring myself to make eye contact with him for days, but when I did, I saw the same fighting gleam in his smile that I had grown up admiring. "Còn nước, còn tát," he had told me—while there's life, there's hope.

In the span of a month, 150 protesters, including my family, escaped to the neighboring Cambodia. In an instant, my friends, home, and life as I had know it vanished. With every step took, my feet ached more, and with every day that food became scarcer, I became hungrier. Each night, when my mother's nightmares jolted her awake screaming "Đừng bắn! Đừng bắn!" (Don't shoot! Don't shoot!), I cried myself to sleep. And at the moment I was absolutely positive life couldn't get any worse, it did.

Cambodia, being an ally of the Vietnamese government, soon began pursuing those of us seeking asylum in their country. The group which we had traveled with quickly dispersed out of fear that they would be deported back to the country which they had fled just months earlier. As a final token of kindness, the local fishing community in which we had found shelter offered us a pair of old fishing boats, in hopes that somehow we could find our way to the Philippines, a country that was willing to accept refugees (Evangelista).

Like sardines in a can, we set off, our destiny held in the unsteady palms of the waves. For eight days and nine nights—each that I thought would be my last—we were tossed at sea. Every time the boat lurched, my father would whisper once more, "Còn nước, còn tát." There is not a doubt in my mind that those words were what kept me alive. By some miracle, we made it to the western coast of the Philippines, where we were received by the Philippine Coast Guard.

International workers helped my family explore the possible places we could settle permanently, and my parents decided that the United States would be their first choice. After an exorbitant amount of paperwork and countless months of waiting, our refugee status was approved. We were going to America.

Life did not immediately get easy when we arrived, however. When we landed, I remember worrying how I'd ever adapt to a world where all Americans look alike and everyone drives on the wrong side of the road. Bigger issues, arose when my father had to settle for a job as a security guard because his teaching credentials from Vietnam simply couldn't be transferred

to the American education system. The most difficult obstacle to our success turned out to be our background, though. I remember three graffiti-painted words scrawled on a broken-down house that accosted us when we first drove through Little Saigon. They read, “Asians go home!” Go home to where? The country that had all but banished my family for independent thought? Or its friend Cambodia that valued a political alliance more than our lives? I don't have a “home” to go back to.

Nevertheless, for every one person that wanted us gone, there were ten more that made us feel welcome, most memorably the Morgan family. Mr. Harold Morgan, the caucasian owner of a local chain of doughnut shops, met my father at a nearby mall where he'd been hired. He invited my family to dinner one night, and although I couldn't understand the entire conversation because of my weak English, it was the first time in a long time I had felt happy.

Later tonight we will celebrate Tet with the Morgans, just like we celebrated Christmas and Thanksgiving with them. Through this relationship I've come to understand that Morgans are much more than family friends, they represent America at its finest—the part that sees us as a nation of immigrants whose differences should be championed, not suppressed. As it is true for the Morgans, it is true for me: America is my country, and just like the thousands of refugees and immigrants that come to this country every year seeking a better life that only America-land of the free and home of the brave can offer, I am American. I don't know exactly where I have yet to go in life, but for the first time ever, I can say that I live in a country that I trust will get me where I need to be, because in America, there will always be life since there will always be freedom—and thus, there will *always* be hope.

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