

TICKET TO FREEDOM

“Nhớ kế hoạch.” *Remember the plan.* Anh’s father’s voice echoed in her head.

Yes, Anh remembered the plan very well. Her mother had insisted that they all go to bed early, but Anh had been running the plan in her head all night instead. She was sure she could even recite it backwards at this point.

She flinched as the first rays of dawn fell through the open window and struck her on the face. She had found comfort in the darkness earlier; the rising sun was a reminder that the world moved on regardless of their plight, and they must keep up. In the distance, somewhere hopefully far away from their little home, whirring gunshots and grenade explosions split apart the quiet hum of dawn. Anh listened, her heart racing each time she heard these noises, but the soldiers seemed no closer today than they were yesterday. They had time.

Anh’s mother was kneeling in front of the altar with her head bowed. She murmured a few words of prayer and offered a stick of burning incense and some fruit to their ancestors. The incense’s earthy, smoky smell wafted through the small room that was only otherwise furnished with four plain beds, a few cabinets, and a small table. The smoke stung Anh’s eyes, which were already twinging from the pangs of exhaustion.

“Đi ăn, Anh. Go eat. You need your strength.” Her mother gesticulated at the stairs that led down to their restaurant.

Anh nodded and closed her eyes again, gathering her energy. “Yes, Ma.”

The whole situation felt surreal. Anh had never seen a movie before, but from what her friend Linh had described about movies, about how they sucked you into a different world and made you live another life, Anh felt as though she must be living in one.

After all, it was hard to believe that only two years ago, in 1973, Anh’s biggest worry

was whether to continue saving for a cinema ticket or to purchase new shoes. She had been eyeing a pair of yellow sandals with red flowers for a while, and her feet were starting to outgrow her current pair. However, they still fit, and it seemed like such a waste of effort to hinder her ticket's progress after she had been saving for months. In the end, she tucked her weekly allowance, 5 Vietnamese dong hard-earned from waitressing at the restaurant, safely away under her bed.

The smell of cooking meat and sharp tang of fresh mint greeted Anh as she entered the restaurant.

“Anh! Buổi sáng tốt lành. Good morning,” her brother, Lam, called out jovially. He spoke over the sizzling stovetop, where he was cooking chicken. “I’m making bún gà for breakfast, there’s a bowl for you at our table. I gave you extra pickled carrots, just how you like it.” Lam’s cheerful demeanor took Anh aback. How could anyone, especially Lam, remain so upbeat in such a serious situation?

“Good morning, Lam. You’re sounding happy today.”

Lam grinned. “You know I’m always happy in the kitchen.”

Despite herself, Anh smiled. It was true. Lam was always his best self when he was stirring pork broth or cooking rice, and this time was no exception. He was an aspiring chef and wanted to open his own restaurant someday.

Ma and Ba were already sitting at stools surrounding their table, a rickety bamboo table closest to the restaurant’s entrance. They were eating Lam’s bún gà, boiled white vermicelli noodles with lemongrass chicken, pickled carrots, romaine lettuce, mint, and cucumbers. Even though this was a popular local dish, Lam’s bún was particularly well-known because he made the vermicelli from scratch.

Anh made her way through the small, dim room past three other bamboo tables and sat down in front of her father.

“I hope you slept well,” her father greeted her. He stood up to give her his usual one-armed hug and rubbed her arm.

Anh nodded. “Good morning, Ba.”

She grabbed a pair of chopsticks and started shoving gà and some vegetables into her mouth. Usually, mealtimes were her favorite part of the day because that was when the Huynh family asked about each other’s day and shared funny moments, but today the air was devoid of chatter and happiness. The aromatic lemongrass and mint, some of Anh’s favorite spices, tasted duller, while the normally citrusy fish sauce was too pungent. Lam finished making his own bowl and sat down on the stool next to Anh to eat. Even though they were only two years apart in age, Lam’s figure dwarfed that of Anh’s. He was so tall that he looked like he was standing behind the table rather than sitting. In comparison, Anh’s feet didn’t even reach the floor.

After several minutes of slurping noodles, crunching lettuce, and the *clunks* of bamboo chopsticks upon wooden bowls, Ba spoke.

“Let us review the plan,” he said. He glanced furtively towards the door and lowered his voice. “Remember – we leave at 7 AM. Two hours from now. Where do we go?”

“22 Gia Long Street,” Anh recited promptly. The address was emblazoned on her mind. This might be the most important thing she would ever have to remember.

“Good,” Ba nodded approvingly. “And if someone sees us?”

“If anyone sees us, including friends and neighbors,” Anh’s brother, Lam, answered with his mouth full of noodles, “we are closing the restaurant for the day to visit grandma in Nha Trang.”

“Exactly. And once we get there –“

“Lam gets on first with the ticket. And we try to get on too if they let us,” finished Ma. Then she continued more shrilly, “The American said they let people without a ticket on the helicopter yesterday.”

No one dared voice the thought they had all had since yesterday: *What if they didn't allow unticketed people today?* They had no plan for that.

“They must,” Ba whispered urgently. “This is the last helicopter. Rumor has it that the Việt Cộng are planning the final attack today. Things do not look good for the South.”

“This is what happens when we are poor and have no connections to the Americans,” lamented Ma. “We do not find out things until it is too late.”

News always did seem to reach the Huynh family last. They hadn't learned about the existence of American evacuation helicopters until yesterday, when the penultimate set of helicopters arrived and carried away over 5,000 Vietnamese people. Today, the last helicopters were coming. They were very lucky to secure a ticket.

Anh vaguely recalled that as far back as 1971, there was news of the American-backed South doing worse than expected. But she was twelve in 1971, and she had more immediate, concrete things to worry about than politics. She was more concerned about how much a cinema ticket cost and how long she would have to save for if she accumulated 5 dong per week. At 1000 dong per ticket, she estimated she would need about four years. In addition, while her parents and their neighbors spoke about the war occasionally, no one had been concerned yet. The conflict was not their problem. They did not understand.

Then, in 1973, the Americans withdrew their troops from Vietnam and the bombs fell closer to Saigon. That year, Ma had fallen ill to typhoid fever, and Anh had to drop out of school

to help with the restaurant. Business slowed to a crawl, and all their money went towards traditional doctors and herbal medicine for Ma. With everything going on in their life, the heightening tension and talk of the Vietcong drawing closer seemed so far away. That was a challenge to deal with another time.

“Yes, it is a shame we do not know what rumors to trust and who is a reliable source of information. Still, we are fortunate,” Ba attempted to soothe her mother. He reached over and rubbed Ma’s back gently. “We must give thanks to Buddha that Anh was able to secure us a ticket. At least Lam will be able to escape. He is most in danger.”

“Yes,” Lam chimed in. “I owe it all to you, Anh.”

At her father’s and brother’s words, a small flare of pride momentarily overcame Anh’s queasiness. She knew how hard everyone worked to support each other, waking up every day at the crack of dawn to prepare noodles and broth and not retiring the night until everything was neatly stored away in the back of the restaurant. Being able to get that ticket for her family filled her with a warm sense of satisfaction.

November 1974, just six months ago, was when Anh’s parents had started to seriously worry. There had been dinner discussions before, of course, about the atrocities the Vietcong were committing in the North. Extorting property. Forcing villagers to labor in the countryside. But that was idle chitchat, unfortunate things that happened to unnamed, faceless people. The Huynhs and their neighbors felt safe in their large, crowded Saigon bubble and continued their lives as normal.

Suddenly, however, people started leaving. The rich, stingy Nguyens down the street sold their jewelry shop and all their gold for one-way tickets to the United States. Saigon’s mayor sent his son to school in Hong Kong. Still, Anh’s parents were not galvanized to action. After all,

their whole livelihood was in Saigon, and they had no gold or American connections to use.

Leaving was not only impossible, but pointless.

Then, the news that the Vietcong were kidnapping boys aged 18 and over for soldier fodder reached their ears. For the first time, the full gravity of the war slammed the Huynhs to their senses. Lam was approaching his 18th birthday. They had to leave *now*.

Ba suggested they bribe an official to change Lam's birthday on identification papers.

"Then we might not even need to leave Saigon," he said. "This will buy us more time."

Ma shot the suggestion down.

"Lam is so tall now, no one will believe he is fifteen. And if we ask an official who is loyal to the communists, chúng tôi đã chết tiệt." *We are damned*. Anh had never heard her mother swear.

They couldn't afford to bribe ship captains to illegally ship them to the Philippines, even if they sold their restaurant and all their belongings. They definitely couldn't afford a plane ticket.

The Huynhs didn't know what to do. Ba struck conversation with street vendors, and Anh eavesdropped on customers in an effort to get information. One escape route for Lam was all they needed. But quality, correct information was hard to come by. Some people had false information, some refused to share, and some lied.

Anh vividly remembered the day one of their customers came in for dinner after he hadn't been seen for months. He was missing a finger.

"Where have you been? We've missed you," Ma had asked.

"Đụ má. Fuck," Hieu, the customer, had cursed. His face had reddened with anger. "I sold all my possessions to escape on a truck to Thailand with information the Nguyens gave me.

I asked them to safekeep my gold and send it to me once I reached Bangkok. We've been friends for over a decade, you know, thought I could trust them. But no! After my escape failed and I finally got back here, I learned from Le that they sold my gold for plane tickets to the U.S. Those backstabbing fuckers!"

"What happened on the way to Thailand?" Lam had asked urgently. "Why couldn't you make it?"

Hieu had snorted. "The Vietcong were stopping people at the border and checking cargo. The Nguyens sure didn't bother telling me that! I barely escaped with my life. It took me a week to get back to Saigon. You see how I don't have this finger anymore? It got infected on the way back, so I had to chop it off."

Lam had looked positively nauseous, and that night, Anh had noticed that Lam wasn't acting his usual happy self while cooking and chatting with customers as he normally did. There was an unspoken consensus that they would close the restaurant early that night. With each passing day, hope dwindled, and desperation increased.

Then came the American yesterday. April 29, 1975.

It had been lunch rush hour. Anh had been wiping down a table and resetting nước mắm bottles when she caught the words *evacuation*, *helicopter*, and *President of United States*. She turned her head to see a white and Vietnamese man conversing in hushed tones. The secretive nature of the conversation and the fact that Americans rarely frequented this area of Saigon piqued Anh's curiosity, and she moved one table closer to the two men, pretending to polish the upside-down cups again with her cloth. Surprisingly, they were speaking in Vietnamese, not English. She was glad; her English was atrocious.

"—do not think I'll leave," the white man was saying. "I have unfinished work in the

embassy.”

“You have an extra helicopter ticket, then?” inquired the Vietnamese man. “Will you give it to someone?”

“Perhaps. I hear that many of your people are now fleeing Saigon.” The white man paused to sip some jasmine tea, and the Vietnamese man raised his hand to signal for Anh. Her mind was racing, trying to figure out what to do. She wasn’t completely sure what they were talking about, but it seemed related to leaving Vietnam. If this was an opportunity, however slim, she had to jump on it. Gathering her courage, she set down the well-polished cup and approached the two men, hastily tucking her cloth into her apron’s pocket.

“H-How can I help you?” These men, especially the American, intimidated her. He was extremely tall, and his face was square, while she was short and her face was round. His hair was slicked back, and he was wearing a suit. He exuded a sense of confidence and refinement that Anh was not used to. She thought of calling her father over, but he had gone grocery shopping for more pho ingredients and would not be back for the next hour. Her mother was busy washing dishes in the back, and Lam was cooking.

“A tea refill.” The Vietnamese man gestured at the empty teapot.

Anh nodded and jotted down the request. She attempted to strike a conversation. “I haven’t seen you two around before. I am glad you found the time to come to our restaurant. It is very chaotic these days, with the Vietcong getting closer.”

“Yes, I hear that they are almost upon the South,” the American responded. He scrutinized Anh for a few seconds. “How is your family doing?”

Anh paused. Should she trust this foreign man? What if he had false information, just like so many other customers she had attempted to glean information from before him? But none of

her other customers were white. He must know something they didn't. And she had to try for the sake of her family.

"Not well," she responded truthfully. "Like so many other families, we are scared. We have no money or connections to do anything." She decided not to explicitly mention that they were looking for an escape route. She didn't fully trust him yet.

"I see," the American nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, it is a difficult position to be in."

"Many of my family members and friends have fled to the United States and Hong Kong," the Vietnamese man said. "And you? Is your family safe here? Will you be okay?"

Anh felt herself relaxing. She felt more comfortable speaking to the Vietnamese man; with his pointed beard and sharp eyebrows, he reminded her of the grandpas down the street who gave her free food every time she passed by.

"No, uncle. My brother, Lam – he is almost 18 years old, and we hear the Vietcong are looking for soldiers. We don't know what to do."

The two men looked from Anh back to each other. The Vietnamese man gave a subtle nod to the American, who turned back to Anh and lowered his voice.

"I work for the American Embassy. The United States is sending evacuation helicopters to Vietnam today and tomorrow. You need a ticket to board. I have unfinished business to tend to before I leave, so I don't need my ticket. Tell you what, I can sell you my ticket. Give it to your brother."

Anh was floored. "A helicopter? How come we haven't heard anything about it around here?"

"It is information that was given only to Americans recently. I wouldn't expect many people to know."

“Where is the helicopter going to land?”

The American man frowned slightly. “I can only give you that information if you buy the ticket. The address is useless without it.”

Anh looked wildly about her surroundings. The bustle of rush hour had drowned out their conversation, although some customers were shooting her dirty looks and calling out for her to take their orders.

“Do you think you can – I want to ask my father about this when he gets back. He is out grocery shopping,” Anh breathed, trying to buy some time.

The American lifted his sleeve to examine his watch. It was a metal watch and looked expensive. “I must leave soon, unfortunately. Back to the Embassy for work. I cannot wait. But if you can’t –”

Anh cut him off. “No, wait, I’ll buy it! How much is it?”

“2000 dong.”

Two thousand – she didn’t have two thousand dong. She had only 990 dong. Anh knew, because a cinema ticket cost 1000 dong, and she had been counting down the weeks before she could finally purchase one.

“I don’t have 2000 dong,” she said desperately. “Here, look–.” She took out a small pouch, green and decorated with red flowers, that she carried with her everywhere. A look of disappointment crossed the American’s face as Anh counted out 990 dong. He glanced almost imperceptibly at the Vietnamese man, who shrugged.

“Very well, this will do. I see how concerned you are for your brother’s safety.”

He leaned forward, and Anh instinctively closed her hand over the banknotes. A tiny part of her didn’t want to relinquish the money; she’d grown attached to and protective of them over

the years. The American raised an eyebrow, and Anh reluctantly opened her palm again. A feeling of disappointment washed over her as she watched him take the bills and drop them into his pocket. She could hardly believe it – three years of scrimping and saving were gone, just like that. She had wanted to use that money to watch *Girl from Hanoi* with Linh in the cinema. She had wanted those yellow sandals with red flowers. She wanted to eat Lam’s cooking every day.

But instead, she watched as the American reached into another pocket and pulled out a thick, glossy sheet of paper stamped with complicated English words.

He handed it to Anh and whispered, “22 Gia Long Street. Go there tomorrow in the morning. If you’re lucky, you and your parents might be able to board too. That’s what others did yesterday.”

Anh had just secured her brother’s ticket to freedom.

It was nearly 7 AM. Vietnam in April was sweltering, even in the morning, but Anh’s family dressed warmly.

“I hear it is still cool in America this time of the year,” Ba said. “We should wear layers.”

“What should we pack, Ba?” Lam inquired.

Ba considered for a moment, his brow wrinkling. “Nothing. We don’t want anything to slow us down when we’re getting on the helicopter. We will start over in America.”

“But I want to bring my cookbook, Ba. Can’t I bring just that?” Lam pleaded. His cookbook contained all his prized recipes, and Lam had been compiling it since he was ten.

In the end, Ba agreed that everyone could bring one item. Each member of the family went to retrieve their most treasured possession. Ma took her jade bracelet, a beautiful circle of deep green jade that had been passed down from Anh’s grandmother and Anh’s great-

grandmother before that. Ba took his battered old plastic watch, which had been dropped in boiling oil, flushed down the toilet, and swallowed and pooped out of a chicken but still worked. Lam, of course, took his treasured cookbook, carefully wrapped in banana leaves. He also took the ticket and carefully zipped it up in his pocket. Anh took with her a monochrome picture of her and her best friends, Linh and Huong, standing arm-in-arm and wearing their best dresses and shoes. She had been unable to tell them that she was leaving on such short notice, and Ba said it was best if as few people knew as possible.

“I’m sorry, Anh,” he had said. “We will try to contact them once we get to America.”

After everyone was done, they made their way to and sat around the table.

Ba checked his battered watch. “It’s 6:55. We should leave soon. It will take us about an hour to walk there.”

For the next several minutes, no one spoke or moved. The Huynhs listened to the sound of the clock tick the seconds away, absorbing the fact that this might be the last time they’d ever see this restaurant, their neighbors, and Vietnam. Anh looked around at the small room. She smiled as she remembered the game she and Lam played as children after the restaurant had closed for the day. They jumped from table to table, zigzagging from the kitchen to the restaurant’s entrance, laughing and shouting, until a very angry Ma came out to chastise them for their recklessness.

The potted plants decorating the walls of the restaurant were a loving memory too. Three years ago, Ba had developed a green thumb and insisted that everyone in the family join him in tending to and watering the plants. Lam had attempted to surreptitiously pluck off a few leaves for a new recipe he was developing, much to Ba’s chagrin and Ma’s and Anh’s amusement.

Feeling tears forming in her eyes, Anh broke the silence.

“What is going to happen in the United States? We don’t even speak English. We are never going to see our neighbors again. Linh and Huong don’t even know I’m leaving. What if we never talk again?” She looked wildly from her brother, to her mother, and finally to her father for some – any – words of reassurance.

The room fell silent again. Then Ba spoke.

“I don’t know what will happen in the United States. It will be hard to learn English and make new friends again. Ma and I will have to find jobs.” Anh’s heart sunk at his words. If Ba, the strong, steady one in the family, had nothing comforting to say, what hope was there for the rest of them?

Then Ba continued, “But I know we will have each other. We will support each other as we always have, just like when Ma got sick and everyone pitched in. We will learn English. Anh and Lam will pick it up fast since they’re young. You two will go to school. I hear school in America is free, and you can finish your education, Anh. We will open a restaurant and sell Vietnamese food. We will get new customers, new neighbors, and new friends. I hear that America is a very welcoming place to immigrants. As long as you work hard, you will succeed. And we work hard.”

Silence descended upon them again, but this time, there was hope. Dreams of the future and what they stood to earn for all their sacrifices hovered in the air. They were still nervous, but now they were just a little excited too.

Beep beep beep. Ba’s watch signaled that it was 7 AM. In unison, the Huynhs rose from their seats, and with one last, searching look across the bamboo tables, plants, and room they had called home for as long as they could remember, they walked out the restaurant.

The streets were quiet except for the sound of chirping birds; even the street vendors had

not started their day. They walked as normally as they could, even though Anh wanted to run from the adrenaline coursing through her. They passed by crowded rows of small houses and shops, twisted around corners, and crossed the street whenever when they noticed other people.

Anh periodically glanced at Lam as they walked. His formerly happy disposition had turned into worry. His eyebrows furrowed even in the shade and his forehead was covered in sweat. Anh reached over and squeezed his swinging hand, trying to let him know that she was there; it was her turn to boost his morale like he'd done for her during breakfast. He looked at Anh and gave a weak smile.

As they drew closer to 22 Gia Long Street, the world began to awaken. The sun shone brighter, and they had to shed their outer layers. More people flooded into the streets, and they could no longer cross the street to avoid them. And was it just Anh's imagination, or were many of these people going in the same direction they were? Had they all also procured tickets and were hoping to escape Vietnam? Together, they continued trekking across Saigon towards their destination.

Anh had expected the evacuation site to be a large, ornate, and perhaps white building, but 22 Gia Long Street was just an ordinary apartment. It was small and square and gray, with a staircase leading up to the roof. A small crowd had already congregated at the building's base, confirming Anh's speculations: other people knew about the helicopter escape, and they had acquired tickets somehow. Perhaps some were like her family too; they had only one ticket but were hoping to all board together in the confusion.

As they waited, they chatted with other people. Anh recognized some people. One was a man Ba had spoken to before who claimed he didn't know anything about an escape route. Some had given false information. But others freely shared their stories. One person's mother worked

for the U.S. Embassy as a maid and had gotten tickets that way. Another was a businessman who got lucky through his connections.

The adrenaline had just begun fading and Anh was finally feeling sleepy when a loud roar split the air. Looking up and squinting, Anh saw the silhouette of a helicopter stand out against the blazing sun. As the helicopter drew closer, the black silhouette became white paint, and the distinct sound of chopping blades pierced through the roar. Finally, the pilot landed on the apartment's roof, and the blades began to slow.

Anh immediately noticed that the helicopter was – small. The landing skids spanned the width of the roof, but the apartment was not very large, and the area behind the cockpit, where the passengers sat, didn't seem like it could fit everyone who had arrived this morning.

Everyone watching the helicopter had noticed this too, because suddenly Anh was shoved forward by Ba as the crowd lurched forward to race for a seat on the helicopter.

“Go, go!” Ba shouted as they ran for the staircase leading up to the roof. “Don't worry about us, run!”

Lam grabbed Anh's hand and hurtled forward, his long stride nearly lifting Anh off her feet as she ran with him. “Come on, Anh!”

Eventually, though, two white men exited the helicopter to shout for order, and the stampede came to a halt. People who were squashed along the staircase had to reorganize themselves in a single-file line, and the crowd backed up. Luckily, the Huynhs had managed to stick together in the confusion. Anh peered anxiously over the heads of the people in front of them. They hadn't been able to make it on the staircase, but they weren't very far away from it. Maybe 40? 50? people were in front of them. Ma was hugging Lam, and Anh gripped her father's hand.

Anh watched with a twisted stomach as one-by-one, the line shortened and the helicopter grew fuller. She stood on tiptoes and craned her neck to count the heads ahead of them over and over. She tried to guess how many more would fit into the helicopter. 30 people ahead, and maybe 25 would fit? Or 35? She hoped it was 35.

They finally reached the base of the staircase. 20 people ahead.

10 people were ahead now.

Then 5.

4.

3.

2.

1.

And at last, it was their turn.

They stepped forward from the top of the staircase onto the roof. By now, the helicopter was bursting with people to the point that some people were nearly hanging out of the doors. But surely, one more Lam-sized person could fit. Or maybe four if you really packed the passengers together. Anh's mother clasped her hands together and raised them to the sky, her lips mouthing a prayer. Ba clenched Anh's shoulders with whitened fingers. Anh reached over and gripped her brother's trembling hand. Together, they awaited the soldier's judgement.

The American looked at the helicopter and then back at the Huynhs. He was tall and square, like the American from the restaurant, but his face was much more rugged and scarred. He pursed his lips. Slowly, he shook his head.

"No!" Ma's and Ba's strangled voices cried out simultaneously, before the soldier could speak. "We have – we have ticket! Lam! Cho họ thấy đi! Show them!"

Lam's hands were shaking so badly that Anh had to reach over and unzip his pocket. Biting her lip, she shoved the glossy sheet at the American.

The American glanced at it and raised his eyebrows. "What's this?" he asked.

"Ticket! Ticket for Lam!" Ma pleaded. She pushed Lam, who stumbled forward.

The American frowned. "This is not a ticket," he said. "Maybe you've been given a fake. There are lots of scammers in the area trying to take advantage of Vietnamese people during this time."

He was talking too fast and using too many complicated English words for anyone to understand, but they understood his frown and shakes of head. They weren't going to board.

Lam dropped to his knees and clutched the hem of the soldier's uniform. "Please! I'm going to get killed here if I stay!" he cried out. "I have to go!"

The soldier looked at Lam but said nothing. His face was inscrutable.

"Không, lấy ngọc của tôi! No, take my jade!" Ma, in desperation, wrenched off her jade bracelet, handed down over countless generations, and thrust it at the soldier. He did not take it, although his expression softened. For a wild moment, Anh thought it might have worked and they would all be allowed to board. But instead, the soldier pointed at Anh.

"Her. She can board. But that's it. No more room."

Anh was confused. Why was the American pointing at her? She wasn't the one with the ticket. The American must have gotten something wrong. She shook her head and gestured wildly at Lam, hoping the soldier would understand.

The soldier looked from Anh to her brother, then the helicopter, and finally back at Lam. His eyes traveled up and down Lam, sizing him, and frowned again. He turned to Anh.

"I'm sorry, but no. He won't fit."

Anh still didn't understand what he was saying, but this time, she understood. The helicopter had no room left. She was the smallest person in the family, and if they really tried, they could squash her in. Lam was too tall and broad.

Ma and Ba also seemed to understand too, because they simultaneously leaned forward to jerk Lam back and push Anh forward. Shocked, Anh turned back.

“Go!” Ba shouted over the roar of the helicopter blades. “This is how it must be.”

“What – no, what are you saying! I'm staying with you!” Anh shouted. Her cheeks were suddenly wet, her vision blurred, and her voice cracked. “How am I supposed to go alone? What's going to happen to Lam?”

Ma reached forward and enveloped Anh in a hug. Ma was calm now and breathing deeply, with any trace of her earlier breathlessness gone.

“Go, my girl. Board the helicopter. Go to America. Work hard and get us there someday. Go. We will figure something out for Lam.”

Ma took her jade bracelet and shoved it onto Anh's wrist. The stone wrapped snugly over her wrist, as if it was made for her.

“Ma is right,” Ba said. He took off his watch and wrapped it over Anh's other wrist. His voice was trembling, but his grip was firm when he gave her his signature one-armed hug. “I know this is scary, Anh. But you are sixteen, nearly an adult. You are already so strong and independent. I want you to be safe and make a life for yourself, and I know you can do it.”

Lam was crying too, but he now realized what was happening. He too, handed Anh his carefully-wrapped cookbook. “You can do it, Anh. I know you can.”

Silently sobbing, Anh backed away with her family's most precious possessions in her arms and collapsed onto the floor, her body heaving with dry sobs. She allowed the soldier to

lead her away from her family and towards the helicopter, but her eyes never left her family. The three of them stood together, shoulder-to-shoulder, crying and waving to Anh and calling out words of encouragement and comfort that Anh could not hear.

Soon, she was made to clamber inside the helicopter. The helicopter was so tightly packed that she could not breathe when the doors closed. A window was in front of her, and she continued staring through it at her waving family, not quite understanding what had just happened.

The helicopter engine revved, and the blades started rotating. Anh pressed her nose and hands against the window and took in Ma's, Ba's, and Lam's faces: her mother's almond-shaped and brown eyes, her father's bushy eyebrows, and her brother's characteristic mole on his left jawbone. She should have brought a picture of her family too.

They began to rise, slowly at first and then faster and faster. The view of the crowd gave way to the apartment building, then the surrounding shops and stalls, and then all of Saigon. An arm wrapped over her shoulder and gave Anh's arm a familiar squeeze. She broke her gaze and looked up expectantly to Ba for comfort, but it was not Ba but a random Vietnamese woman.

"Mọi thứ sẽ ổn thôi. Mọi thứ sẽ ổn thôi," the woman said. *It will be okay. It will be okay.*

Anh looked back out the window. On the disappearing ground, the pinpricks of Ma, Ba, and Lam continued waving up at her. She tried to call out, to say goodbye and tell them she loved them one last time, but her throat welled and her voice cracked. The distance between her and her family grew and grew, and then, they were gone.