

BOAT PEOPLE

PERSONAL STORIES FROM THE VIETNAMESE EXODUS 1975-1996



EDITED BY CARINA HOANG

I named my child Lyma

By Huynh Thuy Ai. Lan (Lyma's Mother)



For six months I lived on one bowl of salty rice a day. I was a prisoner, jailed because some policemen concluded I was a CIA agent because they had found a photograph of me with an American. I explained that he had been my English teacher, and the photo was taken at his farewell party, but that made no impression at all. My husband was also imprisoned without trial or reason. Our house had been raided many times by the authorities whenever it was convenient for them to do so. It had been unpredictable – and terrifying. We were stripped of our possessions.

This was our bitter reality.

I was carrying my first child when I was thrown into prison. As each day passed, my belly continued to swell while the rest of me shrank into a bundle of skin and bones. I didn't have enough to eat for one person, let alone two, and I almost lost my baby. The thought of losing a child was almost unbearable, and most of the time I just wanted to curl up and die.

But there were times when I thought we might all survive, and at those moments I resolved that, as soon as we were released, my husband and I would escape the country with our newborn child.

I gave birth a few weeks after I was released from prison in 1978. It was a blessing that my husband and I were reunited to witness our child take her first breath in this troubled world. She weighed in at 2.1 kg, and we named her Uyen Nguyen. She was tiny and she was beautiful. But not everything was wonderful: in the meantime our home had been completely trashed, leaving only its frame.

When Uyen was still at the crawling stage, we decided the time had come to flee the country. With

arrangements made, we scrambled onto the vessel that was to carry us away, along with hundreds of other people with their hopes of freedom and independence.

We battled high seas and torrential rain for the first six days of our journey. On the sixth night, in calmer conditions, the boat captain made a fateful decision.

We'd spotted an island in the far distance. Maybe this would be the first staging post on our journey to freedom. What none of us knew at the time was that earlier in the journey the captain had made a serious navigation error. Partly out of desperation, partly through excitement, the captain charged towards the island. As we approached it, we saw on its shore a large sign in Vietnamese: *khong co gi quy hon Doc lap Tu do Hanh phuc* – Nothing is more precious than independence, freedom and happiness.

We were still in Vietnam!

The captain reversed the vessel and pushed away from the island at full throttle while uniformed men hurtled down the hill towards us firing their guns. The soldiers jumped into a patrol boat and started chasing us. I grasped Uyen in my shaking arms as terror and panic swept through our vessel. My husband held onto us tightly. We had the dreadful feeling that our time was up.

The communists had no trouble in catching us, and they towed the boat back to the island. We were parked on the beach and given plastic sheets for cover. They made us pay for our food – rice and rotten fish. And when we couldn't afford to buy it any longer, they threw us into prison.

I thought I'd become accustomed to grim situations, but I had never seen anything so horrific. The jail was a wooden structure comprising two large rooms – one for men and the other for women. Two hundred people were crammed into each room with only enough space for us to lie shoulder to shoulder. For each room a bucket was provided for use as a toilet – one bucket for 200 people. To this day I have never felt as demeaned as I did then.

Uyen and I were released a few months before my husband escaped. He was concerned that he would be jailed again if we returned home, so we lived in separate towns with our respective families and friends. It was safer that way.

Living in Vietnam became unbearable. We'd forgotten what it was like to have freedom, hope and happiness. Our determination to leave the country strengthened.

I was nine months pregnant with my second child when we escaped again. Uyen was growing quickly, having just turned four. We were given only twenty-four hours to pack our belongings. The boat organiser felt there would be less risk of being caught if we left during inclement weather, and he saw our opportunity coming.

The storm was much more severe than he anticipated. Our little boat was tossed high on huge waves, then it would plunge down between dark billows of water, pushing aside dead bodies that had succumbed to the perils of the sea – men, women and children who had fled before us. We were also chillingly aware of sharks and other dangerous sea creatures around us. Add to that the fact that we were packed in like sardines and people were

vomiting over each other.

I went into labour while we were on the South China Sea. The pain was intolerable at times, and it lasted for five days. This was a far, far more difficult birth than my first. I couldn't eat or drink, and had horrific visions of perishing at sea. In my delirium, I had difficulty in differentiating between life and death, and as the days wore on I became certain death was closing in on me.

My husband comforted me as best he could. To give birth while the boat was rocking so violently was going to take some kind of miracle. I was still in agony and fast losing hope when our boat came across an oil rig.

Things happened quickly. They lifted us from our battered boat and kept us on the oil rig for seven days. While everyone, including my husband and Uyen, were transferred to Kuku Island by ship, I was airlifted there.

As I lay on the stretcher, still in enormous pain, I struggled to take in what was being said to me. In an effort to distract me from my discomfort, one of the pilots made conversation and, though I was floating in and out of awareness, I did hear him suggest that I name my child 'Lyma' if it was a girl. I was grateful for the attention and didn't think to ask him why that name. I just nodded. And when I gave birth to a girl I followed through and named her Lyma, not knowing what it meant or where it came from.

A doctor and a nurse assisted the birth. I had mixed emotions: relieved in the knowledge that my new baby and I were safe, but heartbroken that my husband had not arrived at Kuku in time to be with me. Lyma was born in good health. It was a

miraculous delivery given the circumstances I'd been through.

My husband and Uyen reached the island half a day later. A month after the birth we were transferred to Galang Island, where a refugee processing centre would decide our fate.

Before long I was pregnant with my third child. It was a boy this time, and he was born in much less perilous circumstances. Kasdyanto Tin Quoc Nguyen entered the world at Galang Refugee Camp in 1983, the same year that we were accepted as migrants to Perth, Western Australia. At long last we would be blessed with the stability that had eluded us for so long.

Even now I am sometimes overcome by a sense of disbelief that I am still alive. I could never have anticipated becoming the mother of three children in the process of escaping from my homeland, but that is virtually the way it was.

(I still have no idea what the name Lyma might mean. Can anyone out there cast some light?)



Lyma is currently living with her partner, Christoph Sperfeldt, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and working as an International Criminal Law Advisor to Legal Aid Cambodia and as an International Civil Party Lawyer representing victims before the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (Khmer Rouge Tribunal).

"THEY PILED ON TOP OF ONE ANOTHER IN WOODEN BOATS. MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN. SO DESPERATE TO ESCAPE THEIR WAR-TORN HOME, MORE THAN A MILLION PEOPLE WOULD RISK EVERYTHING TO TACKLE THE HIGH SEAS IN SEARCH OF SAFE HAVEN. MANY NEVER MADE IT TO LAND. THOSE WHO DID ENDURED UNIMAGINABLE HORRORS. TOLD SIMPLY IN THEIR OWN WORDS, BOAT PEOPLE GIVES VOICE TO SOME OF THE SURVIVORS OF THE VIETNAMESE EXODUS. THE LARGEST MASS MIGRATION IN MODERN HISTORY. THEIR STORIES WILL MAKE YOU WEEP. THEY WILL MAKE YOU ANGRY. ABOVE ALL, THEY WILL MAKE YOU WONDER AT THE ABILITY OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT TO GO ON AGAINST ALL ODDS. THIS BOOK IS A POWERFUL DOCUMENT OF A TIME WE SHOULD NEVER BE ALLOWED TO FORGET - AND OF A PEOPLE WE SHOULD BE PROUD TO HAVE GIVEN A NEW HOME." - THE WEST AUSTRALIAN



carina hoang
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