

AN ORDINARY LIFE.

I am a 43 year old accountant running my own accounting practice in Sydney Suburbia. There is nothing extra ordinary, special or unusual about a beady eye accountant tucked away in the 'burbs, number crunching away. By all accounts it is very uneventful and sublime. My blessed ordinary life is no mean feat. My journey of reaching this place began 35 years ago, in a land of war torn Vietnam.

Searching the labyrinth of my mind, far in the jungle of repressed memories to try and find the child that lived 35 years ago, in a place far removed from the McDonalds and Hungry Jacks of Sydney. I want to travel back to the spring of 1975, to the events that changed my life.

I was a hapless nine year old whose ordinary life consists of going to Christian fellowship meetings in the early out of the morning before sunrise, then rushing home to get my books to go to school. I would be given a small sum of money so that I could pick up some breakfast at the market which often is a bowl "bun rieu" or a plate of "banh cuon". It was always a treat to pass the market before turning in for school. There were so many things to see and smell. Oh... the aroma of those wonderful scents fill me with hunger and the fresh smell of raw meat, vegetables and herbs would linger on to my clothes as I pass by the market place.

At the time I was in third class primary school at our local catholic parish. The town had a population of about 12,000 people made up of almost 100% catholic. Even though by numbers we were a small community, we had the biggest concrete laid church in the country. Back then, to a nine year old child, this church was colossal by any standard, rivaled to cathedrals of some standing. In those days, it was customary that we attended daily masses and Benedictine in the afternoon. Our days seem to be so long that we could fit anything into the day, from going to daily masses, school, coming home for lunch and to a sleeping siesta afterwards. We had ample time to play outside with the other kids from hop scotch, hide and seek, skipping ropes, collecting crickets and just having fun. When we had nothing to do we would always turned to reading comic books to pass the time. In those days, if your family were lucky enough to own a TV there is always a good show on if you could bear the continuous intermitting news updates. The shows were often strung out due to constant news breaks and updates of the battles that raged across the country.

Life was comfortable and lazy, even though the constant battles between the North and South were being waged with immense sufferings to all. I was lost in the naiveness of my childhood. Even though it was bombarded constantly on the small box, I was quite oblivious to the deaths of many hundreds of thousands of people around me. I had often seen men/ex-soldiers with limbs missing coming around door to door knocking begging for food. I just thought that it was just normal. Every passing day was just another ordinary day: brought up with war, seeing the lame and injured so often that I became immune to its sight, losing the capacity to feel its misery.

It took one bomb rocket dropped by the Viet Cong that landed at the back of our Church in the morning in March 1975 that changed the course of my family's history. The bomb took the life of one of the locals and left the ground of the church damaged. It shattered the glass menagerie of my perfect world and brought home the reality of war. By late afternoon on the same day, my father had decided to pack up and leave. He had lived and smelled death under the Communist regime from North Vietnam. He escaped from the North to South Vietnam in 1954 and this time it was no different. He must once more, pack up his life to escape the oncoming communist stampede.

My father had built up a thriving timber business and accumulated much land in the area for himself and his family. But all the wealth in the world cannot shield you from the brutality of the regime. My father did not want to stay around to find out. He did not hesitate to leave it all behind. We did not linger on to the house to breath in its last nostalgic air. After lunch, we packed up our basic belongings and bare essentials, closed the front doors for the last time and left. We had our last meal in the house that day and never to return. We were the first family to leave our town. My parents did not linger on. They have the frontal gnawing fear of looming deaths at the hand of the communists.

At that time there were 8 of us including my father and mother. Our ages ranges from 3 to 14 years old. My mum was heavily pregnant at 7 months. Our first stop was my grand mother's house in Tan-Mai (40 KM from Doc Mo and 80 Km from Pier Kho Nam). We were there for about 3 weeks. It was quite frightening towards the end as we heard constant bombs whistling nightly overhead. The Viet Cong were moving closer and closer into the heart of the City. Some nights we slept on beds, other nights in the bunker. You never know what to expect. We slept in constant fear.

After 3 weeks, we were on the move again to Saigon, to my father cousin's house in Hoa Hung. By this stage every body was here. The rooms were packed to the rafters with people sheltering in the house. It was frightening for us children, but it would have been more so for my parents who grasped the enormity of the perilous situation: worrying not just for themselves but also their young family. I cannot phantom the gut wrenching fear that gripped their lives. I remembered my mother sewing a pocket to the inside of my trousers and put in \$50,000 Dong and told me that should anything happen and we were to become separated, I was to use the money to fend for myself.

We had close calls trying to escape. We were told by relatives that helicopters were picking up people at Chi Hoa Cemetary. We all walked there: there was my family, my great uncle and aunts and his family and my grand parents. It was a three kilometer walk and when we arrived at the destination, we rushed to the helicopter. We made our way in and got on to the plane, but it was over crowded and we were told that one of us had to step down. My father disembarked and told us to go without him. My grandfather refused to leave my father behind. We all then disembarked. We made a decision there and then - that we all go together or not at all. As we stepped down, other people clamored on board to take our positions. We left disheartened that we came so close and yet to be returned. Our misfortunes were our blessings. The helicopter was so over crowded that it went down.

That night on the way back, my mother had overheard an army officer telling his parents that "If you don't see me come home, go to Port Bach Dang as there are ships mooring there which will sail out to seas". On hearing the advice, my mother told my father who did not hesitate to follow suit. He woke up very early the next morning of 30th April 1975, took his motor bike to Port Bach Dang to see the situation. By pure chance and with abundance of luck, he met one of his business acquaintance at the Port who told him to go to Pier 5 as there are ships there which will sail out to seas. He returned to tell the family of the developments. As his motor bike can only carry 2 passengers, he took my mum who was 7 months pregnant and me on the bike. The rest of my siblings went on foot with my grandmother. The journey was fraught with danger. People were scurrying everywhere. Stream of bombs were landing any which ways. There were bodies on the streets folded up in blankets and jute spreads. It was total chaos on a grand scale, like some Hollywood blockbuster movie, except this one is real, unfolding as we were running. The deaths were real, the suffering was real, the losses were real and the bodies were real. It was surreal.

I was so scared that I held on to my father on the bike so tightly that I hardly could breathe. My legs were grasped flushed to the bike exhaust pipe trying to hang on. The heat of the pipe was so hot that it burned through by skin and blistered the inside of my leg. I could not feel a thing, for the sound of the constant shower of whistling bombs filled by bones with so much terror that nothing else mattered. The journey only took about 10 minutes but it seemed an eternity. We arrived at Port Kho Nam, my father left my mum and I there to find our ways. He went back with the bike to pick up my grandfather. The others had to contend with making their ways by foot.

There we were at the Port, and the ship Truong Xuan was there. To get on board we must pass a locked gate. My mother's waist line is now bulging and she could not crawl underneath the gate to get inside. With all the madness that was going on around us, the tension was tantamount. But at last, bribery was paid and the gates were lifted so people could enter. The swells of people are now making their ways on to the ship. By this time, many members of my families had also made it into the port. We all went aboard with the exception of me. I refused to board the ship as I had not seen my father return. I was sure that he had died. I locked arms around the post and screamed out that my father had died and thus refuse to leave without him. People close by try to untangle me to throw me on board, but I hung on until my father returned safely to me.

By the time we boarded the ship and realized the enormity of the situation. We had left everything behind. We took nothing with us, no personal belongings, no possessions apart from the clothes on our back. The many years of working, building and planning: in a space of a few days and one chaotic moment. We had nothing. We lost everything. And yes our hands were empty, but not shackled. We did not leave our home, our country in search of gold or silver. We left in search of freedom, freedom from religious persecution, freedom to speak and seek democracy, freedom to live without fear.

For my parents having escaped the Communist regime in 1954 when they moved from the North to the South, they have seen it all before. The regime so brutal that they have seen their uncles buried alive. Ordinary citizens were killed and imprisoned without trial or jury. We may have left our hearts and material possessions behind, but we left as a free citizen. There is nothing more precious than the life in your hand. We accepted our fate gladly for we are the fortunate ones.

When the ship set sail I did not know of the calamity aboard the ship with the hull of the ship taking in water. All I know is that I was hungry and thirsty and wanted to go home. Further out to sea, the water was calm, the waves rolled softly with the breeze, but the sun was unforgiving. As we drifted out to seas without much food and water, and the scorching sun hanging overhead like a blow torch, I drifted in and out of consciousness. We drifted along for about 4 days before being rescued by a Denmark Ship, the Clara Maersk. We were taken up on board, all very tired and hungry. I can still remember the long winding human lines to the ship kitchen. When it was my turn, I ate some food but kept a few pieces of meat hidden in my clothes so I can take back to my mother who would be lying in her corner with her little bundle all curled up.

My loving mother, her quiet demeanor was a tower of strength for all of us. In the face of danger, she did not panic. She held her nerve and along with my father was a constant guide, always assuring and affirming. In times of sheer terror, she held firm and kept us together. Looking back, contemplating the period. It just dawned on me, she was a woman of only 33 shepherding her six children to safety.

I really did not have concept of the number of days and nights on the ship, but I do remember the time after the ship took us to Hong Kong. Landing at Sakung was like reaching the Promised Land. I remember those times fondly. The people of Hong Kong treated us so well. We were given 3 square meals a day with abundance of fruits. They would treat us to open air movies. And here was my first encounter with Bruce Lee in "Enter the Dragon". It was a treat.

We stayed in the army barracks. My extended family of 22 people stayed in barrack number 13. Actually, every body else was huddled in shared dormitory but we got our own domed because our quarters was numbered 13. Being superstitious, everybody rejected the place. We did not care what number we had, as the place was private and it was built next to a very big tree which provide shade and kept us cool. When we left to go to Australia, a lot of people fought to take up their residence there.

It seems at every turn, we were drawn to certain paths that we did not choose but were mapped out and chosen for us. It was like a force field that drew us unto itself. When we put our names down to go to America. We were called up but missed the announcements and then had to instead take Australia as the second option. The rest as they say is history.

It was quite sad to leave Hong Kong. But there is yet another country that awaits us. Leaving Hong Kong, we embarked to the land of the Southern Cross. We left out beloved war-torn country of Vietnam, the place where we were born and bred, in search of freedom. We know not where our journey ends and it would be the continent of Australia where my home is today. I am compelled with the poet Dorothea McKellar to declare with her, "I love the sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains, of rugged mountain ranges, of droughts and flooding rains. I love her far horizons. I love her jewel blue sea. All you who have not loved her, you will not understand"

I adore my country Australia that I now call home. This country gives me the freedom to pursue my hopes and dreams. These dreams are not of fame and fortune, but that of absolute obscurity in the ordinariness of life. I want to be lost in its country and people where I can wake up everyday without fear of whistling bombs, army tanks and calamity.

This is where I want to be. This is where I belong. My beloved country of Vietnam bore me and instilled in me a resilient will to survive. My adopted country raised me, nurtured me, taught me to keep my heritage and allow me to be who I am today: to live a life of peace and tranquility, in obscurity and lost in the world of a fortunate and ordinary life.

Nguyen Xuan Diep