

# For the love of a child – Mai's story

Khazmira Bashah, aged 12

It was 14th February 1982, our aeroplane touched down at Perth Airport. Everyone was handing out roses and hugging us. It felt wonderful. It seemed like the whole of Perth had come out with flowers just for us. Many years later I was to learn that it was Valentine's Day.

Now, on 14th June 2002, here I was, waiting for a 12-year-old girl to come and interview me about being a refugee. I was filled with so many emotions, as I had never in all these years been asked my story. I wondered what she would ask me and if I would remember how things really were in the Saigon we had fled. As I sat waiting for her to arrive, my mind drifted back to those years and many painful memories came back to me. My own memories and those through the eyes of my mother ...

It was 1975 and the streets of Saigon were filled with beggars, food stalls, cyclos (motor bikes) and the usual throng of people. There were many smells of food and the heat made everything feel so very steamy. Rumours abounded about Vietnam going to war, about the Americans taking over the cities, and the threat of Communism was hanging over everyone.

My father was an army captain, my mother a nurse and they enjoyed a pleasant middle class way of life until 30th April 1975 when their whole world changed. War came with a sudden awakening for my parents; the Communist party came into power. My father was immediately put in prison. My mother, who was pregnant with me, was taken in the middle of the night every night to be questioned about my father's activities, but she was kept alive because she was a nurse and they needed her skills to repair the many wounded flooding into the city.

Many people were re-zoned into the hills away from their families. They were sent away with nothing. Many people took their own lives.

When my mother gave birth to me, she named me Mai. Before she had time to recover from the birth, she was told she would be going to Cambodia to nurse the soldiers. This was not a choice.

Mother was alone and knew she would have to go but if she took me I would surely die. She had befriended the nuns at a convent and as she handed me over to them she made a promise to herself that no matter what she would survive and come back for me. She was determined that we would be reunited as a family one day. She was determined to live.

My mother's days and nights in Cambodia were filled with

terror. Her nursing skills stood aside as she became more like a butcher, sawing arms and legs off the wounded soldiers because there was no other way to treat them. So much pain, so much suffering was endured by so many.

The torture and cruelty continued every minute of the day. The only thing that kept my mother alive was the promise to come back for me when all this was over.

My mother was a good woman and the doctors she worked with felt she had much courage and a very strong will. She was determined that she would find me one day. The doctors formed a plan to help my mother leave Cambodia and be reunited with me. They signed papers saying she had gone mad and that she should be released. The Viet Cong almost had a fear of the insane: they were the only people in the country to be left alone. They decided to release my mother.

The doctors who had made this possible then disclosed to her that throughout the war they had gathered the names and addresses of many of the wounded they had treated. They tucked notes into my mother's clothing. She was to try to deliver as many notes as she could to the families of the wounded and dying.

Upon her return to Saigon my mother kept her promise and delivered the messages to the grateful families who for the first time in many months had news of their loved ones.

My mother and I were reunited in 1978. I was two years old. My mother knew then that we would have to escape. If we remained I would never have an education and I would never have a future. In order to survive we had to go. My mother continued with her pretence of being a mad woman and most of the time was left alone. We continued to struggle for food; all the while my mother continued to look for ways for us to leave Vietnam.

My mother did find someone who would take us and many other families in a boat to safety. We left our house in the middle of the night. We had not told anyone of our plan. So many of us were waiting on the shore to get on the boat to freedom. Suddenly flashlights, soldiers and dogs came out of nowhere. The fate ahead was inevitable. As we were all huddled into a shed to wait, a young soldier came up to my mother and scolded her for putting my life at risk. My mother told him of her hopes, dreams and aspirations for me. He took pity on her and said he would help her to escape back to Saigon instead of us being put to death. The young officer would distract the rest of the soldiers, my mother and I were to run and hide under the bridge until he came for us.

The plan worked but it seemed like we waited for hours under the bridge before he came and yelled at us to run as fast as we could. We heard the sounds of dogs and gunfire as we ran

and ran. We ran through thick jungle and then my mother dropped to the ground and could not run any more. The young soldier carried my mother and me on his back to the safety of his own mother's house. We were given food and warmth and then had to make our way back to our house in Saigon. We unlocked the door and returned as if nothing had happened. The young hero had saved our lives.

My father was eventually released from prison in 1981. I was six years old. Things in Vietnam had gotten much worse and my father was determined that we all should leave. My parents said many times that they could die in Vietnam but this was not the way for me. I needed to go on and survive so that one day I could tell this story.

My father's uncle had a small boat and it was decided that we had to try once more to leave Vietnam. Twenty adults and thirty children travelled on the boat with us. We decided we would head for Malaysia as they were allowing refugees into their country. It was said to be a short journey of no more than two days. We had heard many frightening stories about the terror at sea. There were stories of pirates and cannibalism yet this almost seemed worth the risk as opposed to never having freedom again.

After six days we still had not reached Malaysia. We were lost at sea. We came across an oil rig and were given food, water and a new map to find our way to freedom.

When we arrived on the Malaysian shore we were told we had to sink our boat. As we were doing so and trying to get to shore, my father told me to hang tightly onto him. He jumped into the water and I let go. I fell straight to the bottom and almost drowned. Once again my parents' will to keep me alive made sure I was rescued and finally taken to the shores of Malaysia.

We remained in the camp for a month and were interviewed by American officials. We were asked if we wanted to settle in America but my father was very scared of them and said no. Everyone thought he was mad because now his application would go to the bottom of the list. The officials interviewing all the refugees were due to fly out over the Christmas period. A freak storm hit the island and they could not leave. The interviewing process continued. This time my father was interviewed by the Australians and was desperate to have his application accepted ...

There was a knock on the door. I was startled and wondered where I was. My memories had taken me back to Saigon. A young girl in school uniform stood at the door. She was here for the interview and I knew I was ready to tell her our story.

## Footnote

Mai Nguyen commenced school in Perth, Western Australia at Infant Jesus. She went on to Chisholm College and University. She gained a degree in Sociology, a Diploma in Adult Education and a Masters Degree. Today she works as a dedicated Community Settlement Services Worker assisting Vietnamese people settle into Australian life. She is currently cam-

paigning for bilingual teachers. Mai believes the most important thing that can tie us together is a common language; it builds the bridges and differences between us all.

Mai's mother and father own a restaurant. Her father has never been back to Vietnam; he has not forgotten the price he has had to pay for leaving his many family members behind.

Mai's hopes for Vietnam are for freedom.

I will never forget the words Mai said to me: 'A person who becomes a refugee does not always come with the hope of a better life, they come for survival, because they cannot continue to live and be alive in the country they are fleeing from. It takes desperate steps to leave in small boats to set off for a place that may never let you stay, but none of that matters because you leave your country for Freedom!'