

# Journey to freedom

*Hai-Van Nguyen, aged 18*

155980, 155981: My parents hold the numbers, scrawled hurriedly in the impermanence of chalk, across their chests.

The camera flashes come in methodical succession, and in a brief moment they become mere faces attached to numbers. There had been many before them and there would be many after them.

Away from the sharp focus of the lens, my parents blur into insignificance – indistinguishable faces in a crowd that is a common statistic.

**M**y parents recite the numbers precisely to me as we sit around the kitchen bench. My mother sits

across from me, having not had time to remove the apron from her chest. My father has just arrived home from work, the front of his shirt drenched in the fumes of assorted chemicals. They've come a long way from having had a number held across their chests and it amazes me they recall them so easily. "It's something one never forgets," my mother says. "You wear it in your mind," she says, "long after the chalk has been erased."

A prisoner never forgets his number.

Society is obsessed with numbers. Long after the human atrocities have occurred, all we remember are the numbers. We remember there were 6 million victims of the Holocaust and 1 million casualties during the Vietnam War. More recently, we hear about the '765 people' who are 'unauthorised boat arrivals' and the '228 detainees currently in detention' in Woomera. We're hearing politicians justify their actions with phrases like 'Australia is accepting an ample number of refugees for an industrialised country.' As usual, issues involving human lives become overshadowed by numbers that relegate people to the status of mere statistics. We remember the numbers, but we forget the human faces behind them. We forget that people, whether they be refugees or not, are mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, sons and daughters.

History books and newspapers purport to tell the facts, but facts do not only consist of numbers. Human experience is real; human suffering is real; and so are the stories that capture them. We need stories to restore the human face to such atrocities. Stories, in capturing the triumphs and sorrows of each individual's experience, serve a wider purpose of giving a collective voice to all humanity. They capture humanity's innate sense of endurance and the human spirit's capacity to survive. Numbers become concrete and meaningless. Stories, in essence, are timeless, transcendent. We need these stories to give human faces, not numbers, to the refugees that arrive on our shores; to refugees used as numbers in an imbalanced political and social equation. This is one of those stories.

My parents have been in Australia for almost 14 years, but scarcely does the number come up. They measure the years not by days, but by the experiences that have accumulated during their long 'Hanh Trinh Tim Tu Do\*' – the tears, the laughter, the backbreaking work and the triumphs. Throughout my childhood, I have heard fragments of our experience fleeing Vietnam, like snippets of an old, barely visible movie. My memories are few and far between, but my parents' recall it with vivid accuracy. On that Thursday evening, they told their story for the first time.

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My father said the trip had been planned for months. The vessel that would take us to our freedom was a dishevelled, barely sea-worthy fishing boat about 12 metres long and three metres wide. It could only hold about 40 people, but would be forced to hold twice its capacity. The night we left my mother recalls having never said goodbye to my grandparents – she could not even tell them we were going. It was a heartbreaking deception, but much like what we experienced as refugees, it was done out of necessity, not choice. Before we left, the boat was loaded with cargo, in the hopes that it would hide the human cargo it was to contain. At that time, many were still fleeing Vietnam and the authorities fiercely guarded the coasts. Only several years earlier, if you were caught trying to escape you would have been shot. At the time we chose to leave, if you were caught, you were captured and imprisoned.

We left just after the last drops of light had trickled from the horizon. The final glimpse any of us got of our homeland was of a large black mass of land and the distinct silhouette of wind-ruffled coconut palms. I was four, my sister was eight and my brother was ten. My parents shielded me from the pain of the experience through deception, much in the same way they had my grandparents. Each time I asked, "Where are we going?" my mother would assure me we were simply "going to Saigon." Her words did not subdue my childish sense of curiosity – every few hours I would ask, "Why is it taking so long?" and every time she would reply, "It only seems long."

The next morning we were out of Vietnamese waters and well on our way across the South China Sea. We had overcome the first obstacle, but any security we felt was brief because we knew of the potential dangers that lay ahead. The greatest fear confronting all Vietnamese refugees boats at that time was having to cross the waters of Thailand and come across a Thai fishing boat. These boats were occupied by people whose brutal

acts had earned them the title of pirates. They deliberately sought out Vietnamese fishing boats, knowing we were vulnerable. They were most interested in our belongings, but that was not all they stole. Girls were kidnapped, raped and eventually sold into slavery or prostitution. Approaching the waters of Thailand, we knew many of the stories we'd heard could easily become a reality. It was the sight of a boat in the distance that made my father choke with fear. He urged the captain to connect the spare motor and make the boat go faster. Below deck, fear spread quicker than the lice that infested our bodies. The women shrivelled up, fearing that their short, cropped hair and masculine clothes would not be enough to pass them off as men. Eventually our boat sped away from them, but had we been an inch too slow, many of us would probably not have been here today.

The boat, with its human cargo of 80, was stuffy and unstable. On numerous occasions, giant waves hurled over the sides and splashed onto the decks – we were almost certain the boat would capsize. Three days into our voyage we came across a large cargo ship. We screamed from below deck, with what little energy we had, hoping they would take us aboard. They never did.

All we had to eat were these strange cakes made of dried rice coated with sugar. Oranges were a luxury.

The odour was unbearable – the smell of urine and vomit mingled with the smell of fear. At times you would wake up the next morning to find someone else's vomit in your hair. It was hard, but we had to keep reminding ourselves that we were all on the same boat, literally and metaphorically. Bodies were entangled, overlapping so you no longer knew where somebody else's arm started and yours ended. For the brief time that some of us got to go on deck, all that met our gaze was a hollow sky and an empty sea. We were but a tiny speck of life wedged between a sandwich of two equally brute and unforgiving forces. The sea that encircled us promised everything and nothing at the same time. Our freedom was the deadly kind.

After five days and four nights we finally reached Malaysia. At that point, anything, even a refugee camp, was better

than the unstable confines of the ocean. Of the boats that headed towards this very place, most never made it. To say that we were lucky is an understatement. We were put onto a desert island called Bidong and placed in an area enclosed by barbed wire. The camp was a virtual prison, so for months we were forced to serve a prison term, not knowing what offence it was we had committed. We, like many others, found ourselves living by a tight routine – work by day and sleep by night – not knowing that the word refugee had taken on the same meaning as the word criminal. Food and water were strictly rationed. All we were given to eat was rice and each person was given only a gallon of water each day for drinking and washing. There was never enough to go around, and if you missed out, well then . . . you missed out.

The water flows abundantly as my mother stands there washing up the dishes. My father sits across from me, cleaning up the last grains of rice on his bowl until there is nothing left. As soon as he is done, he lifts up his shirt to show me the scars that are still faintly but permanently carved into his back. "I got these while trying to steal some water," he says, almost laughing. One time some of us missed out on water rations so he and my uncle attempted to steal some from the supplies reserved for the following day's handout. When they were caught, they were beaten by Malaysian guards.

During the day, my parents did farm work. They harvested crops, planted and raked the soil. They, like so many others, struggled to grasp the irony that they had come all that way only to relive the very lives they had been trying to escape. There were some who were forced to pass the time by fishing instead. Most never returned from their week-long, sometimes month-long trips, and so were inevitably lost to the same sea they thought they had overcome.

Six aching months passed, and still there was no word as to what would happen to us, but uncertainty was nothing new. It could be years before we were accepted. Or worse, we could be denied acceptance and simply be shipped back to where we had come from. Finally, our number was called. MC249. It was the number of our boat. My parents remember

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that number too. Finally, we were no longer nobody, we had become a number. The joy of finally being accepted, however, was overshadowed by the grief of those who were left behind, and even worse, of those who were forced to go back.

The running water drowns out my mother's tears, but I can see her wipe her eyes as she tells me of the haunting images still vividly emblazoned in her mind. "Some prayed at the feet of authorities. Some set themselves alight. Others cut their stomachs open in protest. Thousands fainted as they were dragged back onto ships to be transported home. There was a family who lived in the cabin next to ours – two parents and two children. They committed suicide when they were told they could not go forward. That was the worst."

We arrived in Australia on 23rd October, 1989. We had lived to tell a story some never could. But the battle was not over, in fact, it was just beginning. We had fought with the elements and with the authorities, but the real battle started the day we arrived in Australia. My parents have since learnt that language barriers can be as insurmountable as giant waves, that exclusions leave a void far greater than the size of any ocean and that numbers last long after they have been removed. There is, however, another face to the tribulations they have been forced to endure: there is nothing that brings out genuine human endeavour and courage more than the refugee experience. There's nothing like having to cling to every bare breath, to see life reduced to a scarce

trickle, to walk the tightrope separating life and death, at times not knowing one from the other. Very rarely do we get to see human nature stripped of all that it depends on to learn that human nature is itself enough.

The radio blaring frantically in the background now turns its attention to the 'refugee crisis'. Once again, it is the numbers we hear first. "Fifty detainees have escaped from a detention centre in..."

Fourteen years on, my parents still remember their numbers (and I am sure they always will), but it no longer defines who they are. Having told their story, they have embedded themselves in history, and if not official history, then certainly personal history. They are no longer part of a statistic, but a personal legacy that I will pass onto my children. The refugees that have recently arrived on the shores of Australia still continue to be numbers, to be statistics, to be overlooked. Children whose faces we see peering out from behind the wire lattice of our detention centres are still one of '50 detained children' and their parents continue to be one of '65 females' or '105 males'. Perhaps, as a society, we should focus less on numbers and more on words – words of compassion, words of kindness and words of human value. Most importantly, we should listen to their words, hear their voices and document their stories.

*\* Amongst Vietnamese people, these are the words many refugees use to describe their experience. It means 'Journey to freedom'.*