

Noodles for Shakespeare

Pygmalion Down Under

Cenarth Fox

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Because this novel is written in English, Vietnamese names are written with the given names first and the family name last.

Dedicated to the memory of
David Small
actor, broadcaster, writer, gentleman

1

Vietnam 1975

THE AMERICAN ARMY OFFICER RAN FOR HIS LIFE. He threw open the front door, scared the life out of his wife and kids, and shouted. ‘We’re going, now! Come on!’

The family had a plan. Two packed suitcases were ready, and the family dog joined its new owner. The humans piled into their car, and headed straight for the Saigon airport. Their great escape began. It did so because Dad, and thousands of others, heard a certain song on local Saigon radio.

Some songs have an interesting back-story. In 1942, Israel Beilin wrote a Christmas ditty. He was a Russian Jew, probably from Siberia, and became a self-taught pianist in the Big Apple. His song featured snow, had eight sentences, and one version became the best-selling single ever.

Towards the end of the Vietnam War, this famous tune became a secret code advising Americans to vamoose. Harry Lillis Crosby Jr. aka Bing, singing *White Christmas* by Irving Berlin (bit of a name change there), became the tip-off telling thousands of Yanks and their South Vietnamese allies to hit the road, Jack, which they did.

Now in case you haven’t been to Saigon, or Ho Chi Minh City as it is known today, there’s not a lot of snow in that part of monsoonal Asia. It has a sort of mad-dogs-and-Englishmen type climate, and some wag reckons there are only two seasons in Vietnam—hot and hotter.

Imagine the following scenario. It’s late April 1975, and you are an American in Saigon, wary of the threat from North Vietnam when, without warning, on local radio, you hear Bing Crosby warbling Mr Berlin’s popular lyrics. You cup your ear. Can you hear sleigh bells in the snow? What snow? There’s no snow in stifling Saigon, and since when has Christmas ever been celebrated in April?

Then you remember—*White Christmas* is the code.

Translated, it means 150,000 Communist troops are heading south, sharpish, and right now, you’d better pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and flee, flee, flee. You do. You and thousands of Americans and their South Vietnamese allies scarpered, lickety-split.

One wonders if any North Vietnamese sympathisers, sneakily living down south, ever knew that a warbling Bing Crosby doubled as a government secret agent. Here’s what happened.

President Ford and his advisors decided it was time to cut and run. *White Christmas* was broadcast on Saigon radio, and the rush hour began.

There was no time to sort through family photo albums and underwear drawers. It was grab your cash and kids, and get the hell out of town. Stuffing bank notes in your smalls became all the rage.

But how did people escape?

Some hurried downstream, and climbed the gangway of many a ship moored in the Saigon River. Some caught a bus to Saigon’s Tan Son Nhat Airport, and clambered up the portable steps of a plane. Mind you, once North Vietnamese shells began kissing the runways, that option vanished.

Some scrambled inside a Chinook helicopter, which landed in the grounds of the US Embassy. That was the final option. The choppers flew out to sea and landed on the USS Blue Ridge, command ship of the 40-vessel evacuation armada.

Many South Vietnamese pilots with their own much smaller helicopter, flew their family out to the American ships, offloaded their human cargo, then saw their chopper pushed overboard to sink in the South China Sea.

Now to get inside a Chinook, you first had to get inside the US Embassy, where high walls, barbed wire and armed marines meant most of the would-be escapees never made it past security. There were lots of bayonets and broken fingers.

When the last US chopper flew out on April 29, 1975, there were about 10,000 desperate South Vietnamese hopeful escapees waiting outside the US Embassy. Most who wanted to escape, didn't, couldn't.

The vast majority of Saigon residents knew nothing about Bing's code, and these folk were nowhere near the US Embassy as the escape took place. The city heaved with trapped locals, their numbers boosted by the North Vietnamese driving half a million refugees south to Saigon. You could hitch a lift on an ox-cart or take Shanks' pony.

Locals had one option—they could make your own arrangements.

Some stayed and suffered. Some floated out to sea on homemade rafts and drowned. Some found a new life in a new country but many died an unimaginable death.

By 1975, the end of the Vietnam War was expected. Locals knew that once the Americans departed, surrender by South Vietnam would be a formality. It was.

Quang Van Nguyen was born and bred in Saigon. As the War ended, he was 30, and a damn good tailor. His father once owned a Saigon clothing shop, and made shirts for French Army officers in the 1940s. Quality was a hallmark stamped on every Nguyen garment.

Son Quang lived over the shop with his wife Hoa and their four young children—daughter Thu, sons Trai and Minh, and baby daughter Thanh. The older kids played in the shop while their parents worried.

'I need to tell you what I've heard,' said Quang. Hoa knew what was coming as she fed baby Thanh. 'The Communists could be here today.'

'Everybody knows that. What we don't know is what will happen when they get here.'

Quang hand stitched a garment. What could he say? His wife nailed the issue. People in Saigon who had never fired a shot in anger faced a terrible fate. Just being from South Vietnam condemned them as an enemy of the late Ho Chi Minh and his soon-to-be victorious army.

At least the Nguyen children, aged from 6 months to 6 years, were ignorant of the potential hell their parents faced. But what would happen to these little ones if their parents were tortured, imprisoned or killed?

Baby Thanh stopped feeding, and recommenced her vocal exercises, refusing to use the volume control.

Hoa lived in hope. 'I know people who believe they will be saved by the Americans,' she said.

'Sadly, they are deluded,' replied the tailor. 'The Americans will save themselves, and only those South Vietnamese who have worked with and for them.'

'You made a suit for an American soldier last year; the one who married a Vietnamese woman. You should ask him to help us escape.'

'He is a lowly sergeant in the catering corp. He has no influence.'

'But why not try?' She raised her voice. 'We have to do something.'

The older children saw their mother crying. Her anger and fear joined forces. The children were puzzled. *Why is Má crying?*

She spoke sarcastically. 'Well perhaps you should make a suit for an American general, because without the Americans, we are at the mercy of the Communists, who show no mercy. Remember the many murdered innocent citizens in Hue and elsewhere. Some people were buried alive.'

Quang made a *shhh* sound and indicated the children. Hoa continued in a soft voice.

'Doing nothing may guarantee our children become orphans.'

Quang knew his wife spoke the truth. Of course he wanted to protect his family. But how? Like so many South Vietnamese families, the Nguyens faced a horrifying future.

They had a profitable business with quality equipment, which no one would buy. They had modest savings, and a motor scooter. In this climate of fear and uncertainty, their assets were worthless.

For months, Quang and Hoa discussed their options. Their best plan, their only plan seemed ridiculous. It involved two adults, three children and a baby, plus whatever gold and cash they could sew into their clothes, all strapped onto a motor scooter. Their food supply would consist of noodles, nuts and rice. That was it. How far could they travel? How long could they survive?

They would abandon their shop, their home, and their extended family. They would take no furniture or belongings. What sort of a future is that? And that was their *best* plan.

Then there was the matter of their destination. They would head south but with no specific port in mind. Once they arrived, they would try to sell their scooter, find a boat, and buy a passage to a new homeland.

And all this was based on hope with no refund or security.

Would the Communists capture them en route? Could the family afford the fare on the boat? Would it be safe? Would they die at sea? Would a new country accept them? Despair dominated their thinking.

Hoa persisted. She would try anything to save her children. 'Why don't we pay an agent to get us into the American Embassy?'

Quang stayed silent.

His wife begged. 'We can't just wait here to die.'

He whispered. 'I know a family who paid an agent a lot of money to bribe an American official and get the family to safety.'

'And?'

Quang looked at his wife. 'The agent disappeared with all their money.' She despaired. 'Hoa, we cannot trust anyone, not even our own people.'

She pleaded with her husband and tears filled her eyes. She lifted the screeching Thanh's head so the baby's suckling at least quelled her cries. These were dreadful, terrifying times.

An elderly neighbour came into the shop. 'I have just heard the news,' he said. 'The Americans are gone, and the Communists are driving into Saigon.'

The parents looked at one another. Their nightmare began.

'Come and see,' said the old man, leading the couple into the street.

Hoa put the baby in her crib, told the older children to play quietly, and joined Quang in the city.

The Nguyens looked at the new Saigon. Things were strange. Yes, the pedestrians, cyclists, motor scooters, busses, trucks, the ubiquitous cyclo-pousse, and even old Renaults left behind by the French, still jostled for position. Yes, the frangipani trees still added colour and aromas.

However, the Americans and their jeeps were gone, and in their place, locals hurried by, carrying unusual objects. The Nguyens saw people going home with office chairs, tables, lamps, bookends, even a filing cabinet and potted plants. It was "loot Saigon day" with the US Embassy fair game. Anything not nailed down got nicked.

Then there were men walking home in their underwear. Why? Was this madness? Hordes of South Vietnamese soldiers stripped in public. They removed their army fatigues and hats, and pulled off their boots. Clothing and footwear littered the city.

Such actions made sense. Let's face it; if you were a South Vietnamese soldier, would you be wearing your uniform when the enemy hit town?

And hit town they did. Soviet-built tanks rolled into Saigon with North Vietnamese soldiers atop their machines. The grins of the fighters were as big as their weapons. To the victor belong the spoils.

Quang and Hoa faded into the crowd and returned home. They locked their shop, and put their children to bed. Their livelihood was ruined and so too their lives. They were certainly under threat of arrest and detention, and with that, possible imprisonment, torture, even execution.

Nobody dreamt of Christmas, white or otherwise. Their future had *grim* written all over it.

For weeks, the Nguyens survived—just. Quang had a few customers. Everyone feared the conquering army, and the way to survive was to keep your head down and try to become invisible.

Hoa rationed food, and despaired when her brood asked for more. Little children and hunger pains created heartache. Hoa's health suffered, and breast-feeding baby Thanh became a real struggle.

Then, finally, it happened. About a month after the war ended, a dreaded knock sounded on the shop door. Quang and Hoa looked at one another. The knocking became louder and a person shouted.

‘Open the door in the name of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.’

Three bullying officials strode in dispensing threats with the leader demanding answers. One thug helped himself to shirts Quang had lovingly created. Payment? You have to be joking.

‘You have been aiding the Americans,’ declared the leader. It was a statement, not a question.

‘I beg to disagree, sir,’ replied Quang. ‘I am a humble tailor making a modest living to support my wife and children.’

‘We have witnesses who saw you make clothes for the enemy. You have paid taxes to the capitalist regime. These are crimes in the new regime.’

It was pointless to protest. Being a law-abiding citizen and earning an honest living made Quang a criminal.

‘You are under arrest,’ said the official.

Hoa gasped. The goons tied Quang’s hands behind his back and pushed him to the door.

He pleaded. ‘Please, may I say goodbye to my family?’

‘You have one minute,’ snapped the official.

Hoa gathered her brood and held up each child for Quang to kiss. The tailor refused to cry. His wife wept enough for both of them.

‘Be good for your mother,’ said Quang as he kissed his children. Baby Thanh screamed. She was hungry, teething, and needed a clean nappy.

Clutching the howling infant, Hoa leant in and kissed her husband. Both parents knew this could be the last time they would ever see one another. *Helpless* didn’t even come close.

The goons pushed Quang to the door. He looked back and saw his bewildered, terrified and distraught family. Then he was gone.

He travelled, cattle-class, to the Vietnamese countryside and to one of the hundreds of re-education camps. The term *re-education* became a euphemism for punishment, torture and death.

Quang was not alone. Vast numbers of South Vietnamese citizens became inmates in these camps. Many never left.

Back in Saigon, massive change swept the city. The Republic took what it wanted, calling it the expropriation of property belonging to non-communists. The State became the new owner of the Nguyen business with no such thing as compensation. Hoa and her children moved to live with her sister and parents in a cramped room where cat swinging was impossible.

Welcome to the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The Nazis had concentration camps and the Soviets the Gulag. The North Vietnamese re-education camps existed to “help” their former enemies but revenge drove the conquering army. Many South Vietnamese Army officers and foot soldiers became labourers given backbreaking tasks.

Torture was commonplace. Punishment for failure to finish a job or for showing the slightest disrespect to a guard was brutal. Food rations were meagre, disease rife, and medical attention non-existent. Thousands died.

Quang Van Nguyen, a tailor who never joined any army, never fought the Communists, and only ever wanted a peaceful life, entered this brutal world. Now he faced separation from his beloved wife and children, and years of slavery. And for what crime? Bespoke tailoring?

According to international law, the camps were illegal. So what? Amnesty International and the Red Cross can take a running jump. Yet amidst the horror of the re-education camps, there appeared a ray of sunshine; family visits might be possible.

If true, Hoa could visit her husband. They could touch and kiss, and share news of their children. The idea of such a visit fired Hoa’s soul. She would make it happen despite labyrinthine obstacles.

Her first task was to locate Quang. Inmates often moved. Who would know the right camp? Discovering a government department with such knowledge seemed insurmountable.

She searched. Her perseverance triumphed. She found Quang’s camp but then needed official permission to visit. Which form was required? Where can one obtain such a form?

Now it is unfair to say the Communists had a monopoly on red tape and bureaucracy, but in the World Cup of Obfuscation, the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam won gold.

Hoa kept going. Having located her husband, and obtained a visitor's pass, she still had to make the journey, arguably the toughest part of her quest. Re-education camps were often isolated. They didn't spring up beside railway stations or along bus routes. Because of their cruelty, the government wanted them out of sight.

Everyone suffered, even visitors, because visits were often restricted to a measly 15 minutes. After months of planning and hours, sometimes days of travel, you enjoyed but a fleeting greeting. Now that was sadistic.

Hoa was strong, her mental toughness extraordinary. Physically, her efforts were herculean. She raised four children while living in cramped and impoverished conditions. Now she set off to see husband Quang leaving her sister and mother to care for the children. Hoa's journey took seventeen hours.

Quang had no inkling of her arrival, and when he saw her, he thought his heart would burst. He started to move but the shock and joy made him stumble. They embraced and wept. Words were irrelevant. He looked painfully thin and her physique matched his.

Her news thrilled him. Their children were alive, and every day asked about their father. Little Thanh had taken her first steps.

But the sight of one another, being able to touch one another, and share their news became as nothing when Hoa revealed her secret.

'I think I can bribe an official and have you released for a home visit.'

Quang froze. Words would not come.

'Do not get your hopes up,' she said, 'and be ready to leave at any time. But do not tell anyone, *anyone* about this matter. Do you understand?'

Quang still couldn't speak. Seeing her, touching her, smelling her, hearing her, all seemed like a bizarre fantasy and yet he wasn't dreaming; this was real. And when Hoa told him he might be released from this hellhole, even for a short time, his brain failed to function. The idea was incomprehensible.

Without warning, an insensitive guard ended their meeting. Hoa squeezed her husband's hand before she watched him being dragged from the room. Their eyes locked until he left.

Now she had a plan, and he had a dream.

2

Australia 1975

THE BIRTH CERTIFICATE listed his name as *Matthew James Cadwallader* but everyone called him Matt. Occasionally he got Matty, and one of his grandfathers invented Buster. Some of his teachers called him Matthew but later chose to go with the flow.

Matthew the baby was bonny. As a bub, he had endless reserves of laughter. His baby nickname was Cheeky. Lying on his back, he flapped his arms, kicked his legs, and grinned. His facial muscles must have ached, so often did he smile. His eyes sparkled with mischief, and matched his goo-goo sounds and dribbling. Was there ever a more contented bubba?

Parents David and Judith delighted in the happiness of their firstborn. They almost fought to change his nappy. The sprinkling of powder set off squeals of delight, and the baby made noises too.

This was the perfect family scenario. The newborn was wanted and loved. The baby was healthy, and adored the company of his parents. It was impossible to tell who got the better deal. Mother and father worshipped the infant, and the little tacker produced a permanent purr.

How then could things go so wrong?

No two teenagers are the same. Some from a rough, even dangerous upbringing become sensible, model citizens. Some from a stable, loving and nurturing family go right off the rails, only to crash and burn.

Why is this so?

No idea; ask an expert.

Matthew's parents were normal, whatever that means. They married for love, and raised two children in a caring and respectful household. Matthew had a younger sister, Rosie Elizabeth, and life was fine and dandy for the clan Cadwallader. During his childhood years, Matt blossomed. He was healthy, inquisitive and kind, but as he grew older, things changed, and not always for the good.

It was Matthew's Year 10 report, which shocked his parents. It came out of nowhere. His early years in high school were brilliant but overnight, Matt's results went south. David and Judith went to their son's parent-teacher meeting and spoke with Matthew's teachers.

'Have you noticed any change in his behaviour at home,' asked his form teacher?

David and Judith looked at one another, and shook their heads.

'He gets moody at times,' said Judith. 'But we put that down to normal teenage behaviour.'

'I can't believe he's got such low grades,' said David.

'That's why I asked about life at home,' added the teacher. 'We are just as shocked as you.'

David and Judith had that same conversation with all of Matthew's teachers. Each reported a drop in his interest and application.

Driving home, the parents discussed their son.

'He couldn't be on drugs,' said David. 'We'd notice that sort of thing.'

'Would we?'

David looked at his wife.

'Watch the road,' snapped Judith.

They drove in silence.

'Perhaps we introduced him to wine when he was too young,' said Judith.

‘Oh for God’s sake, he’s 16. Every kid his age has tried smoking and drinking.’

‘I don’t like his new friends.’

‘What new friends?’

‘He talks about that Jefferson boy and his older brother. The parents run their own business and are never home, so the brothers have no adult supervision.’

‘I haven’t been in his room for a while.’

‘Shows how much you care.’

David shook his head. That was below the belt. He tried again.

‘What’s it like? That could be a pointer to his attitude.’

‘Bad,’ said Judith. ‘It was never tidy but now it’s a tip.’

More silence. More worry. A troubled teen might mean strife.

David pinpointed a possible cause. ‘I blame his injury. He was a bloody good footballer; he could have made it. I mean at the highest level.’

Indeed Matthew was good at most sports, but a cruciate ligament injury stopped his sporting career overnight. And so from an active and healthy lifestyle with excellent grades at school, he dropped out of sport, and started spending time alone in his room. He mixed with the wrong crowd, and his education copped a hammering.

‘You need to read him the riot act,’ said his mother.

‘Oh please, Judith, if I’ve learnt anything from decades of teaching, it’s that lecturing teenagers never works.’

‘So what, you do nothing?’

‘Now you’re being silly.’

Sarcasm filled the car.

‘Wonderful. It’s my fault our son failed at school.’

David tried deep breathing. He and Judith argued a lot of late.

‘Let’s not argue. I’ll have a chat with him, and follow the golden rule when dealing with teenagers.’

There was a pause. ‘Which is?’

‘If you have a teenager, you must get a dog.’

‘A dog?’

‘Yes, because that way, when you come home, someone’ll be glad to see you.’

Judith shook her head. ‘Always the bloody comedian; you can’t discuss anything without cracking some pathetic joke.’

Under his breath, David quoted Groucho Marx.

Humour is reason gone mad.

The rest of the trip home took place in silence.

David didn’t rush his father-son chat. He waited until the weekend when Judith took daughter Rosie shopping to buy clothes.

It was late Saturday afternoon, and Matthew was ensconced in his room. David listened to the football then wandered upstairs, and tapped on his son’s bedroom door.

‘Oi oi,’ said David, opening the door. Matthew didn’t see or hear his father. The teen leant out the window blowing smoke from his spliff. Headphones on his ears pumped heavy rock music to his brain until he sensed movement and turned.

The cannabis landed on the roses below. Matthew closed his window and removed his headphones.

‘What’s up?’ he asked his father.

‘Bombers had a good win.’

Matthew flopped on the unmade bed. ‘Couldn’t care less.’

The uneasy atmosphere drifted towards confrontation. David worked hard at keeping things low-key.

‘So what’s happening at school?’

Matthew shrugged. ‘Same old, same old.’

This conversation was never in danger of becoming loquacious.

David chose the direct approach. 'How long have you been smoking dope?'

The teen gave a no-big-deal shrug. 'Once in a while.' There was a long pause. 'Just don't tell Mum, all right?'

It was David's turn to shrug. 'Do I look like a snitch?'

Matthew trusted his father. They had an understanding rather than an intimate and loving relationship. Then Matthew dropped a bombshell.

'I'm thinking of leaving school.'

That shocked the parent. 'You're kidding?'

'I'm a businessman, Dad. I'm gunna start my own business.'

'Right,' said David and paused. 'What happened to choosing maths and science, and aiming for engineering?'

'That's garbage. Complete waste of time. You work for some company for years for peanuts. Entrepreneurs are the megastars today. I'm gunna start a business from scratch, watch it grow, and make a mint.'

David knew that to argue or preach would be counterproductive.

'Sounds good. So where will you get the finance to launch this brilliant new business?'

'I've got a few contacts.'

'I see.' The pauses grew ever longer. 'I hope you aren't thinking of asking your old man for money?'

Matthew laughed. 'I'm serious, Dad. You think I'm joking.'

'No, not at all, I'm sure you're serious.'

'And when I start coining it big-time, I won't forget my dear old boring parents.'

David grinned. 'Too kind,' he said, and headed for the door.

Matthew called. 'Chill out, Dad. I'm okay. No need to worry about your son and heir.'

'It's not you I'm worried about. How am I going to explain this new career move to your mother?' Softly, David added, 'and survive?'

He forced a smile, and paused in the doorway. 'And I'd rescue that spliff before your mother starts her Sunday gardening session.'

Matthew froze then relaxed and gave his father a thumbs-up sign.

The old man's mind got busy.

What the hell is happening to my son?

David was spot on about his wife's reaction. Judith went ballistic.

'Drop out of school? That is insane. And please tell me you told him to forget such nonsense and put his head down and pass those bloody exams.'

David said nothing so Judith continued to glare at him.

'You didn't did you? God, you're a weak bastard.'

'To climb steep hills requires a slow pace at first.'

Judith nodded. 'That'd be right. Get Shakespeare to fix the problems of the world.' She stormed out of the room.

Mind you, Judith knew better than to tackle her son herself. He was a lot like her; not afraid to speak his mind. She would get as good as she gave.

At least Matthew's situation was now in the public domain. His parents dispensed with their rose-coloured glasses. His cavalier attitude to dope, unsuitable internet sites and alcohol consumption with the Jefferson brothers, now needed planning and sneakiness. He'd been sprung, and if he planned to continue this hedonistic lifestyle, his ability to tell lies would need to improve.

David knew threats were useless, and Judith knew if her son wanted to rebel, he'd find a way. Locks existed to keep out honest folk.

Matthew finished Year 10, just. Before his parents could ask about his choice of Year 11 subjects, he made an announcement.

'The Jeffersons have offered me a vacation job.'

'Great,' said David.

'Doing what,' asked Judith?

‘They have contracts with estate agents. Every property up for sale or lease needs to be cleaned and decorated. I’ll be doing the lot.’

‘Cleaning,’ sneered Judith? ‘You’re going to be a cleaner?’

‘It’s only a vacation job,’ said David. ‘And well done, mate. Good to see you using your initiative.’

‘So the teenager with the world’s messiest bedroom will soon create pristine boudoirs,’ said Judith.

‘And get paid for it,’ replied her grinning son.

‘How about I pay you to clean your room?’

‘You couldn’t afford me, Mum.’ He winked and started to leave. ‘See ya. Oh, and I won’t be in for tea. I’ll eat with the Jeffersons.’

He left with his parents in disarray.

‘Well, from engineering to cleaning toilets; that’s a smart move,’ said Judith.

‘He told you. It’s only a vacation job.’

‘And what’s he going to do with the money?’

David shrugged. ‘What millions of teenage boys spend their money on—clothes, music, and girls. Live and let live, Judith.’

‘He’ll spend it on drugs.’

That stopped the conversation. David wanted to leave the room.

‘Do you know he’s smoking marijuana?’ David said nowt. He needed think music.

Judith continued. ‘Now either you know and are covering for him, or you don’t know, and have been shocked into silence.’ She looked at him. ‘So which is it?’

David shrugged. ‘He asked me not to tell you.’

‘Oh wonderful. And of course you told him that smoking dope is often the first step towards serious drug addiction.’

‘Look, he’s not stupid. He wants to be an entrepreneur. He’s not like his boring parents with our 9 to 5 jobs. He’s got ambition.’

‘And a drug habit.’

‘Oh for God’s sake, woman. I smoked dope when I was at uni. It’s a rite of passage.’

The temperature of the argument increased. Their relationship drifted from robust discussion to minor skirmish. Sporadic small arms fire began. Before heavy artillery entered the fray, the phone rang. David answered it.

‘Hello.’

It was Robert, his wife’s brother.

‘Oh mate, I’m sorry. Are you there now?’

David had agreed to meet financial advisor Robert in a local pub for a chat about superannuation.

‘Look, I’ll leave now. See you in 15.’

He hung up and started to leave.

‘That was your dear brother. I promised to have a drink with him. I won’t be late.’ He left.

Judith called. ‘I’ve only got one thing to say, David.’ He re-appeared. ‘Let the buyer beware.’

He gave a weak smile and departed.

Robert was a smooth talker. He was a smooth everything, and oozed plastic sincerity. His sole goal in life was to extract money from people. It didn’t matter who but the amount extracted was seriously important. Too much was never enough, and everyone was a potential client, especially family and friends.

David found Robert at a corner table with a beer awaiting the brother-in-law cum victim. They toasted one another.

‘Cheers,’ said David.

Robert asked his usual question. ‘So how are the wife and kids?’

‘All well.’

‘That wasn’t said with a great deal of conviction.’

David grimaced. ‘Matthew wants to drop out of school and start his own business.’

‘Fantastic—good luck to the lad.’

‘That’s not exactly what his mother said.’

‘He’ll need income protection. I can get him a great deal. Tell him to give me a call. There’s something wrong with the world if you can’t take care of your own family.’

Don’t look now, Robert, but your insincerity’s showing.

David nodded. He decided to spell out some ground rules.

‘Listen, mate, you know I’m Mister Boring. You know I’ve had the same government super scheme for yonks, and I’m not interested in risking my quaint little nest egg.’

‘I do know that, but you just said the magic word—*little*. The super laws have changed, and you can do much, much better with your own scheme.’

Robert put a glossy brochure on the table. David looked at it and felt uncomfortable. He and Robert were chalk and cheese. David was flashy watch, flashy car and flashy wife number #3 (or was it #4?). David had worn the same corduroy jacket with scuffed leather arm patches since Captain Cook went surfing in Hawaii. Change was not a part of Dave’s DNA.

‘I know you want security, mate,’ said Robert. ‘I know you hate risk, and cling to old-fashioned bricks and mortar. Well this deal gives you all of that but with a much higher return.’

David hated arguing full stop, and his major dislike of his brother-in-law was that Robert had an answer to everything. He was programmed to never accept the word “no”.

‘All I’m asking,’ said Robert, ‘is that you read the brochure; nothing else. No commitment, no obligation, just read with an open mind.’

If contrived friendship and fake sincerity could be bottled, Robert was on a winner.

‘Fair enough,’ said David, who changed the subject.

Not far from the pub, Matthew Cadwallader copied his father and uncle in consuming alcohol. It was against the law for a 16 year old to purchase grog, and to consume same in a public place such as a park or beach. However, there was no law against 16-year-olds drinking liquor in private.

Matthew drank with the brothers Jefferson in their home; well, the home of their never-at-home parents. Tom was 17 and Matt’s mate from school. Big brother Tony was 20 and a criminal in waiting.

They were sampling the homeowners’ whisky, and went into the garden to smoke pot.

‘Great to have you working for the family, Matt,’ said Tony passing the visitor the spliff.

‘I tell you, mate,’ said Tom, ‘you do the right thing by the old man and you’ll be set for life.’

Matthew discovered a new brand of excitement. This family had wealth. They were successful. He wanted that lifestyle, and right now his mates offered it to him on a plate. However, something else was on offer.

Tony produced a small tin of tablets, and opened it, showing the contents to his brother and Matthew.

‘Here you go, boys. Give yourself a real high.’

Matthew Cadwallader delved into the world of Class A drugs.

3

Vietnam 1976

MONEY CAN WORK MIRACLES. Hoa became acquainted with a low-ranking Communist official and explained Quang's situation. Her husband was never an enemy of the former North Vietnam. He did not deserve to be an inmate of a re-education camp. 'Is there anything I can do to have my husband released for a home visit?'

The official replied. 'For the right fee, something might be possible.'

Hoa hesitated. If she offered more than the official would accept, she would needlessly overspend. Would his fee be more than she could afford? The official quoted his price. Hoa felt tremendous relief. It was less than she expected.

But what about crooked agents, like the ones who took money to bribe Americans but kept the cash? This could be the same thing. She thought.

It might be a rip-off but doing nothing won't bring Quang home.

'I will pay you the money now,' she said. 'And when my husband returns to Saigon, I will pay you a bonus.'

The official liked the offer. His pay was poor. This scenario could turn into a nice little earner. He thought about doing a runner then figured that if he did the right thing, others might ask for the same favour. It could indeed become a very nice little earner.

'But please, you must help me,' said Hoa. 'I do not know how to contact the camp or what I should say.'

The official explained. 'You need a reason for his release. If your husband's mother or father is seriously ill, that might persuade the camp officials to grant your husband a home visit.'

'They are dying,' said Hoa without thinking. 'Both are ill and one is near death.'

Hoa was desperate and lied or guessed. Quang's parents fled Saigon before the Vietnam War ended. They eventually arrived in Australia and, unknown to their family in Saigon, lived in the suburb of Footscray in Melbourne, in a vibrant Vietnamese community.

'You will need to pay the camp commander as well,' said the official.

Hoa felt sick.

This is a scam. I pay different people with no guarantee of success. But what else can I do?

She paid the corrupt official and did as he instructed. She wrote to the re-education camp commander enclosing bribe money but never calling it that. Then she spent her waking hours caring for her brood.

Two months later, Hoa was washing little Thanh's clothes when a strange scream erupted. Then more screams. Hoa raced to investigate.

What a sight. Her older children were squealing, crying, and clinging to their long lost father. Hoa's heart exploded. She leapt into the throng.

As with Hoa's visit to the camp some time ago, Quang's arrival in Saigon was unannounced and unexpected. It certainly provoked joy.

For the children, this occasion was better than every happy birthday they had ever enjoyed, all rolled into one. It took ages for things to settle. Hoa fussed and made the best meal she could. What a meal. What a celebration. What tears, what happiness.

The funniest scene involved baby Thanh. She was now walking, well, staggering. Quang knelt, held out his arms and called to his tiny daughter. She thought.

Who is this strange man? Why is he here? Should I go to him?

With much encouragement from Hoa and Thanh's siblings, the toddler set off to greet her father. Her wobbly legs wobbled. She almost made it but stumbled. The excitement kept building. She started again and then, just within hugging distance, Thanh tripped and fell flat on her face.

'Wah!' she bellowed, and bawled like a baby. Her father scooped her up, and everyone clapped and laughed. Thanh looked at her father, then at her family, then back at her father. She put a hand on his face and patted the tears rolling down his cheeks. Thanh laughed and the world rejoiced.

Finally, with the children asleep, Quang and Hoa lay together on a single mattress. Their breathing mingled. Their smells mingled. They mingled. At last they spoke.

'I have only three days,' said Quang. 'If I am not back in the camp by Thursday, they will arrest me and punish me like never before, and I will die there.'

Hoa said nothing.

Words were not important. Heartbeats, touching and tears were all that mattered. Then Hoa whispered.

'You have only one day.'

Quang thought he misheard; certainly, he did not understand.

'No, my darling, I have three days.'

'No, my darling,' she replied, 'tomorrow we escape from Saigon.'

Hoa had been planning the escape for months. She regarded the home visit as cruel and heartbreaking. Her plan in obtaining a home visit for her husband was to enable the whole family to flee Saigon, and start a new life in a new land.

Step one of her plan was complete.

Quang had trouble comprehending. He believed returning to the camp was his best option. To say he was shocked at Hoa's plan would be a massive understatement. He thought of questions and asked them.

'Where will we go? How will we travel? What will we do for money?'

The more he asked, the better she answered. The only thing more impressive than Hoa's plan was her determination to make it work.

Quang couldn't sleep. He was already restless, but with Hoa's idea, he remained wide-awake.

Her plan covered travel arrangements, destination, money, food, maps, emergency rations, even a Plan B and C. It was impressive.

She had visited the local market. Farmers from down south brought their wares to Saigon in trucks. Some trucks returned empty. Here was the perfect solution. She, Quang and the children would pay a farmer to drive them south. The farmer would make money, and the family would escape.

Of course it was dangerous. If she asked the wrong farmer, he might report Hoa to the government, meaning Quang would go back to the camp, and she would join him.

She listened to farmers at the market. She spoke to people she hoped were honest, and looked for the right man. The chosen farmer mistrusted Hoa just as she mistrusted him. He thought.

Is she a stooge for the government? Is she trying to trap me?

They reached an agreement. He wanted all the money up front. She stood firm and paid only a small amount.

'When it is time to leave, I will pay you the full amount,' she said.

Preparation was the key to Hoa's plan. When Quang arrived in Saigon, she had everything ready; clothing for the children, money and gold sewn into garments, food in packages—nuts, noodles and rice—and even a map with towns and places which offered their best hope of a successful escape.

It was 4.30am and the children were asleep. 'Wait here,' Hoa told her husband, and headed for the market. Her thoughts were many.

What if that farmer is not there? What if he's changed his mind?

She wandered around avoiding people, pretending to be shopping. She spotted the farmer and her heart sang. He saw her approach and knew from her face that today was the day.

He led her behind some crates. 'I want the money first,' he said. She gave him the money. He counted it and grunted. Hoa worried.

'In one hour,' he said. 'Be at the meeting place or I will go without you.'

He walked away and Hoa trembled. Her plan, her dream, her greatest hope was now a reality. She hurried home.

The look on Quang's face spoke volumes. He struggled to comprehend her amazing plan.

'What has happened?'

'All is well,' she said. 'We leave in 15 minutes. I will wake and feed the children. You must eat too. And remember, wear two layers of clothes.'

Soon the children were fed, washed and dressed. They too wore an extra layer of clothes. Carrying many bags would look suspicious.

Quang felt helpless. His wife had arranged everything and her preparation was meticulous. He watched as she spoke to the three older children.

'Today we go on a trip to the country. You must be especially good. Do not ask questions, and do not speak to anyone. Do you understand?'

The children were confused but nodded. Hoa scooped up little Thanh. 'And you, little Miss, you must be as quiet as a mouse. Will you do that for your Má?'

Thanh was sleepy. She looked at her family. Quang put a finger to his lips and said, 'Shhh.' Thanh hesitated then copied her father. It was smiles all round but the tension bubbling in the breast of each adult was palpable.

'Let us wake your sister and parents to say goodbye,' said Quang.

Hoa looked at him and shook her head. He was stunned. He gasped. 'They do not know about your plan?'

'This is the best way. It is risky to tell anyone. I have left a note.'

Hoa wiped Thanh's runny nose, picked up the child and a bag, and walked into the Saigon dawn. Quang took a few seconds to come to grips with the situation. Then he too grabbed a bag and ushered the children.

Their escape began.

Stale cabbage leaves, broccoli stalks and squashed cucumbers littered the floor of the truck. The family Nguyen huddled beneath a filthy tarpaulin. The truck's shock absorbers died long ago. Every pothole brought agony. All the children cried with Thanh the loudest.

Whenever the truck stopped, the family held their collective breath. The children saw the "be silent" signal, and Hoa's hand hovered in front of Thanh's mouth ready to gag the toddler if she complained.

They could hear people and wondered who they were, and where they were. If the people were soldiers or government workers, and they discovered the family, the escape was over on Day 1.

Soon the sounds of traffic and people faded, and the roads became rougher. The journey seemed endless, until the truck slowed, turned and stopped. The farmer got out and banged on the side.

'This is it. Everyone out of the truck.'

Quang lifted the tarpaulin, and he and Hoa helped the children alight.

Hoa was nervous. 'Is this where you promised to take us?'

'Yes.' He climbed back inside his truck.

Thrusting Thanh at her husband, Hoa ran to the driver. 'Please, where are we?'

'A long way from Saigon,' he said, and engaged the gears.

She shouted and held up a map. 'Please, can you show me on the map?'

Annoyed, he got out of the truck and looked at her map. He stabbed a finger. 'This is where you are.'

'And please sir, which road do we take to get to this place?'

She pointed at the port she hoped gave them the best chance of escaping Vietnam. The farmer looked at the map then pointed to a road.

‘That way, but you won’t get there for days, and with little children, I think you are mad.’

Hoa endured misery and hopelessness. The farmer stared at her and her family. What a pathetic sight. He walked to the back of his truck, grabbed the tarpaulin, and tossed it on the ground.

‘Take this, and mind out for Communists.’

He climbed into his truck, revved the engine, and drove away. The sounds of birds and running water were loud. Quang realised. His family desperately needed leadership. His wife needed support. He folded the tarp, picked it up, and his bag, and set off down the road.

‘This way, children,’ he called. ‘It’s time to find our new home.’

Hoa delighted in her husband being decisive. He doubted the plan and her ability but now he became Mr Positive. She grabbed her bag, lifted Thanh, and followed the others.

After a while, everyone needed to rest. Quang himself, after months in the re-education camp, was still desperately thin. Hoa too was weak, and the children could not continue.

Quang walked into the jungle and found a small clearing. He used branches as poles, and with the tarpaulin, made a tunnel-shaped house. The older children found it exciting. Hoa fed the family being careful to ration their supplies.

It started to rain. They were dry but as the afternoon turned to dusk, sounds of the jungle brought new fears. Quang used branches to build a wall at either end of their “house” which gave a feeling of security. Both parents knew it would be useless as protection against wild animals.

As night encroached, the birdcalls faded, replaced by other animal sounds. Monkeys screeched. Were there leopards, tigers, wild boars and more in this corner of Vietnam?

Hoa kept thinking.

Pray God, we will be safe.

The parents couldn’t sleep. Restless children hardly helped, and calls of nature became a major operation. At dawn, once the birds were up, the family joined them.

They ate breakfast, and Hoa worried about her dwindling food supplies. The tarp was soaked and much heavier. Quang failed to fold and lift it. The children were irritable and for the first time in ages, the parents argued. It was hardly a slanging match but both were under serious pressure. Quang thought about their predicament.

If I had returned to the camp, my wife and children would be safe. Now we are lost in the jungle, and could die of starvation or be killed by wild animals. Why did I listen to Hoa?

A screaming Thanh stopped the parental dispute. Hoa picked up her daughter, and headed back to the road. Her children followed. Quang toiled with the tarp. In frustration, he threw it on the ground and stormed after his family.

After some time, they stopped to rest. Hoa made sure the children had plenty of water. She looked back at Quang and nearly died.

‘Where is the tarpaulin? You’ve left it behind.’

‘It was soaked. I could not even fold it, let alone carry it.’

‘But that is our shelter for tonight and for the rest of our journey.’

The children were not used to their parents being upset with one another. Thu, the oldest, began to cry.

‘I want to go home,’ she sobbed.

This shamed her parents, and both moved to comfort their daughter. Her younger brothers were afraid, their young minds confused.

What is happening to our parents and to us?

Quang and Hoa knew their chances of escaping were slim; close to impossible. They decided to move when they heard an unusual sound.

‘Listen,’ said Quang. The sound grew louder.

‘It’s a truck,’ said Hoa.

‘It’s heading the wrong way, going back to Saigon. Quickly,’ said Quang. ‘Everyone come into the jungle and hide.’

The children did as ordered. They saw their parents signal to be silent. The truck got closer. Just as it was about to pass, Hoa leapt up and ran to the road. Quang froze. The truck screeched as the driver swerved to avoid the crazy woman. She waved.

It was an army truck with soldiers. Hoa's desperate attempt to get help for her family backfired. A soldier in the back of the truck picked up his rifle and aimed at Hoa. She panicked and fled into the jungle.

The soldier fired twice, three times. His target disappeared. The soldiers argued, and then the truck drove away leaving Quang and the children crouching in terror. Quang's thoughts reeked of desperation.

Hoa is dead. Who will care for the children?

The jungle was silent. Birds took off when the rifle fired. Tears rolled down Quang's face.

'Where is Má,' asked Thu?

What could her father say? Silence settled in the jungle broken by a strange sound. A branch broke, then another. The family cowered, transfixed. The sounds got louder. A large branch moved and there stood Hoa.

The children stumbled to their mother. Quang found it hard to stand and hold Thanh. Scratches lined Hoa's face, her clothes were torn, but her tiny frame was bullet free.

Hugging became popular, and eventually the family resumed their journey. It was tough going with more and longer rests. Slow progress became slower and, as the afternoon heat attacked their bodies, the fact they had no shelter made both parents fearful.

They moved into the jungle where Quang cleared an area and made a crude shelter. The family clung to one another in their makeshift home.

The rain arrived. Heavy, driving rain penetrated the branches and leaves, and soaked their clothing, bringing misery and despair.

It was not a question of reaching their destination, a port. It was a question of surviving the night.

Son Trai made the discovery.

'Look Cha,' he said to his father and pointed. 'What is that?'

Quang peered through the rain and saw the light. He told Hoa. They discussed it then decided. No matter how dangerous the situation with the light might be, it could not be worse than staying here.

The family stood outside a small house. Quang called. The door opened and an elderly woman, holding a lantern, peered into the darkness. It was difficult for her to see but the sight of a shivering and drenched family, tugged at her heartstrings.

God, Buddha, luck or happenstance smiled on the escapees, and soon they were dry, warm and being fed. Cabbage soup never tasted so fine.

The family insisted on sleeping on the floor. This was paradise. The old woman retired and snoring became contagious.

Around midnight, Quang awoke. He heard something. Hoa stirred.

'That sounds like a car,' she whispered.

'It is a car,' replied Quang, moving to investigate. He ducked away from the window when headlights illuminated the house. The children stirred. The family froze as they heard a rough voice with swearing to match. Footsteps came closer, and then the door opened. The visitor stumbled in the darkness, lit a lamp, held it up, and saw six pairs of eyes.

He swore and grabbed a broom.

'Please sir,' said Quang. 'We mean no harm. The old lady invited us in out of the rain.'

More swearing as the man raised the broom, and just as he moved to smash the family, the old woman spoke.

'Chien!'

He froze then addressed the woman. 'Who are these people and what are they doing in my house?'

'They are refugees with children. They are trying to escape from our wonderful country, now ruled by your friends, the Communists.'

Quang and Hoa felt sick.

This maniac is a supporter of the new government.

The old woman took control. 'Go to your room. I will bring some food. In the morning this family will be gone.'

The brute stared at his mother, and then at the Nguyens. He threw the broom at Quang, swore, and left the room. The woman moved close to the parents and whispered.

'I'm afraid you must leave.'

'Now,' gasped Quang? 'But it's the middle of the night.'

'He has been drinking and will become violent. I cannot protect you.'

Hoa pleaded. 'But the children will not survive in the open.'

The woman looked around and found the keys. She handed them to Quang. 'Take the car. He stole it and will steal another.'

Quang was speechless.

'Quickly,' said the woman. 'When you get to the end of my road, turn right, and eventually you will come to the port. Now go.'

The family made haste. They stumbled in the dark, piled into the ancient Renault, and Quang tried to start the engine. It stalled. He tried again. It stalled.

The drunken lout appeared, roared and came running. Quang tried a third time and the engine spluttered into life. The man drew closer. Quang flattened the accelerator and the car lurched forward crashing into the enraged owner.

He fell against the windscreen, rolled off the car and into the mud. Hoa screamed. The children were terrified. Quang turned the wheel and drove into the night.

Two hours later they stopped. They had to; the car had no petrol. They found it hard to sleep and, at dawn, got out of the car and walked.

At least the weather was fine. They had no idea how close they were to the port. They came around a bend in the road and saw soldiers on bicycles riding towards them. The family panicked and dived into the jungle.

'Be quiet,' whispered Quang.

'Did they see us,' asked Hoa?

'I'm not sure. We need to move deeper into the jungle,' he said and led the family away from the road. They crouched and fell silent. The soldiers dismounted, discussed their next move, and moved into the jungle.

The undergrowth was thick and it was easy for the family to hide. The soldiers kept searching. Thanh wanted to scream and did. Hoa covered her mouth but the sound caused the soldiers to change direction. They were now only a few paces from the terrified family.

Quang whispered to his wife. 'I will lead them away. You take the children deeper into the jungle and I will find you later.'

The parents knew this was a lie. If ever two humans spoke with their eyes, this was such a conversation. Their eyes said *goodbye, I love you* and *thank you*.

Quang touched each of his children then crawled away. As the soldiers were about to discover Hoa and the children, a voice called.

'Over here,' yelled a soldier, and the others moved away from the family.

With a breaking heart, Hoa led her children deeper into the jungle. She could not bear her loss. Her loving husband had given his life to save his family.

Moving through the jungle was dangerous, slow and exhausting. They stopped to rest.

'Where is Cha,' asked the children?

'He will join us later,' said Hoa. 'Now rest.'

Rest was easy, survival difficult—more like impossible. Hoa's exhaustion meant she drifted towards sleep. Suddenly her mind was awake when she again heard soldiers moving through the jungle towards them. Her sweat and tears mingled as she willed her body to stand.

Who can tell what drove this woman to pick up her youngest and lead her children away from the soldiers? They crept through the jungle then heard the sound of water, and came to a river.

Its banks were steep, its current slow. Did that mean deep water?

Hoa panicked as she heard the soldiers closing in on them. Clutching toddler Thanh, she slid down the bank and into the river. Her feet slipped into thick mud. She looked up and beckoned to her children. They followed.

Minh, who had just turned four, panicked and went under the water. His hands flailed as he started to drown. Hoa thrust baby Thanh at daughter Thu, and bobbed below the water. She could not see. She copped a kick in the face and rejoiced. It was her desperate son. Grabbing his shirt and then his hair, she stood and pulled him above the water. He gasped. She placed his hands on a plant growing in the bank.

'Hold this, hold it,' she whispered. Only when the boy settled did she let him go.

But all this was the prelude to the main event. They could hear the soldiers getting closer. Soon the men would stand above them. Talk about shooting fish in a barrel.

Clutching Thanh, Hoa bobbed low in the river and pressed herself against the bank. Her children copied her. Like Má, their instinct was to survive. The children were amazing. Even Thanh chose to remain silent.

The soldiers stood above them. One kicked some dirt. It fell on the family. Hoa refused to cry. Her husband lay dead, and now her children were about to become orphans. She held her breath.

Then it was over. The soldiers left and Hoa wanted to howl with relief. They survived the soldiers but how could they escape their watery jail? The bank was steep and slippery. Climbing was near impossible.

How can I save my children?

Hoa saw a large tree branch jammed against the bank. She looked across the river. There the bank was low. She pushed through the water, and tugged at the branch with her one free hand. It came loose.

'Come here,' she called. 'Grab this branch and do not let go.'

The three older children hugged the branch. Thanh clung to her mother. Hoa ploughed through the muddy riverbed until her feet no longer touched bottom. She launched their "boat".

'Paddle, like this,' she cried, trying to demonstrate. The three older children got the message. They headed across the river, reached the other side, and exhausted, collapsed on the grassy bank. Hoa's misery at losing her beloved husband pushed her to the brink of collapse. Then it happened.

'Look, Má,' said Thu pointing. In the distance was a bridge. On that bridge were people and vehicles. It was civilization. It was hope.

After a long rest, they limped to the port. Hoa removed a small amount of gold she had sown into her clothes. With it, she bought food and fed her children. Her joy at having reached her destination was smashed by her heartbreak. Her husband had given his life so his family might live.

She moved to the dock area. Asking different people brought her to a man whose boat sailed that day.

'How much for me and my four children?'

The man wanted too much. Hoa turned away in despair but the man wanted more passengers so dropped his price. Hoa thanked him, paid, and took her children aboard.

The fishing boat was crowded with families, refugees wanting to escape their homeland for a better life.

Hoa settled her children and waited. What else could she do? Her heart ached; she wanted to vomit but had nothing to spew. To have come this far and lost her one true love meant misery. She could touch her pain. The older children asked about their father. She lied. 'He will join us later. Now sit still and be quiet.' Then she decided. She would get off the boat. She could not leave without trying to find Quang.

She stood to tell the captain but the boat's engines came alive, and the vessel moved away from the wharf. Hoa panicked. It was too late.

Through streaming tears, she watched the land of her birth for the last time. Then she screamed. She screamed so loud and so long everyone on board stared at her. Her children were scared.

Hoa screamed at the captain. 'Stop the boat! Stop the boat!'

Running along the wharf was Quang. He ran, waved and called. His wife waved and screamed. His children waved and yelled.

Annoyed, the captain moved his boat back to the dock. Quang leapt aboard and tears of joy replaced any words.

The family Nguyen escaped from Vietnam.

Preview ends