

# An Unknown Journey

Dao Huynh

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## The Beginning of a Journey

When I was growing up, whatever I wanted to do, time was always on my side. Now, after forty years, the cycle of life has turned me upside down. Many things have happened in the past two years; I couldn't even say whether my personal angel or my own demon brought me to this stage. Life always starts from an unknown circumstance, and it is for me still, even after forty years of living on two different continents with two entirely different cultures.

Living in Viet Nam for twenty years was as if I were in a small jail cell. It could be due to many reasons: the culture I was brought up with, or my parents' economic situation, or the war going on over there. I was restricted in everything I wanted to do; I could only think and dream, but when I was out of there I felt lost more than ever. I wondered what I should do at that moment.

The fall of Saigon in 1975 to the Vietnamese Communists was the loss of a country for the South Vietnamese, and the United States of America as a whole, but it was so much more on a personal level to my family. It took my father away from us, plunging my mom into a severe depression of helplessness about taking care of her ten children by herself. It took away my future of an education, for a better life; but in that loss I gained everything in life. I've especially learned how to love someone, and to go against everything I was brought up to believe in. That experience created an indescribable exhilaration.

In 1970 I discussed with my parents which foreign languages I should take in junior high school: either French or English. French is a very elegant, soothing language. My parents were quite good in that language; they would be a great asset when I was learning and

using it. However, English would be an in-style language to learn, and I could practice it with any American soldier there during the Viet Nam War. But in the time of war and the customs of the country, interacting with an American soldier for a teenage girl was impossible. Her family and the society forbade her to do such a thing. She was taught to believe in the superiority of her own over other, different races and cultures. In her own mind she thought she would be mistaken for and condemned as a prostitute if she, an Asian woman, stood in a public place and talked to a man of any different race from her own. That feeling stayed in me for a long time; but no one could predict how the future would turn out to be.

After the analyzing the pros and cons of the two languages, I decided on French as my second language, from my passion for its elegant sound. I devoted most of my time to reading, writing, and speaking in French to an imaginary friend, or with anyone interested in the language. My goal was to speak fluently so I could get a scholarship to study science in France.

The Vietnamese became independent from the French in 1954, but the cultural influence that had been cultivated in our minds after eighty years of colonization was inerasable. It took me one year to master my French. I could speak French equally well as my French teacher, who looked nothing like the French; he was quite short — I could literally say that his height was the same measure as his waistline. He was bald, and that gave more power to him; in my culture, having no hair was a sign of wisdom, and that was the reason I looked up to him. We got along beautifully. Speaking French was my ticket to a new world.

He was at first surprised at how well I could speak French to him, which made him enjoy even more teaching the language to the class. I was from the new generation, holding onto the lost language; and he was from the old generation, wanting to do the same. The year I took his class was the last year he taught French, then he moved back to France so he could be with his son, who had been studying abroad for many years and was glad to have his father come back to stay with him.

Being good in French wasn't good enough; I also had to be superior in math and science, and my mom made sure I had those

skills by sending me to a private tutor and paying with her too few resources. Living on my father's salary of a police officer was barely enough for our family of ten children. Every summer my mom had to send a few of us about a hundred miles from our house, to my Aunt Binh's family. Aunt Binh had happened to marry to a well-to-do engineer, which eased our family's overall financial hardship. Aunt Binh had only three children. Her oldest, a daughter, Hong – four years younger than I – was quiet, timid, and indifferent to people around her, contrary to her two fraternal twin brothers. Hai and Hoan were loud, obnoxious, and put their noses to everybody's business, reminding me of my Aunt Binh.

My aunt's husband Anh worked for the government engineering department, which was responsible for the design and maintenance of the airports. He was one of the elite sixteen engineers in the department, and lived in the airport facility housing, free of charge. They had a large, comfortable four-bedroom house with a swimming pool on an acre of land with a lot of tropical fruit trees planted there by a previous owner.

It was a strange way to spend three months of summer: close by a major airport, with extreme security to prevent terrorist attacks because of the ongoing war between North and South Viet Nam. I had to have an official entrance permit anytime I wanted to pass the gate a mile from my aunt's house, and was body-searched anytime there was a major battle, or an explosion happened somewhere back in the countryside before I got to her house. The restrictions were for the safety of the people who lived inside the airport area, but I felt like I lived inside a giant jail and was being watched at all times.

At home every day we sat down, crammed elbow-to-elbow at the dining table in a twelve-by-fifteen-foot main room in the middle of an elongated, rectangular-shaped house. Here we held all the family group activity. We could have dinner, or get together with friends for studying or discussing world events, which hardly had anything to do with us; but we dreamed about getting away, and being at strange, new places. We knew we could never afford it, but in dreaming about it, we could travel to exotic, distant lands. Or we got together to discuss family matters, or listen to the radio, even sleep there to make room for guests staying overnight when they visited us. But the most comfortable feeling at that table came from listening to the

clacking sound of chopsticks touching the chinaware, and the chewing sounds of my brothers and sisters at dinner time.

Eating dinner together as a family at six o'clock right on the nose was the requirement, so everybody could have an equal share of the hot food, and Mom didn't have to always be on her feet to wait on us at different times. We always enjoyed the many colorful main dishes arranged nicely at the center of the table, which Mom made from her own oddly creative ingredients and most delicious varieties of meats. It could be roast pork, stir-fried beef with a combination of different types of vegetables, fried fishes or exotic seafood like octopus, crab, or clams. A large vegetable portion and soup were always provided as side dishes, since Mom believed those would strengthen our digestive system, and steamed rice was a must.

Every year, a week before school was over for summer vacation, at dinner time we didn't talk much to one another until my mom slowly and quietly asked us:

"Who would like to spend summer at Aunt Binh's house?" She looked at us one by one, and waited for the answer; but we acted like we were too busy eating and didn't care about answering her question. It was a privilege to spend summer "over there," as she put it, so we had to wait for her next statement, designating the privileged person, without showing too much eagerness to be away from the family -- that could hurt her feelings.

Finally, she looked at me and said, "I think you should go over there since you're the oldest girl here. You'd be able to help them out around the house if they're short-handed, and give your grandma companionship."

I stopped eating, looking up to her, and responded with a calm voice as I tried to hide my excitement:

"Yes, Mom, but Lan might want to come this time."

Whenever I thought about going away to a different surrounding, no matter if it was a good place or a bad place, I could feel a chill in my spine and numbness in my arms. I remembered that once my sister Lan complained that she never had a chance to be away from home for summer. Mom never sent her away -- only me, so to be fair to her I mentioned her name, and I wanted to share summer with someone my age I could relate and talk to about my interests. With my cousins, who were much younger than I, we had

nothing in common. But that wasn't my mom's intention; she liked to command, and expected the children to follow her orders, and didn't worry about how we would feel or what we were concerned about.

"Lan will stay here to help me take care of your younger brothers. She's very good with them. You're older, so you can be better help for you grandma."

In her age and wisdom, my mom knew me more than I could understand myself. She regarded me as mature, and independent, but flexible; I would be capable of handling any situation; sometimes I was even stubborn when it came down to protecting what I believed in. More often, the conflict between Mom and me was that I only complied with her wishes with a rebellious attitude. I thought she was an old-fashioned thinker, too cautious and with too many doubts when dealing with the younger generation.

During summer, once a month Mom would stop by Aunt Binh's house to visit and bring her some exotic fruits she bought at a bargain price from the groves nearby. They would have lunch, and Mom quite often got an earful about my progress there. One day I was thirsty after playing hopscotch with my cousin Hong, and came to the kitchen but stopped short at the door when I overheard Aunt Binh mention my name. She said:

"Do you know that Dao is a strong-headed girl? I'd never seen her like that before. Last week, uncle Ton was here. He gave Dao a small wooden carving of a horse. When Hoan saw it he asked Dao to give it to him, but she wouldn't, so the boy was crying and screaming for that carved horse, but she didn't care."

"I don't see anything wrong with that. It was her horse. She should do whatever she wanted with it; either give it away or keep it." My Mom was up front with Aunt Binh about my behavior, so she agreed with me that time.

"I haven't finished the story yet. Let me tell you: After five minutes listening to the boy screaming, I guess her grandma had enough, so she asked Dao to give the horse to him, to stop his crying. Do you know what she did after her grandma asked her?" My Aunt kept talking without pausing for Mom's response since she knew my mom wouldn't have an answer for her: "She wouldn't say a thing, and ran outside through the front door; when she got close to the

stream, she threw the horse into it, then walked back to the house, looking at her grandma and her cousin, still not saying anything.”

“So how did her grandma handle it?” Mom asked her.

“She was shocked at her behavior. She couldn’t believe Dao could change so quick from a sweet girl to a mean and disrespectful one for such a no-big-deal matter.”

“I mean how her grandma handled it — if she punished her for that outrageous behavior.”

“You know Mom. She wouldn’t hurt a fly. Besides that, she doesn’t believe in spanking, so she sent her to stand in the corner of the living room, facing the wall, for one hour to think about her bad behavior.”

“Well, I think that was fair discipline. So everything was all right after that?”

Mom was non-challenged about the incident since she found out my grandma hadn’t spanked me.

“No.”

Aunt Binh’s response raised Mom’s curiosity. “What else did Dao do?” Mom asked her in an excited voice.

“She refused to stand in the corner of the room. Her reason was she hadn’t done anything wrong. The horse was still hers, in her mind. Dao does whatever she wants, just like you thought.”

“So, how did Mom react to her attitude?”

“Mom told her that Dao was much older and should understand the situation better than my son. So, to keep peace in the family, she should give the horse to my son. Also, Dao was punished because she was disrespectful to Mom by throwing the horse figurine away, against Mom’s request. She told Dao that if she wouldn’t comply with discipline, she wouldn’t go on the trip to the national zoo with the rest of the family on the weekend.”

“Did she comply with her punishment?” Mom asked.

“No, she walked away without a word. So that weekend she stayed home by herself; and she wouldn’t talk for three days.”

I walked in when Aunt Binh finished talking. They were real quiet when they saw me. Mom was cutting some vegetables, stopped, looked up, and asked me, “Are you all right? You’re all red! Is it too much sun out there? Lunch will be ready in half an hour.”

“I’m thirsty, and came in for some water,” I answered Mom

while staring at my aunt. She wasn't looking at me but at the water running from the faucet, waiting for the pot beneath it to fill up.

Mom asked me, "Have you been here long?"

She was concerned that I had listened to the conversation and my feelings would be hurt. I didn't want her to worry about me being there and putting up with all the hassles from my cousins, so I told her a little white lie:

"No, Mom. Why do you ask me that?"

Mom didn't say anything. I understood that she no longer wanted to talk, so I got a glass from the wooden cabinet and walked to the corner of the living room where the water bottles were lined up on a little table. I was thinking about Aunt Hoa. She was my youngest aunt – in her twenties. She had taught me that giving up one's pleasures and personal needs for others was a virtue; but the times when I listened to Grandma and Aunt Binh talk to each other, I had the impression that they thought if one was born into a poor family, one wasn't worthy of the same treatment as a member of a well-to-do family. Anytime Aunt Binh told me to help the maid to clean house, my cousin Hoan, the inconsiderate younger of the twin boys, would say, "I'm glad I'm not you." One day, when he saw me busy cleaning the floor, he looked at me with his indifferent eyes, and said, "That's Mai task. She's paid to do that cleaning job, not you," he taunted me.

I was upset by his arrogant remarks, so I told him, "You're a brat. Why can't you help her out?"

He ignored my anger with his expressionless face, and said, "You can be a slave and do that. I don't have to."

I was about to respond to him; but he didn't let me challenge his statement and walked away with a smirk on his face.

My favorite, Aunt Hoa, who was older than I was by thirteen years, and was a sensible, considerate, and mature lady, since she had grown up without a father. The war against the French had kept her father in North Viet Nam while she was with my grandma in the South, and separated from them since 1945. My grandma raised her children by herself, so she was close to all of them. Every summer Grandma and Aunt Hoa would come out from the countryside to spend the summer at Aunt Binh's house.

Aunt Hoa was reading a newspaper close by and overheard Hoan

and me talking, so she looked up and when she saw me said, “Come here.”

I approached her but looked down at the floor, trying to hide my tears.

“There’s no reason for you to cry. He was very inconsiderate and ignorant to talk to you like that.”

I was too choked up to respond to her.

“You are very kind to help her out. It doesn’t matter who she is, but it matters that you help someone out when they’re in need. Life is a cycle. When you need help someone would be there to help you out. If you help someone it should be from your compassion for that person. Don’t let him convince you of any other way. You should know who you are. Be proud. Go wash you face.”

Aunt Hoa was my angel. She always cheered me up and encouraged me to be better and believe in myself. I wiped off my tears and said, “Yes. Thank you.”

Then I walked to the bathroom to clean up my face, so my cousin wouldn’t get too much enjoyment out of my distress and disadvantaged circumstance.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I was back home from my visit, I was glad we all got together again at the dining table so I could find out how everybody’s summer had been. Mom was happy to see me again. She asked, “Did you enjoy your summer? We missed you.”

Lan didn’t wait for my answer. She said, “Mom, you don’t have to ask. I know she’d go everywhere and meet all kinds of people. She didn’t miss us.”

It was very unfair for her to say that. I looked at her and said, “That isn’t true. I missed your guys, even if I did have some good times playing at the house with Hong. I don’t think any one of you would like it there.”

Lan looked at me with disbelieving eyes. She asked, “Why not?” She thought I had lied to her.

“I had to go to bed at ten at the latest, because I had to follow the rules like our cousins, for their father to be fair to them. Uncle Anh believes our cousins are too young to stay up late with the adults.

They need enough sleep to grow and be alert for the next day.”

Lan laughed when she heard the reason. “You’re right. I wouldn’t like that. Over here we wouldn’t go to bed then; the earliest time was twelve. I won’t make it over there.”

I was glad she agreed with me. “There were too many rules to follow, to the point I didn’t bother to ask any adult for permission to do anything, but quietly tagged along for family functions, like visiting their relatives, or walking for exercise after dinner. If you like to do those things, I suggest you go over there next summer.”

I didn’t mention the housework, or my cousins ridiculing me, or the maid, since everybody would take the situation differently. I let Lan judge them herself, but she didn’t hesitate to say, “Sure, I’d like to try.”

It didn’t matter what Lan said about my feelings when I was away for the summer. I was glad to be home again, even if food was scarce, and I had no fancy clothes like those I borrowed from my cousin Hong, so I could dress right up to their standard anytime we went to visit her mom’s relatives. When my aunt took us to a get-together party I had to be always on my best behavior; I wasn’t allowed to talk to adults unless they initiated the conversation. I wasn’t permitted to eat or drink, even if food and drink were the focus of the party — unless I had been offered some by the host. Any conversation about my parents discussed among my aunts would be about their bad traits since they had too many children; were too selfish in pursuing their own pleasure without thinking about the children they already had. I felt less and less happy after the many summers I spent there. My ego was slowly squeezed out by too many adults’ orders and rules, like octopus’ tentacles submerging me into a deep darkness of isolation. I felt threatened to spend another summer at my aunt’s house, yet I was ready to go there just to see how much longer I could endure the survival of my ego and will while challenging the living style at my aunt’s house.

I got along well with my cousins since I always put them above me. I cared for their feelings and their needs more than worrying about my own feelings. They were naïve, bubbly, and inconsiderate, in their own protected world. They never had to worry about if there was enough food or money for tomorrow; everything, no matter how trivial a thing, was there - if they wanted it, they always got it. They

didn't have to do any tasks around the house; it was all taken care of by the maids. But for my mom's children, my aunts often mentioned to us our responsibility for the well-being of our younger brothers and sisters by helping my mom with cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the baby. Fortunately, by the influence of the French culture, Mom had never forced those responsibilities on me, even though I was the oldest daughter in the house.

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The school year began, and, after school, at four, I was exhausted from too much complex thinking, either from the writing class or the physics class. I was glad to be home and around Mom, helping her cook, and listening to her small talk and gossip about the neighbors. Mom asked, "Do you know Thom is pregnant?" Mom often started a surprise conversation from the least expected news.

"Whom did you say, Mom?" I asked.

"Thom — the third daughter of our neighbor, who lives across from us. She's your age. You two used to be friends in middle school."

"Oh, yes. I haven't talked to her lately since I take different classes in high school now; but who told you that? How do you know?"

"You have to look at her."

Mom was making nonsense-talk, so I had to express my opinion to her, while most of the time before I wouldn't say anything. "How can you know the girl's pregnant by just looking at her?"

"What a shame! She looks like she's just out of bed all the time; and the vein on the left side of her neck is more visible, and beating fast."

I was amazed how Mom could be so sure of her tell-tale observations. I laughed and said, "I don't believe that, Mom. She's only seventeen."

"As long as a girl has a period and she sleeps with someone she can be pregnant. It doesn't matter how old she is. She has to quit school. Her parents have to arrange the wedding now, if whoever she slept with agrees to marry her."

"If not, then what?"