

Anh Oi



It was two in the morning when a mother and her five year old daughter left their home for a trip to Căn cứ 5 Rừng Lá. The mother, Yến, carried her sleeping daughter, Kim Chi, with one arm, while lifting a fifty pound bag worth of food onto her back. The previous day, she had cooked thịt kho, prepared chà bông, and bought a variety of fruits from the market. She also packed nước mắm, a ten pound bag of rice grains, and utensils into the bag. All of this food could last for two whole months. Scanning the bag to ensure that every dish was packed and concealed, Yến carried Kim Chi and the heavy sack of food onto a xe lam. She had to be at the station by five in the morning, so she could reach the camp by noon. What was the purpose for her willingness to bring a fifty pound bag of food with her at two in the morning? In all honesty, her sole reason was to keep her husband alive at the re-education camp.

Her husband, Sang, served in the military for South Vietnam. Due to the Fall of Saigon, he was automatically reported to the reeducation camp in order to "learn" about the new government. One morning, the Vietnamese Communists showed up in front of his home and gave notice to Sang that his time at the re-education camp would only last for ten days. He agreed to go to the reeducation camp because he hoped that by reconciling with the new government, the people would live their life peacefully. However, those ten days later turned out to be two months, and those two months became six years.

The re-education camp was not a place to learn and to better oneself. Not everyone had an education, so how could the reeducation teach new ideas when not everyone had an education? Though there were different grades, such as first grade to fourth grade, the government had a lack of funding or chose to not invest their money into people who were their enemies in the first place. Instead, the camp's purpose was to detain and slowly torture South Vietnamese men with hard labor and starvation.

Majority of the wives were devastated by their husband's detainment at the camp, and did not know how they would survive without their husbands. More often than enough, wives of the detainees would neglect their husbands and leave their husbands to die in the camps. However, that was not the case for Yến since she had vowed that she would love and support Sang for eternity. There were times when Sang's absence had truly devastated her. The first year of living with Sang was the most difficult for her to cope with since she was pregnant with their first daughter at the time. Living in a two storage home was a nightmare for Yến since she felt lonely in that empty home. The quiet, eerie home suffocated her, and she feared the confinements of her own home since it reminded her of her husband's absence.

Yến refused to be trapped in her own home, so she decided to busy herself with working. Since Sang was at the re-education camp and could not work to provide for the family, she had to raise and support her daughter on her own. Yến found herself a job

as an elementary school teacher. However, her teaching job's salary was still not enough for her since she needed to save money on the side for the family's tickets for the vượt biên. To resolve this, she then found a side job that involved selling motorcycle parts. Even with balancing those two jobs was still not enough for Yén, so she used the extra money from her teaching job to buy a few sewing machines to make towels. Since she was independently working, she stayed up until midnight to sew the towels in order to sell them the next day. All those hours of working drained her, but she endured through the fatigue with the promise that once Sang was free from the camp, the family can then start a new life in America.

Yén only visited her husband every two months since there were strict visitation rules at the camp. Every time Yén visited the camp, the commute took an entire day. Typically, she left home by two in the morning in order to catch the xe đò's 5 AM departure. Once she secured a seat on the xe đò, it took the bus five hours to reach the province of the camp. The xe đò would then arrive at the province at ten in the morning. However, there was an additional two hour walk to reach the camp. On average, the travel for Yén to visit her husband at the reeducation camp took a total of ten hours. On top of that, the time ratio of the travel time to the visitation was off balanced. The officers at the camp only allowed thirty minutes, and sometimes one hour of visitation if the officers were feeling lenient, for visitors to see their loved ones.

The night sky illuminated the figures of the mother and daughter walking hand-in-hand to the station. The line to buy a seat ticket for the xe đò was long due to the holidays since other families were visiting their relatives to celebrate Tết. After a few minutes of waiting in line, Yén successfully bought two tickets, and guided Kim Chi to their assigned bus.

As Yén and Kim Chi found their bus, the driver halted them from boarding, "The bus is at its fullest capacity."

Yén was puzzled, "I bought my tickets though." She showed the driver the tickets, but he only shook his head.

"Sorry, miss. There isn't enough room on the bus for you and your child." Yen inspected how the bus was filled to the brim. There were people hanging off of the edge of the bus, and there was no room on the bus to accommodate her and Kim Chi.

"Is there another bus that has room for two people?"

The driver shook his head, "Unfortunately, no. You'll have to try again tomorrow morning."

Yén was confused because she had bought her tickets, which would at least guarantee her a seat. She tried asking the cashier for a refund, but there was no refund policy for tickets since the purchase has been finalized. Frustrated with the customer service, Yén quietly dragged Kim Chi further down the road from the station.

"Mẹ, what's wrong?" Kim Chi saw her mother's sulken face.

Yến held her small daughter into her arms and broke down crying. Yến was upset because she had missed a day to see her husband. She hasn't seen him for two months now, and she was looking forward to seeing him today. There was no other way to reach him, except to visit him at the camp. The times she visited him in person gave her the assurance that her husband was still surviving. Yến wondered if he still had enough food for one more day, and if he was still strong and healthy. She was afraid that if she did not see him, he would die from starvation and overexhaustion. Yến looked at the bag of food she had prepared, and frowned at the result of the food going to waste since it would be ruined by the next day.

"Why are you crying, dear?" A gentle woman's voice interrupted Yến's cries. Yến looked up at the young woman's face who looked like she was in her early thirties. Even though Yến did not know who this woman was, she felt like she could trust this woman. Yến did not hesitate to tell the woman the start of her day—how she woke up at two in the morning to visit her husband at the camp, only for the plan to not work out in the end.

The woman was touched by Yến's dedication for her husband that she offered, "I can help you since I know you."

Yến was taken aback by the woman's response since she has never met this woman before, yet she claimed that she knew her.

"You don't even know me, I'm not from around here." Yen corrected the woman since she was perhaps mistaking her for someone else.

"I know you now."

Yến was silent for a moment because she thought this woman was strangely nice.

"Come with me, I can let you stay over at my place. I live nearby."

Yến looked at Kim Chi to see if this was a safe idea. She scanned her daughter's tired face and she had remembered that Kim Chi hasn't eaten anything since last night. The time was approaching noon, and her daughter hasn't eaten anything since then. Yến decided to trust this woman and take up on her offer since she was in desperate need of help.

"Alright, I'll go with you." Yến hesitantly followed the woman.

Yến could not believe her eyes as she entered the woman's mansion. The interior of the house was modernized with high ceilings, white walls, and there was a gold chandelier adorning the living room. A woman in a uniform walked past Yến, whom she noticed was a servant working. There was a total of three servants bustling around the house. Yến and Kim Chi followed the woman around the house, while silently admiring every single corner of the home.

"You can put the food in the fridge here," The woman pointed Yén to the kitchen. Yén listened to the woman and placed all containers of food into the spacious fridge. She could not believe that the woman was willing to help her out.

The woman helped Yén packed the other containers in the fridge, and told her, "Go take a shower, I know the both of you had a long day. I'll have dinner ready."

After Yén and Kim Chi took a shower, they came to a dinner table filled with a variety of dishes placed throughout the long table. There was more than enough food for three people. There were at least three to four entrees, and plenty of appetizers. Back at home, Yén could only afford to feed her family to eat rice with watermelon or nước mắm. The woman gestured Yén and Kim Chi to take a seat.

"Thank you for everything." Yén expressed her gratitude to the woman, "I can't thank you enough."

"As mothers, we are all here to support each other." The woman beamed at Yén, as she picked up a piece of meat and placed it onto Kim Chi's bowl of rice.

The next morning, the woman walked with Yén to the bus station. As Yén waited in line, she scattered through her pockets. She came to the realization that she did not bring enough cash to buy two extra tickets since she had previously only brought enough cash for one trip.

Crestfallen by Yén's unpreparedness, she hesitantly looked at the woman.

"I'm sorry for burdening you more, but I only have two dollars in my pocket. Can I please lend a few extra dollars from you. I promise I will pay you back the next day."

The woman shook her head, "You're not burdening me." She shuffled inside her purse and handed Yén a few extra bills, "Just take it, Chi. Take it as a gift from me."

"I can't take your money! It's Tết. I'll pay you back, I promise."

"Don't worry about paying me back." The woman ushered Yén to the ticket station, "Now, go. Before the bus leaves. You don't want your husband to be waiting."

"Please! Let me repay you—"

Before Yén could react on time, the woman had already beaten her to buying two tickets for the bus ride. Yén was shocked by the woman's quick thinking, so she handed back the bills the woman had given her earlier.

"Nope. I won't let you." The woman shoved the bills back into Yén's palms, "Keep the extra change."

"You're doing so much for me." Yén frowned since she could not immediately return the favor for the woman since she was empty handed. She was moved by the woman's selfless actions.

Afterwards, Yén, Kim Chi, and the woman walked to the assigned bus, and were relieved to find that there were enough seats in the bus. As Yén loaded her belongings

onto the bus and guided Kim Chi to the seat, Yến looked out the window to see the woman once more.

"Thank you so much, em."

"Take care of yourself and your daughter, *nhé?*" The woman bided her final goodbye to Yến and Kim Chi.

That was the last time Yến saw that woman ever since they departed paths. To this day, that woman's kind gestures still touches Yến's heart since it gives her hope that there are altruistic people who exist in this world.

—

Yến and Kim Chi finally arrived at their destination. They had to walk a few extra miles to the camp since it was located deep in the jungles. Every time Yến visited the camp, the officers would ask many questions such as what was her occupation and why she was visiting her husband. In response, Yến would answer that she came to visit Sang in order to motivate him to improve and learn from his disciplines. Once she was done being interrogated by the Công An, Yến and Kim Chi's faces brightened as they finally saw the officer escorting Sang into the room.

"You have *thirty* minutes." The officer sternly addressed and left the room afterwards. Yến released a sigh of relief since her husband was still in a healthy shape from the last time she saw him.

"Hello, *người đẹp.*" Sang widely grinned at his lovely wife, "And my princess." He ruffled Kim Chi's hair.

"How are you, Anh?"

"I'm doing fine."

"Are they overworking you? Have you been sleeping well? When was the last time you ate?"

"Doesn't matter, I'm still alive aren't I?" Sang attempted to placate his wife's concerns, but she still had a worried expression on her face. "Plus," He held up the heavy bag of food, "I'm full for eternity with this."

Yến was still not convinced with Sang's optimism, "I'm so sorry. I should of had visited earlier, but the cars were overcrowded because of the weekend, and there weren't any cars available yesterday."

"No need to be sorry, *người đẹp.* I am still glad to see you and Kim Chi. How's everything at home?"

"The usual, just working. I think we should have enough for America in a few months."

"That's good to hear," Sang beamed at his wife's integrity and was immensely proud of her, "I'm sorry if I can't contribute."

"Nonsense. You just need to stay alive, *nhé?*"

"Bố, when will you be home?" Kim Chi pouted.

"Aye! What did I tell you?! Don't ask that question." Yén quietly scolded her daughter.

"Soon, my dear." Sang gently patted her his daughter's shoulder, "We'll soon be in America." He reassured his family.

"You don't deserve to be here." Kim Chi sobbed into her father's arms. Sang gestured Yén to come closer to his side, so that the family can share a group hug. They silently embraced in each other's arms to commemorate the fact that they still have each other, and that was what mattered the most.

"One minute." The officer's voice interrupted the family's moment.

"Listen to your mother, *nhé?*" Sang kissed the top of Kim Chi's head.

"*Dạ, Bô.*" Kim Chi nodded.

"Please stay healthy." Yén said in a weak voice. She hated goodbyes. How could she go to bed without a daily update that her husband was still alive? Yén always worried for her husband's well-being. She heard horror stories of how the camp gave little to no food for the men to eat. There was an incident where a hungry detainee ate a peeled skin of a banana that was found from the ground, and that other detainees would often eat bugs in the dirt. Yén never wanted her husband to starve at the reeducation camp. Her love for him was what kept him alive.

Sang rubbed his wife's shoulders, "Please take care of yourself and Kim Chi. Don't worry about me, I'll be fine."

"How can I not worry about you!?" Yén berated her husband.

"I'll be fine. Remember, I fought in the military. I'm a strong man." He smiled at his wife once more before the officer barged back into the room.

"Time's up. Why are you still talking?!" The officer brusquely charged towards Sang, and grabbed him by the shoulder. He then forcibly dragged Sang back inside the dark room.

"You better stay healthy!" Yén yelled at the sight of the officer roughhousing with Sang.

"*Anh yêu em!*" Sang's cries reverberated in Yen's worried heart since that would be the last moment she had with him until she visited him in the next few months.

With that given small amount of time, those precious thirty minutes with her husband was all Yén needed. Even if it took ten hours out of her day to see her husband, the time was worth it since those thirty minutes gave her the reassurance that strengthened Yén. She detested that the system unfairly did the people wrong. But what could she do? Her people lost. Although South Vietnam lost everything, Yén still had her family and that fact alone gave her the strength and hope for the best to arrive.

And eventually, that new beginning to America happened in December 1993.