

Going Away

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I woke up in my father's rough arms, untiringly carrying me to places I'd never dreamt of going to. My eyes, still foggy, lazily opened to view fresh, real palm trees and sunlight that appeared broken and scattered through the slowly swaying leaves. The air tasted pungent and was full of such different sounds in this strange land! Without sounds of men shrieking bargains on prawns in the street or the smell of fish sauce on every corner, this new place was soaked with the aroma of salt and a rhythmic, incessant crashing in the distance.

I rubbed my tired eyes in hopes of a better look at this quieter world whose solitude was broken only by my father's labored footsteps and dry breathing, loud in my ears and matching the rhythm of the slowly growing crash like cymbals. A rough crust of little grains sprinkled my hands. I looked down to my father's trudging feet, kicking away at the powdery earth—the same stuff on my hands. My curiosity and fascination rose uncontrollably in my throat.

“Ba,” I whispered, afraid to disturb the delicate balance of sound. “Where are we going?” I was answered by an absent silence. I looked up to my father's face to see that his eyes were fixed on something that was not in this world, something I couldn't see. “Ba,” I said firmly, a hint of worry in my voice. My father blinked and focused for seemingly his first time onto our surroundings, surprised by the increasing noise.

“Can you walk?” his voice raspy from a night and day without use. Not needing a reply, he slid my small frame down his thigh; my feet fell into a kind of ground that held my toes in a cold, firm embrace. For the first time, I saw where my father had carried me. We were inside a tunnel of shadowy trees that would tell some ancient secret about their past lives, but were

drowned out by that beating sound. A chilling wind, dancing around dark trunks and through drooping leaves, urged me forward from behind. No bigger than my fist, a blinding light ahead was the source of the crashing.

“Let’s go,” he said, grasping my whole hand in his and pulling. I didn’t remember his hands being so rough before. Each step I took sent a heavy mist of fine powder into the dank air. We walked until the blinding light slowly focused into a small circular portrait of white, sky blue, and the kind of green you find on paintings of the ocean. The ocean! I had only heard of its shining sand, sparkling green water and blossoming sunshine from stories that my grandma had told me. This was that place in the pictures! This place of wispy earth and ancient trees and mysterious water that teased and enticed me to its shifting edge; this place would be the last I would touch of my father’s country—my country.

We waited for hours. My father led me to a small, cramped enclosure to just sit and wait until something would come by. Whether it would come from the expanse of the water or the shadows of the trees behind us, I couldn’t tell. I looked at my father again. He seemed alert, almost skittish, as if the trees would at any moment lift themselves up from the ground, pick us up, and carry us back to wherever we were going from. For the first time in my life, I saw fear in my father’s eyes. It was the kind of fear that when I saw it, I would remember it each time that I was afraid. I began to think about Mother.

For that matter, I tried to think about what exactly had happened to me. I could recall a hushed exchange my parents had had just when sleep was claiming my consciousness and when I would wake, I wouldn’t recognize anything around me.

“Xin loi,” father whispered apologetically. I’m sorry.

“Never take your hands off of him,” Mother said on the verge of tears. “You must promise me that I will see him again, happy and safe.” I didn’t hear anyone speak.

“Yeu thuong” he said after a while. I love you, I love you.

The sun had fallen now. The shadows of the trees had grown to cover the ocean’s already murky depths, melding water and leaf and dark into night. We remained smothered by the heavy darkness, my father watchful, seemingly able to see through the blinding atmosphere; myself, holding his hand limply with the air thickly filling my lungs.

Suddenly, every muscle in my father’s body tensed in clenched anticipation, gripping my hand so tightly, I had to cry out in pain.

“Shh!” He snapped through his solid jaw. I steeled myself to hold back the tears, trying to be brave, trying to be strong. Soon, I saw what worried my father so.

Glowing, floating, approaching, orange orbs of sickly light swayed across the black land. Father pressed my frail body low to the ground as the ghostly wanderers drifted toward the water. Mine and my father’s eyes followed them silently, intently on the now clustering phantoms. They halted at the water’s edge, looking as though they were readying themselves to float across the waves. Now, the orbs sporadically blinked and flashed, a pattern mimicking firecrackers.

Father exhaled a breath that had been waiting to escape for what seemed an eternity. “It’s safe.”

We walked to meet the ghosts, a dirty, broken militia armed with oil lanterns, scraps of cloth, and some rafts. Some faces sullen, others stone, and not a child in the bunch.

“Now we go,” stated a man with eyes brighter than the lamps. Several of the hanging heads nodded in agreement. The rafts were cast and each boarded one, ready to venture the ocean darker than the sky.

On the turbulent water, my father hummed Vietnam's song.