Walking on a strange land.

I think back twenty years ago, when the icy grass was broken under my shoes early one morning in July. The open shoes, for sure, couldn't keep my feet warm. The chilling wind went through my body, causing me to shiver as I walked towards the station to catch the 6.30 am train for work. I would leave home at 6.00 am, after a cup of coffee and a sandwich to keep me warm. My working day would start at 7.30, but I had to catch a train and then a bus, so even leaving home this early I would get to my workplace just on time. Three hours spent travelling every day was considered normal for a newcomer, as I was, to this land.

I remember the day I armed myself with my little English, enough to fill only the palm of my hand, and headed without any confidence to a job interview. I could not help smiling to myself: all I had was the English I had learnt at school back home and during a ten-week course here, in Australia. Oh, dear me! Poor me! I stood in front of a big factory which looked totally different from the hospital where I used to work before I fled my country. Table hand was the position I was applying for. I had no idea what on earth that was! I was only informed that I would be working as a process worker, a labourer. It was fine with me. I didn't mind. My previous job had also been very hard -hard labour in

fact- especially when dealing with difficult births, such as babies that didn't want to come into the world the normal way, head first, and insisted on bottom first. In those cases, I had to use all my strength to pull the baby's head out. I remember the assistant and I always laughed with joy when I brought the baby's head out of the mother's womb, beautifully, without any harm done to the newborn. It was very good feeling unlike any other, still now I can feel that wonderful emotion run through me whenever I think of the time I worked as a "labourer" of a different kind.

So, I breathed in deeply as I walked into the office and asked to see the manager. Everything seemed fine after I'd filled in the application form. But when it came to the interview, I must be honest with myself, I could not understand a word of what the interviewer was saying, except that I was asked for my name and address. It was difficult to understand him, though I had cleaned my ears properly that morning. He appeared to be swallowing most of the syllables and it was impossible for me to follow him. Luckily, most of my answers to his questions were only required to be yes or no. He must be found me very disappointing. I couldn't dream of being given a job. But to my surprise, he told me to follow him to see "your boss" as he put it. "She will be the one who looks after you". And so that very day I started working as a table hand or a process worker. I stayed there for six years. The "boss" was a woman in her twenties, double my size in every which way. Smiling at me very kindly, she took my hand and walked me to the machines. She explained how they worked and introduced me to the person in charge of the operation of each machine. She informed me that I would be working at the machine from which the products were coming out; my job was only to take them and put them in boxes, seal the box and put them on the pallet; then a man would come and take them away by means of a forklift. She told me that whenever the machine broke down or stopped for a while, I could go looking for the next job number, to make labels for the boxes. Besides that, I should take off all the old labels and sticky tape from the old boxes and prepare them for the job in line. Sound easy doesn't it? But it wasn't. She asked me if I wanted to have a try. I say "yes". And that was it. I was on. My energy had run out by lunch time, because the machine run very well without breaking down once!

After a half hour lunch break, she -the boss- took me to the table where most of the women were sitting down gluing, padding, packing, stapling, talking while working, smoking sometimes. I joined the party and shyly introduced myself. I made friends with them easily. They were helpful and friendly. Two older Australian women always smiling at me when they caught my eye, often encouraging me to keep up with my work. I was doing hand-collating. Each job had an order number in one corner of the page; I couldn't miss one page or I would ruin the whole job-and there thousands of pages waiting for me to go through them. Some girls tried to tease me, saying that if I didn't finish the job by half past four in the afternoon I would have to stay back and work until the next

morning. This would make everybody laugh cheerfully. I was among people from many different countries. The girls came from everywhere in the world. They were from Italy, Hungary, Philippines, China, Lebanon, Russia, Yugoslavia, Poland, etc. Some were refugees from war-torn countries, such as I, others were immigrants who has their families here. The rest were Australians who'd settled in this land a long time ago.

I sat down to my task. It seemed easy at first. But by haft past four that afternoon when I left work -unfinished of course- I could feel "the earth moves under my feet". I had a splitting headache and I already knew what the job of "table hand" was about.

Leaving everything behind for the sake of my children's future is one thing I will never regret. To accomplish this, self-sacrifice was impossible to avoid. With three young children by my side, on my own, I knew that the road in front of me was not going to be easy, soft, smooth and straight as I wished. I call this land, the land of peace, although some may not agree with me. But that is how I've felt in my heart since I arrived here with my children more than twenty years ago.

I will never forget the day that my country was invaded by the Communist from North Vietnam. Gunfire broke out everywhere. We gathered the children and my mother-in-law, all our important possessions and a sack of rice, put them on a tricycle driven by my husband and left the house. On the road we joined many others who did not know where they were heading to. We saw people that had panicked and were running up and down the road, trying to get away from the battlefield. There was panic everywhere, no place was safe. At that moment I decided we'd rush to the local hospital. In my trembling heart I had the silly notion that if anyone in the family got hurt by gunfire, we'd be helped in the hospital. It was also my place of work, so I thought we might be safe there. There were hundreds of people, residents from the areas nearby, had already taking refuge in the hospital. I settled my mother-in-law and the children in a room which was the office of the doctor in charge of the maternity ward; there was no sight of her or any other staff on duty. I went to the maternity ward; it was full of patients who needed lots of care, but no one was there to attend them. I took over that day and so many days after. Cars carrying wounded people rushed into the hospital, but once they found no doctors, no nurses. People screaming out for help. They were very angry.

I went to see a patient who's had a Caesarean section a few days before. A new born baby boy laying next to her was crying, but the patient was in pain and couldn't look after him. I gave her some pain-killing tablets, then went out of the room, I saw a woman at the door of the labour room. She was so happy to see me. She told me that her sister was on the delivery table. I rushed to her and ten minutes later I delivered a baby. At the same time there was an explosion outside the unit. I held the newborn on my knees and crouched on the floor. I heard people running screaming.

The figure of a small girl passed by the door looking very trouble. Then I heard a knock and a very soft voice said: "Please, Missus, my mother is in so much pain". It turned out she was the daughter of the patient whom I had visited when I first got there. I made sure the newborn and his mother were comfortable and went back to the poor woman. To my knowledge, she'd got an infection from the operation, I was very sorry, because I couldn't help her in this case; the operation had led to peritonitis. She need a doctor. She died the following night. I cried, I was upset and angry. I had never carried a dead person, but that night, with the help of a woman (a relative of one of the patients), I carried this dead woman to the morgue. Following us was a little girl, who wept quietly.

When the war is over, we lived under the control of a strict government from the North. Things were in a state of confusion. We worked, but received no pay for three months. Then we got in kind, token payment: rice, sugar, toothbrushes, noodles, and tobacco, followed by a little money, enough only to buy a kilo of meat for the four of us. I couldn't bear to see the children's ribs showing through their shirts, so selling our possessions was the answer.

One week after the fall of Saigon, the Communists took my husband away for re-education. In order not to put too much of a burden on my shoulders, my mother-in-law left us; she went back to Saigon and stayed with my husband's brother. Many months and years went by. My husband and many other husbands were still being held in a place they - the Communists- called Re-education Camp, but which was really a prison. They were many camps like that one, from the north to the south of Vietnam. Some families of war prisoners have been forced to move out of town and rebuild their lives somewhere else, in places bearing beautiful name like "new economic zones" with no electricity, no water supply and only dry rocky soil. People must use their bare hands to work the soil to grow some food. News of people dying from lack of medical attention in case of malaria, typhoid fever and dysentery, were rampant; the situation was chaotic. Along with it was malnutrition, which only made things worse.

All male doctors were sent to re-education camps. The rest of us must go every night to a meeting for brainwashing. Going to the meeting at night was a must, no matter your family and circumstances. If someone was absent from the meeting, they must have a very good reason for it or they would be criticized in front of everyone at the next meeting Criticism and self-criticism would drive people insane. All of us must write a self-incriminating statement and present it to the government for consideration, which made me feel really humiliated. A large web of secret police spread out into every corner of everyone's life, making sure that anything or any idea against the new regime was reported. People couldn't even trust their own children or spouses…

A propaganda system of loudspeakers perched on tree branches and street corners was installed all over the country to brainwash its citizens. At 5 o'clock in the morning they open their big mouths and woke everybody up to pour on

them their news and speeches and lessons. No-one dared to complain. Walls had ears.

Teachers and school children swept the street and schoolyards before they went into the classroom for lessons. All children wore a red scarf around their neck and became Ho-Chi-Minh Youths, who would sing songs worshipping Ho and his party. Some songs were full of hatred towards the Americans and South Vietnamese people who had worked for the past government. Most young children came from families that had a father, brother or uncle that had been taken away by the Communists. They were taught to hate their own fathers. I was very worried for the younger generation. I really was, because my children were among them. Seeing people carrying blood-red flags walking the streets in groups, celebrating the communists' victory almost every day, was uncomfortable for me. There was a star printed on the red flag that looked like a bullet hole through a heart. Everywhere I went, I only saw red. I felt an intense dizziness. Anxiety took over our lives completely. Especially when night fell, because the dominant people capable of interrogating and torturing innocent citizens at night, and people just don't know who going to be next. News of people who'd got away and settled safely in some other part of the world made everyone dream of freedom. I nourished my own dream, as so many others. Then one dark night we, the children and I, fled the country by boat, together with many others. In the darkness of the sea I prayed to God in all His might to help us go through this ordeal. I carried in my heart the shattered feeling of a lost person who has left a war-torn country in search for a land of peace together with the guilt for leaving my husband still in the hands of the Communists, to get on with a hard life on his own if he was ever released

Where was the land of peace? We honestly didn't know. But we must get away first. I knew there were dangers, as I had heard of many people who had done this before us and ended up in jails or lost their lives at sea. We were stopped at some Malaysian and Indonesia ports. But for some unknown reason we kept on going until we arrived in the port of Darwin. We asked the authorities for permission to land. We stayed on board and waited. How long was the waiting period? If my memory doesn't fail me, it was two days of longing and expectation. We were then accepted by the authorities to stay in the beautiful country of Australia. I cannot describe my feelings at that moment. I know only that I was happy, very happy. I was dizzy, walking in zigzag on a land of peace for the first time since the exodus started nearly one month before.

When I put my head on a pillow that night in a haven I could smell the scent of peace and freedom rising around me, filling my mind, taking away my sleep. My children were soundly asleep. I knew that from then on, they wouldn't have to take a broom with them to sweep the street when they went to school any more. They wouldn't have to sing songs that stabbed people in the heart. I wouldn't have to worry any more that someone would knock on my door at night, questioning me for this and that for no reason at all.

Thank God we were safe in the land of peace. This was a land where people came from different countries, mixed with other cultures, worked side by side in the same place, and talked to each other in the same language- English- I was grateful for this harmony. I would push away any barricade, confront any misfortune, and work very hard without any complaint. I was thirty-three years of age, at the peak of a woman's life. I had been forced to fight, so I'd fight like a bull for my family's survival.

Dã-Thảo Quế Trần,
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A piece of beautiful nature in the Land of Peace