



Khaira Ledeyo's story of

Nhan



My mom's name is Nhan Thi Nguyen. She was born in North Vietnam in 1931. She grew up in a small village a few hours from Hanoi called Ha Dong. Her father's last name was Nguyen and her mother's was Dang.

This is her story as I recall it from my memory of stories she told me and also from various accounts of her life by my older siblings. As she is now in her late stage of Alzheimer's I have no way to verify these details with her.

She was the fourth or fifth girl in a family of nine girls and one boy, who was also the youngest of the clan. My mom recalls how she was a lazy child, a dreamer and a tomboy. She was not considered pretty, either. She was also a little over-particular, making a point of washing her chopsticks and bowls separately from the rest of the family's and insisting upon storing them apart from the rest, as well.

She was first married in her early twenties. When the Vietnam War began in 1954, she was pregnant with her first son. Her husband left to South Vietnam to avoid the draft in the North. He took all their valuables and went into hiding; they planned to re-unite as soon as possible.

My mom soon went after him, leaving her family and village for the first time. She worked her way south, following word that he was safe, hoping to find him. She was late in her pregnancy, and somewhere in Central Vietnam when she admitted herself into a hospital and gave birth to Tuan Ngoc Le.

In Vietnam, hospitals were not responsible for the food or personal care of patients. Being alone, she had no food or help. The woman next to her asked her husband to bring an extra portion of food for my mom, at mealtimes. She left the hospital with my brother and when they returned to the place she was living, she found that it had burnt down. All her belongings and her stock of rice had burnt with it.

She sought work in an orphanage so that Tuan could stay near her throughout the day. Eventually she left the orphanage. Somebody took pity on her and helped her to start selling vegetables on the street-side, using baskets that she would balance on her shoulder. She found that she was quite enterprising. After a short time she was ready to continue her journey south, following a rumor of her husband's whereabouts.

There is a story that tells how my mom was raped by a border official, or the man who told her he was a friend of her husband's and could take her to him. Either way, my mom was pregnant again. And when she finally arrived in the South, she was told that her husband had remarried and moved to the United States.

My mom settled in a seaside town called Vung Tau, a few hours away from Saigon. She began building her life again and continued to buy and sell in the marketplaces.

In Vietnam it was acceptable for men, whose wives did not bear them sons, to seek what is called "small wives". (It was acceptable to have a "small wife" for any reason at all, actually). One such man, apparently finding out that my mom was pregnant, thought that he could help my mom and also himself by offering to take her on as his "small wife". In this way, she could avoid a "bad reputation" and he could possibly have a son. The arrangement did not work out as my mom gave birth to a baby girl. Since it was also acceptable for men who took on "small wives" to abandon the woman if she could not bear him a son, he ended their agreement. She named her daughter Thu.

As the years passed, her abilities as businesswoman eventually had her excelling in buying and selling real estate as well as being the supplier to the kitchens of the U.S base in Vung Tau.

During this time, my mom really fell in love. But he was married. According to my sister's stories, he was well respected and well loved in the small town. They also chose not to make their affair public. She became pregnant and gave birth to another girl named Hien. Shortly after Hien was born, the love of her life died in a motorcycle accident.

My mom would rent rooms out of her properties and in the late 1960's an army officer of the South Vietnamese army came to ask her about a room. She married this man, named Trung Dung Le and had three more children with him – a daughter in 1968, a son in 1970 and, me, her last daughter, in 1972. Our names were Van, Ai and Huong.

My mom spent a lot of time in the marketplace. She would often buy cartloads of sea creatures or cages filled with birds, all meant to be bought and killed for food. She would then take them to a stretch of beach in the town and release the animals back into the water or into the sky. She loved releasing turtles.

In 1975, I was 3 when the U.S. Army pulled out of Vietnam. My family had a boat prepared with food and gear in preparation for our escape from the country. In the chaos of the time, our boat was stolen and we were left stranded. As the story goes, a short time later one of the boats heading out to sea turned and headed back toward the shore. The man in the boat told us that he had changed his mind and was coming back to be with his son, who had been left behind. He gave our family his boat and we escaped. This all happened at the same stretch of beach where my mom would bring the animals from market.

My eldest brother steered the boat through the pitch-black night while, under a thick blanket, my mom with her three smallest children, navigated with compass and flashlight hoping to keep the light hidden from pirates and Communist ships picking up boat people trying to escape. We survived, arriving in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and stayed in a refugee camp while our papers were processed for us to fly to Vancouver where my Dad and our Grandma were waiting.

We arrived in the winter. We lived in Vancouver for a year and then we moved to Edmonton.

My mom worked every single day until she retired. She worked cleaning restaurants, in mushroom factories, selling vegetables at the flea markets, and then opened up a pizza place in 1989, where she worked even harder.

When she was home she would do things like spend hours picking out fresh pomegranate seeds for us kids, so that we could have the luxury of simply scooping them from a bowl in heaping spoonfuls.

I remember only once her buying something for herself which was not a practical necessity: a gold chain with a large jade, heart-shaped pendant detailed with tiny curly leaves and stem. She never wore make-up except when I or my sister would force her to try some lipstick.

One of her proudest moments was buying a new car – a white Chevrolet Celebrity and, in 1984, she bought a house. However, she was mostly very frugal and used to tell us:

“For every grain of rice you leave uneaten at the bottom of your bowl, you will come back one lifetime as a maggot!”

When Vietnam first re-opened its doors to overseas Vietnamese and tourists in 1989, my mom and my eldest brother, Tuan, returned to Vietnam and searched for Thu and Hien, my sisters who had stayed behind in Vietnam. After they found the girls, my mom returned to Vietnam almost every year. She was able to see her family in the North again, after she had seemingly disappeared almost 40 years before.

In 1996, when she was 65 years old, she moved to Vancouver to be with me. She sold the house in Edmonton in 1998.

In Vancouver, she spent her days with friends or at the Vietnamese Buddhist Temple on Commercial and 1st. She was well loved and very popular and respected among her friends and community. She was a very devout Buddhist. She was a joker among her friends. She was still physically and mentally very strong. I didn't notice the signs of her becoming ill.

In 2001, after a frightening trip alone to Vietnam, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. As her mind became weaker, I remember moments of heartbreaking beauty, like when she once called me to the window with such excitement.

"Look, look, Huong! There is something up in the sky! What is it?"

It was the full moon.

She continued to live with me in Vancouver until it was no longer possible for me to care for her at home. My sister, Van, and I decided to bring her back to Vietnam for a final chance to see her family while she was still in the early stages of her disease. She stayed there for five years, first in Hanoi and then in Vung Tau, to be cared for day to day by Hien, and hired caregivers. In October, 2005 we brought her back to Vancouver and she lives with me again.

She does not remember our names, nor can she play with her newest grandson but, in her eyes, I can see so much of the way she was and the way she lived. She taught me, best of all, about compassion. My favorite memory of the way my mother used to be is of all of us kids in the backseat of the rickety old van, heading to the outskirts of Edmonton. On the metal floor of the van was a large turtle, ready to snap at our feet, which we kept tucked up high the entire journey. We were going to release the turtle back into the wild. We arrived in Devon and my mom carried it to the edge of a marsh, lowered it into the water with a prayer, and watched it swim away. On the way home, she told us that it had turned around and nodded to her in thanks.