

MANI/PEDI

A True-Life Rags to Riches Story
from Boat to Beauty Salon

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SHE WRITES PRESS

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The famous words on the Statue of Liberty

*“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to
breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your
teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost
to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*
—Emma Lazarus

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Six Months Earlier

The knock on the door was strong and hard and even before Hieu opened it, she knew who stood on the other side of the front door of her parents' home. Her heart pounded, the way it always did when she came face-to-face with the Communist soldiers.

She held her breath as she approached, but she had no choice—she had to open it. Even though she was afraid, she had more fear of not opening it, knowing what they would do to her if she didn't.

When she pulled the door open, she was met with two men with hard stares and no smiles, just like all the others. "An invitation," one said as he shoved a paper into her hand.

She didn't have to look down to know what it was. An invitation was what they called it. An invitation to a town meeting. It wasn't an invitation, though, it was a demand to attend. No one had a choice. It was an invitation that could not be refused.

That night, Hieu, her sisters, and all the other women who lived on their block were crammed into the school hall, wilting in the heat and wondering what the news would be. The only one who was missing was Hieu's mother, Thi Ba. She never attended the meetings, always finding some reason for not attending. Tonight, she told the soldiers that she had a headache.

The meetings were all the same, the room filled with women since the men attended their meetings in the afternoon. The evenings were always reserved for the women, after taking care of their families.

The women waited, wondering what this meeting was going to be about. There was always a different subject, but what they were about to be told was shocking to them; tonight, they were the news.

A soldier stood at the front of the room, on an old stage where Hieu remembered children performing plays and concerts before the fall. Like the soldiers who'd come to her door, this one stood erect, hard, his glare so piercing, he filled everyone with fear even before he spoke his first word.

"We know all of your secrets," he said in a calm voice that made most of the women in the room tremble.

He was a tall man, taller than the average Vietnamese. He spoke with a slight accent that Hieu couldn't place. He moved in what looked like a slow march, from one end of the stage to the other.

"If you tell us what we already know," he paused, turned around, and walked in the other direction, "you will not be punished." Again, he stopped, turned around, then continued, "Now is your time to wipe your slate clean and start over."

He stopped again, but this time he faced the front and glared at all of them.

There was nothing but silence in the room.

"You know who is planning to escape. You know who is working in the black market."

Those were the words that finally even made Hieu tremble as she thought of her mother.

"You know who is hiding their connections to the pigs of the West. There are rewards for you if you tell us what you know. You and your family will not suffer." Another pause. "And remember, we already know."

The room was almost as silent as before, except Hieu heard the

shuffle of nervous feet as the women tried to figure out what the government knew. Then suddenly, a voice came from the back of the room.

“My neighbor has a boat.” It wasn’t loud, wasn’t soft, though Hieu could hear the way the woman’s voice quivered.

“Good. Good,” the soldier said, though he still did not smile. “You make your nation proud.”

That was all it took. Within seconds, the rest fell like dominoes.

“My auntie. She plots against the government.”

“My brother. He is trying to brainwash my children.”

“I think my friend works for the CIA. They keep secrets from us.”

The school hall became a minefield of information as women who were supposed to love their families, sacrificed even those they loved. Hieu stood there so afraid. It would be only a matter of time before her mother’s name was thrown into the fray. Then, her mother would disappear, too, just like the men and women who were being exposed at this meeting.

Nowhere was safe.

And that was only the first problem.

The major challenge was that the Communists followed an old Roman tradition. The government knew that the only way to quell revolt and to indoctrinate an angry populace was to use the power of love and family. After the unification of the country under Communist rule, the government encouraged good Communists from North Vietnam to marry men and women in the south, and then together have and raise good Communist children. The theory was that if the angry citizens of South Vietnam could fall in love with the enemy, the southerners would be far less likely to revolt against the government. Loving a Communist husband or wife and having faithful Communist children would quiet and possibly even convince the staunchest supporter of the West.

Never treat the conquered as “other.” Make them a part of you.

Hieu didn't want that for her children.

It was time to leave to leave her home country.



"There's a boat," Hieu's mother whispered one evening not too long after the town meeting. They were sitting on the floor with her younger sisters and her children, eating dinner.

Hieu froze at her mother's words. For a moment, she glanced around the modest Saigon home her parents shared with their family, including Hieu and her children. Hieu had been living with her parents since Tien had been sent away to work in the countryside. With her husband gone, staying with her mother and father was the only way Hieu could feed and take care of her children.

"There's space for your family," her mother continued, in a hushed tone. "There's space on the boat and it's your time. You, Tien, the kids. It's your time to leave."

This was how it had been since the fall of Saigon and those town meetings. Always hushed conversations, even between parents and children, because you never knew who was listening, you didn't know who you could trust since even family members were turning each other in. You had to be careful when discussing any kind of escape plans and leaving this Communist rule because there was always a high price to pay if you were caught.

Even with that, Hieu's mother, Thi Ba was always one of the first to know of the boats that were taking people away to a new life of freedom. It was because of Thi Ba's connection to the gold market that she had this knowledge. Thi Ba had been buying and selling gold on the black market since the fall of Saigon. The gold market came to her naturally; her husband had spent his career, before the fall, as a successful goldsmith. However, once the Communists came into rule, Hieu's father could no longer own his goldsmith shop. The

government owned and controlled everything that was sold in the country and so his shop had been closed immediately.

Although they could no longer work out of their own storefront, that didn't stop either one of Hieu's parents from buying and selling gold. They both knew the business, everything from determining the quality of gold to knowing where to find the best gold in the country. However, what Thi Ba had in addition to her knowledge of the business was her understanding of people. She was a people person, a people connector, and had great discernment, which was an asset living under that Communist regime. She knew who was safe, who was honest, who she could trust.

With the knowledge and her discernment, Thi Ba still found a way to sell gold. Her primary location was the open-air market. There, among the many vendors and shoppers, it was less likely that she would be caught by the Communists. It was still very risky, but walking through the crowded streets, she could blend in with the many people so that she wouldn't stand out, she wouldn't draw the attention of the police. Yet, the people in her village knew where to find her.

This was the reason why Thi Ba always knew when boats were leaving her country. The only way to secure passage was to have enough gold to pay the boat owner. So Thi Ba often made the connections between the boat owners and the people who wanted to escape.

Now, because of her parents, Hieu and her husband had the gold she needed for her family to leave their country.

Hieu thought about her mother's words: There's a boat.

Could this be the time for them to escape? Hieu knew that they had to leave one day. Not only did she want to leave because of her children, but she really had to do it because of Tien.

Her husband had been exiled to the countryside by the Communists because when they came into rule, Tien was immediately

a suspect. Tien was an educated man, just about to graduate from law school when Saigon fell. He had been told by the Communists that he could be a lawyer, but only if he went back to school to study Communist theory. He never did that.

So, he'd been given a menial government job monitoring farming output. It was thankless and monotonous work, but for the safety of his family, Tien knew he had no other choice. Well actually, there was a choice—he could have gone to a re-education camp, where he would have been good for no one.

Their lives had changed so drastically in the four years since the fall of Saigon, when he was a younger, aspiring attorney. Now, his life choices had been taken away. The only decision he had to make was to survive.

Hieu's life has been stunted as well. She had been just weeks away from graduating from high school when the rockets began to fly over their home. By the time the US embassy was evacuated, the schools had closed, and she never received her degree.

Now, she was a wife and a mother of two, but she was also part of a dying generation. Although she was still young, just in her early twenties, she was part of a generation that the government was trying to kill-off—not physically, but mentally. She was part of the last generation who studied the West, learned to speak English, aspired to attend a university and gain even more knowledge. She was the last to be educated without a steady diet of Communist theory.

The kind of education that she'd been given, the kind of thinking that had been encouraged in her classrooms, no longer existed. For those who were younger than Hieu, their education was much different. Children in Saigon could go to school, but the major focus of the state was indoctrination. Hieu's younger sisters spent most of their school hours learning about the power and greatness of the Communist state. Instead of history, they were given heavy doses of propaganda designed to transform them into good Communists.

Her sisters were taught to value the government above all, even above their families and even above themselves. They learned that families were not important at all. Everyone's primary obligation was to ensure the safety of the state. They were encouraged to spy on their family and friends. And they were constantly monitored, tracked, and carefully recorded. If they lived up to the expectations of the government, they were rewarded. Those children who did not—like Hieu's children, even though they weren't yet in school—had no chance of a future.

The state sponsored schools were training people to become robots, not free-thinking adults. It worked because the government created good Communists through separation and creating suspicion among loved ones.

This was not what Hieu nor Tien wanted for their children, and they were not alone. Thousands were fleeing the country. There were boats leaving all the time, taking refugees away to the West. An entire generation of Vietnamese were disappearing in the middle of the night.

There's space for your family.

More of Hieu's mother's words rang through her mind. Escaping was their only way to survive, their only chance of getting their life back. Before the fall of Saigon, she'd been a carefree teenager, discussing clothes, boys, and the latest gossip. Going shopping and getting manicures from the women in the market.

Now, she had to rely on her parents because there was no other way to support her two children. Finding a job and child care was impossible, since she and Tien had no intention of joining the Communist party. It was a decision they'd made even though they knew making that choice brought greater hardship because without joining the party, there were few opportunities.

Accepting communism would have given them a better life. Evidence of this was all around them. Childhood friends who joined

the party enjoyed trappings that were out of reach for Hieu and Tien. From their houses that were filled with beautiful, European furniture that she'd only seen in the homes of American servicemen, to the clothes her friends wore and the freedoms they had—those who embraced the communist rule lived a far different, a far better life. Still, Hieu kept those friendships if only to remind her of life before the fall.

It's your time. You, Tien, the kids. It's your time.

Her mother was right, if for no other reason than Tien couldn't last much longer in exile. The government's goal was to break men's spirits by keeping them away from their loved ones and having them perform menial and tedious work. It was the perfect way to stop insurgency, and it worked for most.

Hieu missed her husband, and their children ached for their father. Escaping would be their solution, but it wouldn't be easy.

"Okay, Ma," Hieu said. "We will get the gold. We will do this. We will leave Vietnam."