

*A Refugee Family's Miraculous
Story of Loss, Rescue, and Redemption*

W H E R E

T H E

W I N D

a memoir

L E A D S

VINH CHUNG
WITH TIM DOWNS

*Foreword by Richard Stearns
President, World Vision U.S.*

Twenty-Eight

ACROSS THE PACIFIC

WHEN MY FAMILY LEFT OUR HOME IN THE MEKONG Delta of Vietnam, none of us had ever seen the ocean, another country, a cargo ship, an elevator, or even a bathtub—so imagine what it was like for us to board a 747.

The date assigned for our departure from 25 Hawkins Road was October 25, 1979. On that day we dressed in our best moldy clothes and our flashy new sunglasses, loaded up all the treasures my father had shrewdly purchased in Singapore, and boarded a bus for Paya Lebar Airport, about ten miles away. Since we were the last ones to leave the camp, no one was there to say good-bye to or bid us a fond farewell, but we felt no disappointment because we were going to America.

Paya Lebar Airport was sprawling and modern, big enough for even the Concorde to land, but the airport itself was nothing compared to what we saw when we stepped out onto the tarmac and beheld our waiting transport. The 747 was even longer and taller than *Seasweep*, and when they told us it could fly, we knew anything was possible. The 747 had room for more than four hundred passengers, but when we boarded the plane, we were surprised to find we were the only ones there. The plane's cabin was the size of a subway tunnel, and the children all ran around until a flight

attendant pointed to our seats to let us know it was time to buckle up for takeoff.

You would think my brothers and sisters and I would have been frightened to fly for the first time, but we didn't give it a second thought. After all the wonders we had already witnessed, we just took for granted that a 190-ton chunk of metal could hurtle across the sky at five hundred miles per hour carrying us in its belly. Why not? If the pilot had told us we were going to make a quick stop on the moon, we probably would have believed him.

Since no one spoke our language, no one could tell us how long our flight would be, so we were surprised when the plane started down again, less than an hour after takeoff. We were landing in Malaysia—we just couldn't seem to get away from that place. In Malaysia a large group of refugees boarded the plane and joined us. This time when we took off, we looked out the windows and saw water below us. We knew then we were finally on our way.

Actually, we were only on our way to Japan, where we had to refuel before making the long hop across the Pacific to the West Coast. The flight from Malaysia to Japan took about seven hours. No additional refugees boarded there, so as soon as the plane was refueled, we took off again. Everything about flying was fun for us, but the best part of all was the food—they kept bringing it to us on little plastic trays. One of the entrees was pizza, which my father had never seen before. He took one look at it and said, "What's that mess?" But the rest of us loved it. I don't think my brother Bruce would have cared if we never landed.

The flight from Japan to the United States took almost eleven hours; we landed at Travis Air Force Base, about fifty miles north-east of San Francisco. Due to the bizarre mathematics involved in flying east across the International Date Line, we actually arrived in America five hours before we took off from Japan, which our minds found fascinating but our bodies found unconvincing. The clock on the wall told us that we had been flying for only six hours, but our exhausted bodies insisted that we had really been flying for twenty-one.

For refugees arriving in America from Southeast Asia, Travis Air Force Base served the same purpose Ellis Island had for immigrants from Europe a generation before. At one point in time, five hundred refugees were arriving at Travis every day to meet with immigration officials, make sure all their papers were in order, and most important of all, find out for the first time where they would be living in America.

We were given boxed lunches when we arrived, and each one was packed with exotic American delicacies we had never tasted: fried chicken, a biscuit—none of us knew what it was—and even a big, beautiful red apple. An apple for each of us—we couldn't believe it. In Vietnam an apple was a luxury that would have been cut into small slices and savored by an entire family. Everything tasted so good; we couldn't have felt more welcome if the governor of California had shown up to shake our hands.

The refugees from our plane gathered in a group while a Vietnamese-speaking translator announced each family's assignment, and my father noticed that regardless of the location, the translator always added the same comment:

“Oh, that's a wonderful place. You'll like it there.”

The translator wasn't just trying to encourage us; that was what he believed. He told my father later, “In America, to make money is difficult, but to starve is even more difficult.” In other words: “You're in America now. How bad can it be?” Most refugees had very little knowledge of America before their arrival; their goal was only to get here, and after that one city or state was the same as another. They were all just names on a map to us, and the only names that sounded familiar were the places that had large Vietnamese populations, such as Los Angeles, Houston, Philadelphia, and New York. Those were the assignments everyone hoped for though no one had the slightest idea what the climate was like there or whether the landscape would look anything like Vietnam. Those things didn't really matter because for an unemployed refugee with no language skills, community meant a lot more than geography or climate.

We finally received our assignment: Kansas City, Missouri—though the translator pronounced it *Misery*. We had no idea what the

word meant, so we were elated—we were going to live in Misery. But we had barely begun to celebrate when we were informed that, for some reason, our assignment had been changed. We were not going to spend our lives in Misery after all; we were going to Fort Smith, Arkansas.

Where?

After completing all the necessary paperwork, we were taken by bus to a small hotel near the San Francisco airport, where we were told we would spend the night before flying out the next day. The ten of us were assigned to a room with one king-size bed, which looked luxurious to us after our empty room at 25 Hawkins Road. My brother Thai turned on the television and saw the first of many wonders we would see in America: a commercial that showed slices of bacon flying through the air from a frying pan to a plate. Who would have known—in America even the food could fly.

My father had just taken off his shirt when there was a knock at the door. It was the same man who had just dropped us off.

“Let’s go,” he said to us. “We have a plane for you now.”

We were rushed to the San Francisco airport and told we would be taking an American Airlines flight to some strange place called Dallas. We had never heard of Dallas before, but we liked the name of the airline and remembered it because the flight attendants gave us all little plastic wings to wear on our jackets.

While we were hurrying to the gate in San Francisco, a strange man stopped me, smiled, and slipped a piece of paper into my jacket pocket. At the gate I said to my father, “Look what someone gave me,” and pulled from my pocket an American hundred-dollar bill—another mysterious act of compassion by a perfect stranger.

It took another three hours to fly to Dallas, and the moment we stepped off the plane and into the terminal, we were told that we had to hurry to catch another flight at the opposite end of the airport. A gate agent pointed the way, and we hurried as fast as a family of ten could—which wasn’t very fast at all because Anh and Hon were almost two years old by then, and after twenty-four hours cooped up on an airplane, they insisted on walking while my parents insisted on

carrying them. We must have made quite a sight: ten frustrated and exhausted Chinese arguing with each other in Cháo zhōu while we hurried across the airport like a column of army ants.

The terminals in Dallas were shaped like two half circles with a long straightaway in between, which made us feel like hamsters on a treadmill. We managed to get lost once along the way, and that made my mother very anxious because the closer we got to our final destination, the greater her fear that something would go wrong at the last minute—an emotion I would feel many times over the next years. We finally found the correct gate and boarded the flight—our fifth for the trip and, mercifully, our last one.

Our final flight lasted less than an hour, and with every mile our anticipation grew because our next stop would be more than just another connection—it would be our new home. Each step of our journey had presented us with another wonder: Paya Lebar with its two-mile runways; the flying cargo ship called the 747; a flight across the world's widest ocean; the sprawling city of San Francisco glistening below us; and the Dallas airport with its Texas-size terminals. If those were just the wonders along the way, what would our final destination be like? It had been almost five months since we left Vietnam, and we had journeyed more than eleven thousand miles. At last we were coming to the end of the Silk Road, and we were about to see the Imperial City of Fort Smith, Arkansas, for the very first time.

It was late October, and we arrived around eight o'clock at night: it was dark and cold when we stepped off the plane. The temperature had reached eighty degrees that day, but it would drop to thirty-nine before the night was over; that was the coldest temperature any of us had ever experienced, and we were wearing only light jackets. The Fort Smith airport was just one small building with a single door marked A on one side and B on the other; after successfully navigating DFW, we had no trouble finding our way inside.

The night was cold, but the reception we received inside the terminal more than made up for it. Our family had been sponsored by a small Lutheran church on the south side of Fort Smith, and fifteen of

the church's members showed up that night to welcome us. Neither party could understand a single word the other was saying, but our grateful smiles and their welcoming handshakes covered just about everything that needed to be said.

When Vietnamese refugees first began to pour into the United States in 1975, nine voluntary agencies, or *volags*, helped to find individuals or organizations who would agree to sponsor them. One of those volags was the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service in New York, which contacted the pastor of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Fort Smith, a gracious and compassionate man named Fred Hagemeyer. Fred did a lot in those early years to help those first refugees adjust to their new lives in America, and when Fred and his congregation of 160 at Redeemer Lutheran heard about our situation, they agreed to do what no one else would: take on the ten-member Chung family.

It was the sponsor's responsibility to find housing for us; provide enough food, toiletries, and household items to get us started; and orient us to our new community. Those were the basics, but some sponsors took it upon themselves to help register their refugees for school, shop for clothes, find employment, and even give English lessons. The range of a sponsor's duties was really up to them, but anything they chose to do took a lot of work when they were doing it for a family of ten.

From the airport they escorted us to a waiting luxury stretch limousine—at least it seemed like one to us. In reality it was a twelve-passenger conversion van with swiveling captain's chairs, wooden cup holders, and most impressive of all, wall-to-wall shag carpet. Shag carpet is hard for some people to appreciate, but after three months on a bare wood floor, we thought it was like sitting on 1,000-count Egyptian cotton sheets.

We all piled into the van, and the man who was driving handed us each an enormous chocolate chip cookie. I bit into mine and gagged. I wasn't used to eating things so sweet, and to me it tasted terrible. Jenny liked hers, but I collected the cookies from everyone

who didn't and left them in a neat little stack with a single bite missing from each one.

We were driven to our new home, a three-bedroom, two-bath house where we would be allowed to live rent-free for the next six months, courtesy of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church. The house was located on South Seventeenth Street in a spot now occupied by a parking lot. When we pulled up in front of the house, my brothers and sisters and I scrambled out of the van and ran to the door while the grown-ups took their time. The house looked palatial; 1,100 square feet of space for only ten people—that was almost four times larger than our room at 25 Hawkins Road. Such luxury—did everyone in America live like this?

The man who drove let us into the house and handed us the key—and with a warm good-bye that we didn't understand, he left us to settle in. The house was completely empty except for a folding table and ten folding chairs leaning against a wall. My mother and sisters headed straight for the kitchen, which was decorated in a color that can only be described as guacamole-gone-bad. But Jenny loved that kitchen because on the farm she had to cook with leaves and wood and charcoal; in this kitchen all she had to do was turn a plastic dial and an electric element glowed orange-red—and there was no ash to clean out when she was done cooking. The kitchen came outfitted with flatware and dishes and even a set of beautiful red cook pots—everything we could possibly need.

There was a refrigerator, too, and when we opened it, we found that the church had thoughtfully stocked it with food. They left plenty of milk for the eight children, but we couldn't drink milk because we were lactose intolerant. In Vietnam children drank only goat's milk or powdered milk, and adults didn't drink milk at all. The church left beef for us in the freezer, but Asians rarely ate beef because the taste and smell were too strong. There was canned tomato sauce and canned green beans, which was a real novelty to us because we had never eaten canned vegetables in Vietnam; they tasted so bad that Yen still can't stand the taste of canned green beans.

The church was even thoughtful enough to leave five pounds of rice, which probably would have lasted a year for any American family but would last only about three days for my family. It was the wrong kind of rice too. American rice was hard and had a different texture than we were used to. My family came to call it “Sam’s rice” because it was the kind that was always sold in big sacks at Walmart and Sam’s Club.

By the time we finished exploring the house, it was almost eleven o’clock. My mother decided it was time for bed, so we divided up bedrooms. There was a master bedroom with its own bath on the right, which my mother and father claimed for themselves and shared with me and my two little brothers. The other two bedrooms were on the left side of the house and shared a bathroom between them. My brothers and sisters were supposed to divide those two bedrooms, with the girls in one and the boys in the other. But there was a problem: the back bedroom had glow-in-the-dark owl stickers on the walls, and in Vietnam the owl was considered an evil omen. No one wanted to sleep with an evil owl glaring down at them, so Jenny, Bruce, Yen, Nikki, and Thai all crowded into the remaining bedroom that, for some odd reason, had carpet not only on the floor but also on the walls. Since there were no beds in any of the rooms, we all just curled up on the floor, and since we didn’t know how to turn on the heat, the house was cold, so we just snuggled up together, closed our eyes, and waited for sleep to come.

Unfortunately eleven o’clock in Fort Smith was six in the morning in Singapore, so our hours were completely reversed—it was time to wake up, not go to sleep, and we were still too excited to sleep anyway. We ended up playing most of the night, and when exhaustion finally overtook us the next morning, we just dropped wherever we were and went to sleep.