

## ENGLISH: CREATIVE WRITING

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“Mum, why did we have to leave? Weren’t we happy back then, when we were in Vietnam?”

My mum just sat there, crying. At the sight of me approaching, she turned away.

“Sweetie, Mummy is busy at the moment. Please go do something else.”

She didn’t seem busy at all, not with all that crying. It was obvious that she wanted to avoid answering my question, considering how many times she told me to go do something else when I tried questioning her. Probably a hundred times. Maybe more. What confused me was why we left when life was perfect then, but what confused me more was why she tries to avoid answering me like I’m asking her a forbidden question. I just don’t get why.

I still remember clearly what it was like back then. Back then, standing in our tiny village on the other side of the world we led a peaceful and simple life, nothing to worry or care about. I would have friends to play with every day in the neighbourhood and I would have complete freedom. As everyone spoke Vietnamese, I could understand when people talked to me. I could run around the streets and swim in the river all day long. I felt at home. But good things never lasted forever.

The utopia ended when one night, my mum frantically pulled everyone out of bed as if the apocalypse was approaching, telling us that she would explain everything later. She led us to a boat roughly nailed together which made me wonder how it still held together. On the boat, I tried to question my mum, but all she did was she covered my mouth with her hand, saying that if we weren’t quiet, we would be dead. Why would we be dead? Why were we fleeing from our home? Questions kept circling my head. Did my mum do something wrong? Was she in debt? Even till today, I still don’t know.

I still remember after a while on the boat, we were supposedly rescued by what I was told to be the Australian navy. They brought us to a foreign country, Australia, where it felt the streets were uncomfortably clean and the climate was unusually cold compared to back home. Whilst we were in what I was later told to be a detention centre, I felt very alienated there. No one spoke a word of Vietnamese and we all had to fight over food. Back in Vietnam we had all we wanted, now we struggled to even get what we needed. I hated this place.

“Can’t you answer me, mum? Why are you trying to avoid answering the question?”

“Sweetie, mummy will tell you later.”

There she goes again, avoiding my question. She gathers all her energy, turns away from me and drags herself to pick up the phone. I opened my mouth to ask, but instinct told me not to, knowing that this was not a good situation for that. As I continued to eavesdrop, I found out she was talking to uncle and something about Malaysia and Vietnam. At the mentioning of Vietnam, my mum burst into tears and continued crying incessantly. I wanted to ask her what had happened, but I know there’d be no clear answer. I was guessing that uncle was in Malaysia, hopefully safe. Thinking about extended family and my home village made me feel very homesick and isolated.

As my trail of thoughts stuttered to an end, my mum finished the call and now was staring at me with those red eyes. It was hard to tell whether the red was from anger or from all that crying. She still has that expression on her face as she had since she started the call. Before she exited the room, I couldn’t hold my curiosity in and launched another barrage of questions.

“Mum... did something happen in Vietnam? Where is uncle? Is he safe?”

She turned around, braced herself and opened her mouth but instead of the answer I so desperately wanted coming out of her mouth, a sigh took its place. Maybe too many questions confused her. Or she's collecting her thoughts now for the answer that will answer all those questions stuck within my storage of questions.

"Listen sweetie, mummy is not in the mood to talk about that. Maybe later. Go practise your English now and impress mummy later."

And once again, she runs away without answering my question. Seeing how she is now, I chose not to press on and left her alone. Maybe I can find the answer somewhere else. Obeying my mum, I decided to watch television in hopes of improving my English. I barely made out simple words here and there but I could never seem to understand the meaning of the sentence. Some cartoon called Batman was just finishing its credits and what seemed like the news stories followed up. Maybe they'll know the answers to my questions. The first few words I could understand from the news reporter were 'Good Afternoon', 'news' and 'Vietnam'. Within seconds of the greeting, graphic images of my hometown sprung before me. Corpses and blood flooded the river I once swam in, an armada of tanks crushing through whatever was in their path and the innocent villagers being massacred. Those still alive were held captive in prisons far worse than the detention centre. My mouth gaped in horror at the images that flickered before me. This was more than enough as my answer to all those questions I've wondered about.

Inside, I felt the safe haven of Vietnam was no longer home to me.