

The Hopes and Dreams Series  
Vietnamese-Americans

# The Family from Vietnam

A story based on history



Second Edition

**Tana Reiff**

Illustrations by Tyler Stiene

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The cover and illustrations are by Tyler Stiene. The book was set and designed by Tana Reiff, consulting with A.A. Burrows, using the Adobe *Century Schoolbook* typeface for the text. This is a digital adaptation of one of the most popular faces of the twentieth century. Century's distinctive roman and italic fonts and its clear, dark strokes and serifs were designed, as the name suggests, to make schoolbooks easy to read. The display font used on the cover and titles is a 21st-century digital invention titled Telugu. It is designed to work on all digital platforms and with Indic scripts. Telugu is named for the Telugu people in southern India and their widely spoken language. This is a simple, strong, and interesting sans serif display font.

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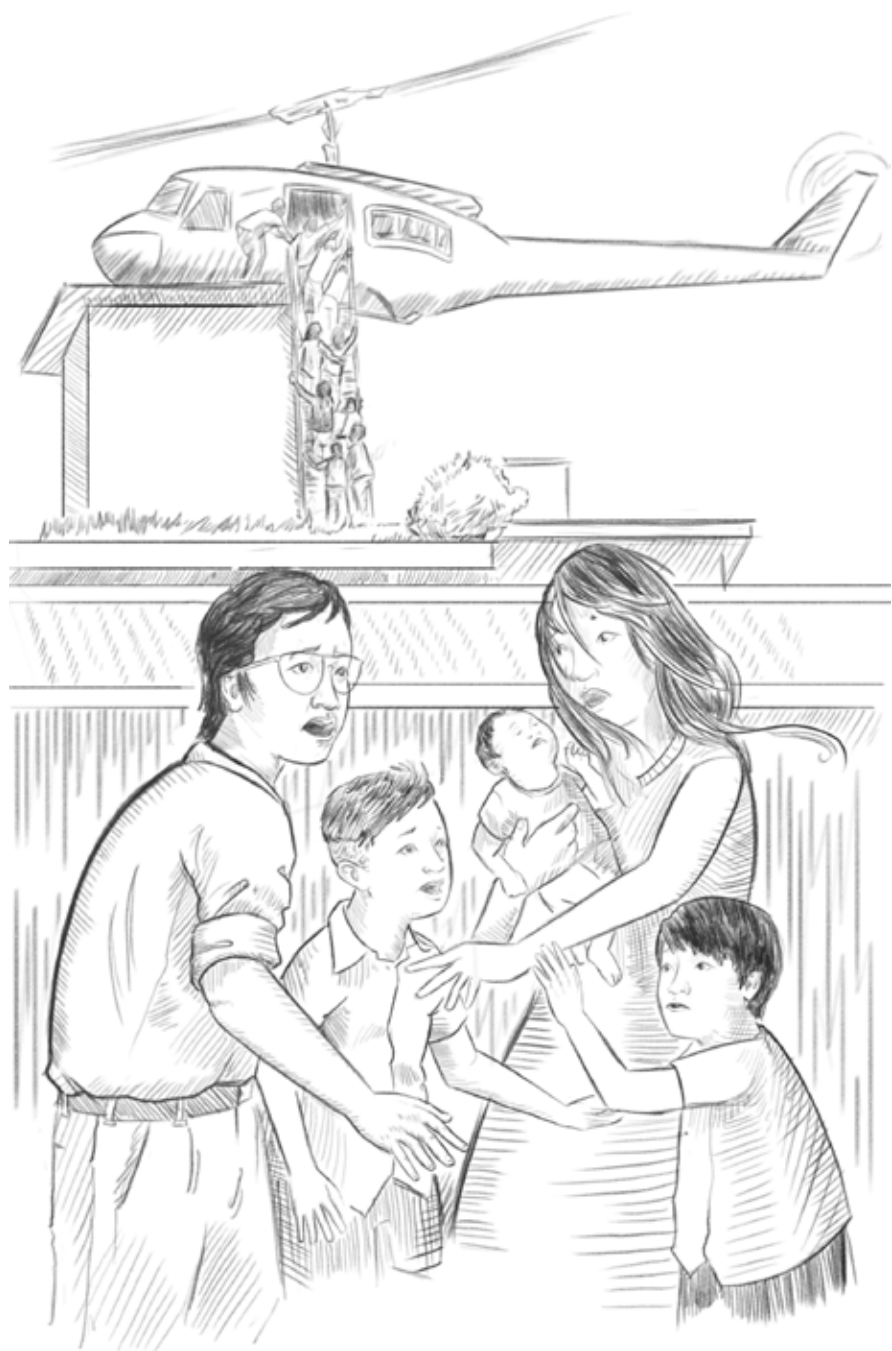
## The Hopes and Dreams Series

by Tana Reiff

The Magic Paper (Mexican-Americans)  
For Gold and Blood (Chinese-Americans)  
Nobody Knows (African-Americans)  
Little Italy (Italian-Americans)  
Two Hearts (Greek-Americans)  
Hungry No More (Irish-Americans)  
Sent Away (Japanese-Americans)  
A Different Home (Cuban-Americans)  
The Family from Vietnam (Vietnamese-Americans)

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# 1 Time to Leave

A Village in Vietnam  
April 29, 1975

In their small house,  
the Nguyen family waited.  
The parents, Mai and Set,  
watched the war on TV.  
They saw other villages  
burned to the ground.  
They saw many people  
being killed.

The war in Vietnam  
had been going on  
for many, many years.  
Now, at last,  
it looked as if  
it was coming to an end.  
But not a happy ending  
for South Vietnam.  
The North Vietnamese  
were heading for Saigon,  
the capital of South Vietnam.

If the North Vietnamese  
took Saigon,  
the war would be over.  
The Communists  
would take over.

The Americans  
were helping people  
get out of the country.  
People were leaving  
by boat,  
by plane,  
by helicopter.

Mai and Set  
did not want to leave.  
South Vietnam  
was their home.  
They had their house.  
They had good jobs.  
Mai was a teacher.  
Set was a doctor.  
They had money  
in the bank.

And they had three children.  
The older boy's name  
was Vinh.  
The second boy  
was Bao.  
The little girl's name  
was Thi.  
She was not much more  
than a baby.

    If they stayed,  
they might be killed.  
Set's uncle  
worked for the Americans.  
That put the whole family  
on the wrong side  
of the Communists.

    Outside their house  
they saw neighbors  
in the street.  
Something was happening.  
Then, Bang! Bang! Bang!  
on the door.

Set looked at his wife.  
Mai looked back at him.  
There were no words.  
Only fear in their eyes.  
Set opened the door.  
There stood his uncle.  
The uncle's car  
sat out front,  
its engine running.

“It is time to leave,”  
said the uncle.  
“Now!  
You each may take  
two bags.  
My car is running.  
Let's go!  
Now!  
Hurry!”

Mai and Set  
had hoped  
that this day  
would never come.  
But their bags were packed.



They were as ready  
as they could be.

Mai, Set, and Vinh  
each picked up two bags.  
The bags were heavy.  
Bao and Thi  
were too little  
to carry them.

“Where are we going?”  
Set asked his uncle.

“To Saigon,”  
the uncle said.  
“Tan Son Nhut air base  
has been bombed.  
No planes can fly.  
Instead, we must go  
to the American embassy  
in Saigon.  
Helicopters are there,  
on the embassy roof.  
They are taking people  
to ships out at sea.”

Set turned  
to his uncle.  
“What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me,”  
said the uncle.  
“Give me your house key.  
And give me  
your bank numbers.  
I will take care of business.  
And then I will get out.”

Set did  
as his uncle asked.  
Then the family  
with their bags  
piled into the uncle’s car.

The drive into Saigon\*  
took 30 minutes.  
The family  
would never forget  
what they saw there.  
People and cars  
filled the streets.

\* In 1976, Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

Scared people.  
Crying people.  
People with heavy bags  
on their backs.  
People pushing their way  
toward the American embassy.  
People looking up  
at a helicopter  
on the roof  
of the embassy.

The helicopter lifted  
off the roof,  
into the sky.  
Then another helicopter  
took its place  
on the roof.  
One after another,  
the helicopters  
flew in and out.

The Nguyen family  
waited in the car.

They watched  
as the guards  
turned people away.  
They had no papers.  
There was no way  
they could get close  
to the embassy  
without papers.

Set's uncle  
got out of the car.  
The others  
waited for him  
for two hours.

Then they saw their uncle  
walking toward the car.  
He waved his arm  
and opened the car door.  
"You can go now!"  
he called.

Set, Mai, and the children  
got out of the car.  
Uncle took the wheel.  
“Good luck!”  
he called to them  
as he turned  
the car around.

The guards  
waved them through.  
They became  
part of the crowd  
as they made their way  
toward the embassy.

Name pronunciations:

Nguyen: “win”

Mai: “my”

Vinh: “ving”

Bao: “bough”

Thi: “tea”



## 2 The Airlift

The five Nguyens  
pushed toward the embassy  
with the crowd.

“Stay together!  
Stay together!”  
Set kept saying.

Mai carried little Thi  
tied to her back.  
She held a bag on each arm.  
Set held Bao and two bags.  
Vinh, the older boy,  
held two bags.

At last they were close  
to the embassy.  
But the gate was closed.  
So they climbed the wall.

“It’s too much!”  
Mai called out to Set.

“I can’t hold all of this!  
I will fall!”

“Drop a bag!”  
Set called to her.

One of Mai’s bags  
fell to the ground.  
She pulled tight  
on the child pack  
on her back.  
Little Thi cried.  
Mai looked around  
at the girl’s face.  
When she turned her head,  
the other bag fell.  
She kept on climbing.

All five Nguyens  
reached the top of the wall.  
One at a time,  
all five of them  
jumped to the ground.

“Give me Bao!”  
she called to Set.

“I can hold him now.”  
Set handed over the little boy  
to his mother.

Then they waited  
inside the embassy grounds.  
Every ten minutes  
a helicopter landed.  
It quickly filled with people.  
Then it flew off.  
The helicopters were very loud.  
They covered their ears  
and waited their turn.

The U.S. Marines  
let the Nguyens  
come inside the embassy.  
They went up the stairs  
to the roof.

A helicopter sat ready.  
A ladder went  
from the roof  
to the helicopter.



Marines pulled people  
from the ladder  
into the helicopter.

Mai with the two little ones  
were ahead of Set and Vinh.  
A Marine reached out  
for Mai's arm.  
He pulled her and the children  
into the helicopter.

Inside, the helicopter  
was packed with people.  
The helicopter blades  
began to spin faster.  
The engine got louder.  
The door slammed shut.

Mai looked around.  
She tried to look out  
over the crowd.  
She looked at every face.  
"My husband and son!"  
Mai called out.  
"Set! Vinh!"

But it was no use.  
No one could hear her.  
The helicopter lifted off  
into the air.

So there she was.  
On an American helicopter  
full of Vietnamese people.  
Over the South China Sea.  
Carrying two small children.  
Without her husband  
and her older son.  
No bags.  
Nothing to eat or drink.  
Lost in time and space.

*Goodbye, Vietnam,*  
Mai said to herself.  
She told herself  
to be strong.

The next day  
tanks rolled into Saigon.  
And then the war was over.



### **3 Out to Sea**

The helicopter  
flew only 20 miles.  
It landed  
on a U.S. Navy ship  
in the South China Sea.

All the people  
got out of the helicopter.  
Then the Navy men  
pushed the helicopter  
off the ship,  
into the sea.  
It couldn't go back  
to Saigon,  
and there was no room  
for the helicopters  
on the ship.

The ship headed out  
into the Pacific Ocean.

It would be at sea  
for six days.  
The people on board  
had little food and water.  
The sun  
beat down  
on the open deck.  
The air was cool  
only at night.

Mai felt sick  
most of the time.  
And she could not sleep.  
Her thoughts  
kept her awake.  
She tried  
not to worry.  
She had always tried  
to live one day at a time.  
But she had so much time  
to think.

She thought about  
how nice Vietnam had been  
before the war.

Her children  
had never known those days.  
She thought about  
her mother and father.  
They had been killed  
in the war.  
She thought about the school  
where she had taught.  
It was gone now.  
She thought about her house.  
She would never  
see it again.

Little Thi was crying.  
“Don’t cry, my baby,”  
said Mai.  
“Don’t be afraid.  
Your mother is here  
to keep you safe.”

Mai’s words  
were not her thoughts.  
She was very afraid.  
She had never been  
on a ship before.

And her husband and a son  
were not with her.  
She had two children  
to care for.  
She did not want them  
to know she was afraid.  
She smiled at them  
and hid her fear.

She thought about  
Set and Vinh.  
If only the family  
could be together.  
Everything would be  
so much better.  
Where were they?  
Mai hoped  
they would meet up  
when the ship  
reached land.

She did not know  
that Set and Vinh  
were on another ship.  
And that ship  
was going to a different place.

## Glossary

Definitions and examples of certain words and terms used in the story

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### Chapter 1 — Time to Leave page 1

**burned (to burn) to the ground** — Completely destroyed by fire. *They saw other villages burned to the ground.*

**going on (to go on)** — To continue; not stopping. *The war in Vietnam had been going on for many, many years.*

**looked as if** — Seemed or looked like.  
*... it looked as if it was coming to an end.*

**heading (to head)** — To go toward a place or in a specific direction. *The North Vietnamese were heading for Saigon.*

**Communists** — The North Vietnamese army and government.  
*The Communists would take over.*

**take over** — To defeat and control another group.  
*The Communists would take over.*

**get out of** — To leave; to escape something or a place.  
*The Americans were helping people get out of the country.*

**the wrong side** — In a bad or uncomfortable situation; opposite. *That put the whole family on the wrong side of the Communists.*

**running** — (The engine) is on, ready to go. *The uncle's car sat out front, its engine running.*

**bombed (to bomb)** — Hit by bombs, explosives falling from airplanes. *Tan Son Nhut air base has been bombed.*

**take care of** — To do what has to be done.

*I will take care of business.*

**piled (to pile)** — To get into (a car) quickly, without being very careful.

*Then the family with their bags piled into the uncle's car.*

**lifted off (to lift off)** — To move from the ground into the air and fly away. *The helicopter lifted off the roof.*

**turned people away (to turn away)** — To not allow (people) to enter or go forward.

*They watched as the guards turned people away.*

**turned the car around** — To go back the way (the car) came. ... *as he turned the car around.*

**waved (to wave) them through** — To allow someone to enter or pass, sometimes by moving the arm forward.

*The guards waved them through.*

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## Chapter 2 — The Airlift page 10

**reached (to reach) out** — To hold one's arm out to help.

*A Marine reached out for Mai's arm*

**blades** — The wings on top of the helicopter that turn around rapidly to lift a helicopter into the air.

*The helicopter blades began to spin faster.*

**spin** — To turn around quickly, again and again.

*The helicopter blades began to spin faster.*

**rolled (to roll) into** — To move forward one after another.

*The next day tanks rolled into Saigon.*



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### Chapter 3 — Out to Sea

page 15

**beat down** — The sun shines very hot on a place or people.

*The sun beat down on the open deck.*

**hid (to hide)** — To not show something; keep something secret. *She smiled at them and hid her fear.*

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### Chapter 4 — Guam

page 19

**territory** — A place or area. Guam belongs to the US, but it is not a state. *It is a territory of the United States.*

**needle in a haystack** — An idiom meaning something is difficult to find. A needle is a small metal pin used for sewing. A haystack is a very large pile of hay (dried grass).  
*... like looking for a needle in a haystack.*

**comfort** — Help that reduces stress.

*But she had time to give Mai some comfort.*

**carry on** — To continue doing something although it may be difficult. *... we got out in time. We will carry on.*