

The Happiest Refugee



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANH DO

In 1980, shortly after the end of the Vietnam War, the infant Anh Do and his family secretly fled their native country of Vietnam in search of a better life elsewhere. They barely survived the perilous boat journey out of the country, during which they faced storms, pirates, and Vietnamese patrol boats. Eventually rescued by German sailors, they settled in Australia. There, Anh Do, in spite of the poverty into which his family was plunged after they were abandoned by his father, found success and prosperity first as a comedian, and then as a television celebrity, actor, and writer. His memoir *The Happiest Refugee*, published in 2010, became a national bestseller in Australia, winning awards such as Book of the Year and the Indie Book of the Year Award in 2011.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Anh Do's incredible story of migration was precipitated by the Vietnam War, which led his family to flee their native country of Vietnam in 1980. Beginning in 1954, the war was fought between Communist North Vietnam (which was supported by Communist powers such as China and the Soviet Union) and the non-Communist South, supported by capitalist, anti-Communist powers such as the United States and Australia. During the 1960s, the United States became increasingly entangled in the war, sending hundreds of thousands of troops to support the anti-Communist South Vietnamese forces. However, the war was eventually won by the North Vietnamese, who captured Saigon in 1975. Several members of Anh Do's family had fought alongside American and Australian troops in the war. This meant that, in the aftermath of the war, they were subject to punishment by the Communist regime that came to power. Indeed, two of Anh's uncles from his mother's side ended up in Communist "re-education" camps, where many opponents of the Communists were condemned. The poverty and devastation in which the country was gripped in the aftermath of the war, as well as the political repression of the Communist regime, were all reasons that led many Vietnamese—including Anh's family—to flee the country after the end of the war. These refugees came to be known as "boat people," as many of them made their escape by boat or ship. Given the perils involved in their sea escape, many "boat people" did not survive the passage.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Anh Do's *The Happiest Refugee* belongs to the autobiographical literature that emerged in the 2000s documenting the migrant

experience of Vietnamese "boat people" who had fled Vietnam in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Anh Do's migration story, focused on Australia, finds echoes in the memoirs of "boat people" who ended up both in Australia and elsewhere in the world. In *Boat People: Personal Stories from the Vietnamese Exodus 1975-1996* (2nd Ed. 2015), for instance, Carina Hoang not only recounts her family's own migration from Vietnam via Indonesia and the United States to Australia, but also collects the stories of other "boat people" who passed through Indonesian refugee camps on their way to new homes. *Where the Wind Leads: A Refugee Family's Story of Loss, Rescue, and Redemption* by Vinh Chung (2015) also shares parallels with Do's book, particularly in its emphasis on the perilous sea journey that Chung's family undertook in 1979 to escape the repressive communist government that came to power at the end of the war. Chung and his family ended up in America, and the book recounts their establishment of a new life there. Taken as a whole, this body of autobiographical and biographical literature depicts the hardships and perils that Vietnamese "boat people" faced as they fled their native land, hoping to make better lives for themselves and their families elsewhere.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Happiest Refugee
- **When Written:** 2010
- **Where Written:** Australia
- **When Published:** 2010
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Saigon (Vietnam), Sydney (Australia), and Melbourne (Australia)
- **Climax:** Anh's baby brother Khoa is dangled over the edge of a boat by pirates
- **Antagonist:** The Vietnamese government, pirates, poverty
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

A movie on the way. Anh Do's *The Happiest Refugee* is set to be made into a film backed by Australian film star Russell Crowe.

A man of many talents. On top of his multiple talents for comedy, acting, and writing, Anh Do has recently also established himself as a distinguished painter.



PLOT SUMMARY

It is the late 1970s in Saigon, Vietnam, and the Vietnam War has recently ended. In the aftermath of the war, and under the grip of a repressive Communist regime, the country's population suffers through hardship and poverty. Anh Do is then only two-and-a-half years old. His father and mother have decided to flee the country, taking Anh and his baby brother Khoa with them. They are accompanied by over thirty members of their extended family, as well as family friends. The **journey** proves more perilous than they could have ever imagined: on the small fishing boat on which the family makes their escape, they barely evade Vietnamese patrol boats, are almost shipwrecked in a violent storm, and are captured by pirates, who strip them of all their valuables and the few provisions they had brought with them. Miraculously, the family survives. They are rescued by a German merchant ship, which brings them to safety.

The family begins a new life in Australia, the country that offers them asylum as refugees. Soon, Anh's family find their feet in their new adoptive city of Sydney. His parents launch a garment sewing business that sees them prospering enough to help other Vietnamese relatives and members of the community, many of whom come to live with them for long or short periods of time. Anh and his brother Khoa attend primary school, quickly adapting to their new environment.

The family's prosperity comes to an end, however, when Anh's father loses the family's money—as well as the savings of several of his brothers—on farming and real estate ventures that fail. This not only leads to conflict among the brothers, it also leads Anh's father into a downward spiral: he becomes an alcoholic, and is even violent towards his wife, two sons, and daughter Tram. Soon, he abandons his family, and Anh doesn't see his father again for eight years.

Forced to survive on a single mother's garment sewing wages, the family struggles with poverty. Anh and his brother Khoa can barely afford the uniforms and textbooks for the expensive boys' school that they attend. Nonetheless, Anh perseveres, and in his final year of high school, he decides to pursue a university degree in law—this, he decides, is a lucrative career path than can help lift his family out of poverty. In law school he falls in love with Suzie, the beautiful blonde law school student who becomes his close friend.

Although Anh continues with his law studies, he finds that his heart is not in law work, and so he begins simultaneously studying art. When he attends a comedy show one night with a law school friend, Anh is inspired to take up comedy, and soon begins booking small gigs doing stand-up. In his final year of law school, he's offered a high-paying job at a big law firm. Knowing that his heart is not in it, however, he decides to pursue a comedy career fulltime—and plunges in headfirst.

Eventually, Anh gets together with Suzie, and the two become engaged. After eight years of estrangement, Anh makes contact with his father, whom he finds living in Melbourne with a new partner and a baby son. Soon, Anh discovers that his father is suffering from a serious brain tumor.

After his marriage to Suzie, Anh continues with his comedy career, which eventually leads to television roles. He achieves enough financial security to buy his mother a home. After scripting and directing his own film, "Footy Legends," Anh receives more and more television roles—eventually ending up on the show "Dancing with the Stars." His appearance on this show transforms him into a national celebrity. His siblings reconcile with his father, who recovers from his tumor. Once Anh and his siblings are all grown up and financially secure, his mother finally stops working and devotes herself to caring for her grandchildren. Anh's career continues to prosper, and he finds immense happiness with his wife Suzie and the three boys that they have together.

On a beautiful, sunny day, Anh, his wife and children, and his mother take a trip to a national park, where they board a boat from which they can enjoy the lovely views. Surrounded by his loved ones and reflecting on the long journey that has led his family from Vietnam to this leisurely boat ride in the national park in Australia, Anh considers just how lucky he has been, and gives thanks.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Anh Do – The author and narrator of *The Happiest Refugee*, a memoir of his life, in which he recounts the story of his family's treacherous **escape** from their native country of Vietnam to Australia shortly after the end of the Vietnam War. Anh faces many obstacles as a boy and then an adolescent in Sydney, the city where the family settles. Most notably, he must struggle with poverty after he, his mother, his brother Khoa and his sister Tram are abandoned by his father. And yet, Anh proves to be creative, resilient, clever and hardworking. Throughout his adolescence, he comes up with novel ways of making money—by breeding and selling fish, for instance—and manages to do well in school in spite of not being able to afford basic necessities such as books. He also feels a deep sense of responsibility towards his younger siblings and his mother, whom he helps support. Although estranged from his father for much of his childhood, Anh inherits from him a sense of ambition and courage that lead him to success as a comedian and, eventually, a television celebrity. His multiple talents include comedy, acting, writing, and art. A devoted family man, he takes great pleasure in his wife, Suzie, and the three sons—Xavier, Luc and Leon—they have together.

Anh's Mother – Mother to Anh, Khoa, and Tram, and former

wife of Anh's father Tam. She escaped Vietnam shortly after the end of the Vietnam war with her then-infant sons Anh and Khoa, and her husband Tam. Her priority is her children's welfare. On the dangerous **journey** from Vietnam, she protects and comforts her children through the hardships of the voyage. In Australia, she works tirelessly sewing garments to support her three children, and is the one who provides for and looks after them after her husband abandons the family. While she encourages her children to succeed, she never puts pressure on them, and allows them to follow their own path—as when she supports Anh when he decides to pursue a career in comedy instead of law. She is extremely generous and full of compassion, always coming to the aid of those less fortunate than herself, and instills in her children the values of generosity and compassion.

Tam / Anh's Father – Father to Anh, Khoa, and Tram, and former husband of Anh's mother. He grew up in extreme poverty in Vietnam, among ten siblings. He is also known as “Four,” given his birth order as fourth among the ten siblings. Tam is the one who oversees and directs the family's dangerous **escape** from Vietnam on a small fishing boat, shortly after the end of the Vietnam War. On the journey he behaves heroically: he fixes a broken engine, and helps steer the boat through a violent storm, among other feats. Tam also acts with incredible courage at other times: one of his most daring acts of heroism consisted of walking into a Communist **re-education camp** in Vietnam to save his brothers-in-law Thanh and Huy. His boldness and courage are admired by Anh, who throughout his life returns to his father's advice: “There's only two times in life, there's now and there's too late.” However, Tam's incredible courage and bravery is counterbalanced by his recklessness and irresponsibility. He loses all of the family's money on risky farming and real estate ventures, becomes an alcoholic, and then abandons his wife and children to live in poverty. Upon the initiative of Anh, he eventually reconnects with his children, and attempts to show and communicate to them his love for them. His desire to have a relationship with his estranged children becomes especially pressing when he discovers that he is suffering from a brain tumor—but he eventually recovers. Anh's feelings towards his father are ambivalent—he both admires his courage and bravery and is extremely angry at his abandonment of the family—but slowly comes to rediscover his father's positive qualities after the two reconcile.

Khoa – Younger brother to Anh, older brother to Tram, and son of Anh's mother and Tam. Born in Vietnam, Khoa was a baby when the family made the dangerous escape from the country on a fishing boat. During the **journey**, he almost lost his life when one of the pirates who attacks the family's fishing boat dangles him over the edge, threatening to throw him in the water. Like his siblings and mother, Khoa suffers greatly from the family's abandonment by his father soon after they arrive in Australia. He is so enraged at Tam that when Anh implores

Khoa to make up with him years later, Khoa refuses. Eventually, however, he reconciles with his father. Khoa is notable for his charitable and creative qualities. He has a talent for filmmaking, and his charity work with at-risk children utilizing film leads him to be recognized as Young Australian of the Year—an important award that marks a high point in Khoa's life, as well as the family's.

Tram – Younger sister of Anh and Khoa, and daughter of Anh's mother and Tam. Unlike her brothers, Tram was born not in Vietnam—the family's native country—but in Australia, where the family finds shelter as refugees. Like her brothers and mother, she suffers greatly from her father's abandonment of the family, and must struggle with poverty. As a child, she is extremely self-conscious over her misaligned teeth, so much so that she barely smiles. It is for this reason that her brother Anh uses the cash prize of a big comedy award he wins to provide Tram with braces to fix her teeth. Like Khoa, Tram refuses to reconcile with her father when she is urged by her brother Anh to do so, but eventually she reestablishes a relationship with him as well.

Suzie – Wife to Anh, and mother of Xavier, Luc and Leon, the three boys she has with Anh. Suzie, blonde and beautiful, is Anh's fellow student in law school in Sydney. She comes from a wealthy family that lives in an upper-middle-class neighborhood in the city. Suzie doesn't immediately reciprocate the feelings that Anh has for her. Eventually, however, she also falls in love with him, and they get married. While she works as a lawyer for a time after her marriage to Anh, she eventually leaves law to pursue her passion for writing and photography. She is very popular with Anh's family, who like to feed her all kinds of strange Vietnamese dishes. Her husband Anh is very much in love with her.

Uncle Thanh – Eldest brother to Anh's mother, and husband to Aunt Huong. During the Vietnam War, he served as a paratrooper and fought alongside American and Australian troops. He endured the Communist **re-education camp** to which he was sent after the end of the war, and almost died there as a result of brutality and disease. He was rescued from the camp, along with his brother Huy, by his brother-in-law Tam. Although he survived the camp, he became infertile as a result of an operation that was undertaken on him there. Uncle Thanh makes the dangerous **journey** on the boat with Anh's family to escape Vietnam.

Uncle Huy – Second eldest brother to Anh's mother. During the Vietnam War, he served as a paratrooper and fought alongside American and Australian troops. He narrowly escapes death when he misses a boat he was meant to board during the war, which he then watches explode before his eyes. After the war, Uncle Huy and his brother Thanh are sent to a Communist **re-education camp**, from which they are rescued by their brother-in-law Tam. Huy makes the **journey** of escape from Vietnam to Australia with Anh's family. In Australia, he

becomes a priest.

Uncle One – Eldest brother to Tam, Anh’s father. Uncle One was meant to accompany the family on their escape from Vietnam, but was murdered shortly beforehand, when he and his brother Tam met three men to purchase the boat on which the family was to make their voyage. Anh’s father feels terrible guilt over his brother’s death, given that he was with him the night of his murder, and didn’t follow him and the three men, as he believes, in retrospect, he should have.

Uncle Two – Second eldest brother to Tam, Anh’s father. Uncle Two accompanies Anh’s family and other family members on the dangerous voyage of escape from Vietnam, shortly after the end of the Vietnam War. He and his wife and four children move in with Tam, Anh’s mother, and their children in the industrial space that the family occupies for a time in Sydney, Australia. Uncle Two’s left hand is missing a finger because during the Vietnam War he had served as a sapper, defusing landmines, and lost his finger in an accident. He has a tragic end, as he ends up suffering from mental illness in Australia and ends up in a mental institution.

Uncle Three – Third eldest brother to Tam, Anh’s father. Uncle Three left Vietnam on a boat **voyage** six months before Anh and his family. On that voyage, he was accompanied by brothers Five, Seven, and Nine. However, pirates shipwrecked the boat the brothers were fleeing on, and only Uncles Three and Nine survived—their two other brothers die. Uncle Three invests in Tam’s farming and property ventures, losing all his savings when the ventures go bust. He then fights with Tam, and ends up returning to America, where he had lived after leaving Vietnam and before his arrival in Australia.

Uncle Five – Younger brother of Tam, Anh’s father. Uncle Five perishes on a **voyage** of escape out of Vietnam, six months before Anh and his own family flee the country in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The boat he had been on with brothers Three, Seven, and Nine is shipwrecked by pirates, and he drowns.

Uncle Six – Younger brother of Tam, Anh’s father. Uncle Six makes the **voyage** of escape out of Vietnam with Anh’s family, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and ends up in Australia with them. He also lives with Anh’s family for a time in the industrial space in Sydney that the family occupies. He mysteriously disappears for two decades. Anh later learns from his grandmother that Uncle Six, whom everyone thinks is an adopted child, is in fact the love child of his grandfather and another woman.

Uncle Seven – Younger brother of Tam, Anh’s father. Uncle Seven perishes on a **voyage** of escape out of Vietnam, six months before Anh and his own family flee the country in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The boat he had been on with brothers Three, Five, and Nine is shipwrecked by pirates, and he drowns.

Uncle Nine – Younger brother to Tam, Anh’s father. Uncle Nine left Vietnam on a boat voyage six months before Anh and his family. On that voyage, he was accompanied by brothers Three, Five, and Seven. However, pirates shipwrecked the boat the brothers were fleeing on, and only Uncles Three and Nine survive—their two other brothers perish. Uncle Nine invests in Tam’s farming and property ventures, losing all his savings when the ventures go bust. He ends up returning to America, where he had lived after leaving Vietnam and before his arrival in Australia.

Anh’s grandmother – Mother to Tam, Anh’s father, and nine other children—including Uncles One, Two, Three, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine. She raises her ten children in extreme poverty in Vietnam, having to rely on the low wages of her husband, who served in the army during the Vietnam War. She joins Tam and some of her other sons in Australia, where she takes up gardening. She also impresses Anh with her Nintendo skills.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Xavier – Eldest son to Anh and Suzie. He is happy to start the boat engine with his father when the family takes a boat trip in Bobbin National Park, at the end of the book.

Luc – Second eldest son to Anh and Suzie.

Leon – Youngest son of Anh and Suzie.

Uncle Dung – A younger brother to Anh’s mother. He makes the **journey** from Vietnam to Australia with Anh’s family. He is cheerful, and in Australia grows to have a big gut and “several chins.”

Uncle Eight – Younger brother of Tam, Anh’s father. He makes the **voyage** of escape out of Vietnam with Anh’s family shortly after the end of the Vietnam War.

Aunt Huong – Wife to Uncle Thanh, and sister-in-law to Anh’s mother. She makes the **journey** of escape from Vietnam to Australia with Anh’s family. On the journey, she is almost raped by pirates who hijack the family’s fishing boat.

Loc – The son of a family friend, who accompanies Anh and his family on the sea **voyage** of escape out of Vietnam. He finds the cramped, oppressive conditions on the boat unbearable, and is unable to handle the psychological strain of the journey. He jumps into the sea, and perishes.

Pirates – Outlaws who, on two occasions, attack Anh’s family as they make their **voyage** of escape out of Vietnam on a fishing boat. The pirates steal the family’s valuables and provisions, and inflict terror and violence on them.

Baby Anh – The son that Anh’s father Tam has with his second wife, after he abandons Anh, Khoa, Tram, and their mother. Tam names his infant son after Anh, his eldest boy.

Ms. Burke – Neighbor to Anh and his family in Sydney. She

helps the family settle in and find their feet in Australia.

Phil Keenan – Schoolmate and friend of Anh at St. Aloysius, the high school that Anh attends in Sydney. He helps Anh through school by lending him his textbooks, which Anh can't afford to buy himself.

Dave Grant – A comedian friend of Anh's, who advises him about pursuing a career in comedy.

Mrs. Borny – Anh's English teacher in St. Aloysius. She praises Anh's storytelling abilities, encouragement which motivates Anh to continue his creative pursuits. Twenty years later, he surprises her on a TV show called "Thank You," to thank her.

Rachel – A girlfriend of Anh, who lends him money to start a business selling crystals.

Amanda – A girlfriend of Anh's, who is vegan. Anh takes up veganism to please her, but then gives it up again when they break up.

Steve – A law school friend of Anh's. He makes fun of Anh for snuggling up to him during a camping trip during which the two friends had shared a tent. He also takes Anh to see a comedy show, which ignites Anh's interest in comedy.

out of Vietnamese sea territory into international waters. As they are approaching the crossing, they are spotted by a Vietnamese patrol boat, which comes after them at speed and shoots at them, damaging one of only two engines on the boat. While there is no doubt that the patrol boat could have caught up with them, luckily the family crosses into international territory in the nick of time, and the patrol boat turns back, deciding not to follow them beyond the zone of surveillance.

Another perilous occasion occurs on the second day of the journey, when a massive storm hits the party—exposing the family to near shipwreck. And yet, miraculously, the boat weathers the storm, and everyone on board survives. Some of the most dangerous moments on the journey occur when—on two occasions—pirates hijack the vessel, stripping those on board of valuables such as jewellery, money, and even the boat's engines. As such, as they embark on their voyage, the family faces threats from all sides: from the Vietnamese authorities, from bad weather, and from pirate boats carrying bandits who prey on vulnerable refugees.

And yet, although the family confronts many life-threatening obstacles on the journey, they are blessed by fortune and good luck time and again. Not only does the family survive the crossing into international waters, and the storm that almost wrecks the boat, but even when they are hijacked by pirates, they escape mostly unscathed. During the second pirate hijacking, which occurs shortly after the first and in many ways is worse, as the pirates are more brutal and violent, the family also encounters luck. As the pirate ship leaves the family's boat, one of the pirates—a young man who had been gentler than his fellows—throws a gallon of water overboard to the family. This, as Anh recounts, saves the family's life. Those on board had run out of water, and were certain to die of dehydration had it not been for this gallon of water that the pirate throws to them. The family's luck continues when they encounter a third boat. This time, it is not pirates, but a German merchant ship. The German sailors rescue them, taking them to an island in the Malaysian archipelago. It is there that the family's new life begins. Soon after they are informed that the country of Australia has decided to take them in as refugees.

The family's numerous lucky escapes contrast sharply with the fates of those who were less fortunate than themselves. Most notably, three of Anh's uncles—his father's brothers—die as a result of ill fortune, also while attempting to escape Vietnam. Uncle One, who was supposed to undertake the journey with Anh and the rest of the family, dies shortly before the trip. He had gone with Anh's father to purchase the boat on which the family was to make their escape. However, at the meeting, the three men selling the boat insist that only one of the brothers can follow them to look at the boat. Uncle One, carrying half of the money to pay for the boat, goes with them, and never returns. The next day, Anh's father discovers his brother's body in a wild area. He had been murdered by the three men, who



THEMES

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MIGRATION AND LUCK

In the memoir *The Happiest Refugee*, Anh Do tells of the fantastic **journey** that he took with his family as a young infant, as they sought to escape their native country of Vietnam shortly after the end of the Vietnam War (1954-1975). The family—consisting of a large group of aunts, uncles, children, and others—flees the poverty-stricken Communist-ruled country and ends up in Australia, where they make a new life for themselves. Anh's account highlights how luck and serendipity were ultimately key to the family's survival of the perilous journey. In emphasizing the role that luck and serendipity played in their own survival, Anh's account highlights the terrible vulnerability to which refugees are exposed. Anh suggests that for many refugees, including his own family, survival is largely, if not purely, a matter of luck.

In telling the story of the family's dangerous journey on a small boat—referred to by the family as the "Motherfish"—Anh emphasizes the endless dangers and perils that the large clan of 40 people faced during their escape from Vietnam. On the first morning on the Motherfish, the group faces one of the most nerve-racking moments of the voyage, when they must cross

presumably had no boat to provide and instead killed him for the money that he carried.

Uncles Five and Seven had left Vietnam with Uncles Three and Nine on an earlier journey out of Vietnam. Like Anh and his family, they fled on a boat. However, unlike Anh and his family, they were unlucky enough to be caught by pirates who not only looted their belongings, but also sank their boat. Of the four brothers, only Uncles Three and Nine survived—Uncles Five and Seven drowned as a result of the shipwreck. The tragic fates of Uncles One, Five, and Seven point to the capricious role that fortune—for better or worse—plays in the lives of refugees. Unlike Anh and the rest of the family, these three uncles lose their lives largely because of ill fortune.

In recounting the story of his family's migration, Anh's narrative calls attention both to the extreme hazards that they faced as refugees, as well as to the extreme good fortune that saved them, time and again, from death. In emphasizing the role that luck played in his family's survival, Anh suggests that most refugees are vulnerable to good or ill fortune—survival, in other words, is largely a matter of chance.



POVERTY AND HARDSHIP

In *The Happiest Refugee*, Anh Do narrates the story of his life—beginning with his family's **escape** from their native country of Vietnam, to their arrival in

Australia, where Anh and his family face poverty and hardship as they attempt to establish new lives in their adoptive home. And yet, Anh Do's story suggests that as difficult as it was to face such poverty and hardship, privation can also teach one strength of character, as well as the valuable skills of flexibility and creativity in facing obstacles.

Although Anh and his family quickly establish a secure livelihood for themselves soon after arriving in Australia—mainly through a garment sewing business that his mother and father Tam start and run together—the family faces financial ruin once Anh's father abandons them. This leaves Anh, his siblings Khoa and Tram, and their mother in dire straits. As a single parent, Anh's mother struggles to put her children through the expensive Catholic school which they attend. Anh is forced to go through much of his high school unable to afford even the textbooks that he needs for school, and must rely on the generosity of friends, who lend him school books so that he can follow his lessons. The family can also barely afford rent. Anh recounts how, as a child, he and his siblings would often have to hide from the landlords who would come knocking on their door, asking for payment. The family is forced to move time and again as a result, which leads to a great deal of instability in the children's lives. One of the most difficult aspects of poverty, as Anh recounts, was watching his mother suffer. Forced to shoulder the responsibility of providing for her children on her own, she works without break, even through illness and bad health. This, in turn, places much

pressure on Anh not only to help his mother, but also to succeed in school and university so as to be able to relieve her and make her sacrifices seem worth it.

But the poverty and hardship through which Anh lives also equip him with strength and resilience. As an adolescent, Anh must shoulder much more responsibility than his wealthier schoolmates. Not only must he meet his school obligations, but he must also work various odd jobs in order to support the family. Furthermore, he helps his mother with her garment-sewing work so that she can fulfil her orders on time, which then allows the family to meet their basic financial needs. As the oldest brother, Anh also feels responsible for his younger siblings, going out of his way to support them financially. When he wins a cash prize of \$5,000 in a comedy competition early on in his comedy career, he spends the money on procuring braces for his younger sister, who for years had been so self-conscious about her misaligned teeth that she refused to smile fully. While difficult, the many burdens and responsibilities that Anh shoulders as an adolescent clearly endow him with a strength of character beyond his years. Rather than breaking down or shying from the challenge, Anh develops the strength and resilience necessary to help support his family.

Poverty and hardship not only teach Anh strength of character, however. They also teach him flexibility and creativity in the face of dire circumstances. For instance, unable to afford good quality trainers for the basketball games in which he participates as a team member at school, he takes to immersing the soles of his cheap shoes in lemonade during basketball games, so as to make the shoes stick more efficiently to the slippery floor of the basketball court. He also develops a knack for effective (and sometimes far-fetched) money-making schemes. When he and his brother discover that the two Siamese “fighting” fish they buy at a pet store breed instead of battling each other, Anh begins a small business breeding thousands of fish, which he then sells for a profit. As such, the financial constraints that Anh faces as a result of his family's poverty in fact teach him to be resourceful and adaptive. Time and again, he finds novel ways to beat the odds.

Anh Do doesn't allow the poverty and hardship that constrains his family's life to limit him. Instead, he rises to the challenge of finding ways and means around his difficult circumstances. As such, the story of his family's struggle with poverty is one that points to the ways in which adversity, when approached with the right attitude (and with enough luck), can have its merits: it can foster strength of character, adaptability, and creativity.



COURAGE AND PERSEVERANCE

In *The Happiest Refugee*, Anh Do tells of his family's struggles as they flee their native country of Vietnam to establish a new life in Australia. This is a journey full of perils—first as the family escapes Vietnam on a dangerous sea **journey** shortly after the end of the Vietnam

War, and then as they face hardship and poverty in Australia. And yet, Anh overcomes many of the obstacles that he and his family face, and ends up as a successful comedian and celebrity in his adoptive land. Anh's success is largely due to the values of courage and perseverance that often guide and orient his actions, values instilled in him by his parents—and which see him through to success and prosperity.

Both Anh's father and mother embody the values of courage and perseverance in different ways. One of Anh's father's favourite mottos is "There are only two times in life, there's now and there's too late," a motto which he repeats to his children over and over again, and which is absorbed by Anh. Indeed, on numerous occasions in his life, Anh's father acts out of extreme courage. As a very young man, he saves his two brothers-in-law Thanh and Huy from the brutal work **re-education camps** to which they had been condemned in Vietnam after the end of the Vietnam War. He does so by dressing up in the uniform of a high-ranking Communist official, then simply walking into the camp and demanding the release of the two men. This act of courage pays off: the camp guards are so terrified and confused by the appearance of this high-ranking government official that they hand over Anh's brothers-in-law and let them walk out of the camp with him, without realizing that they are being tricked. Anh's father is also the one who oversees the family's escape on a boat out of Vietnam, being responsible for steering it through the open sea, and beyond the perils of pirates as well as storms. Anh's father, of course, is not without his major flaws—eventually, he abandons his wife and children in Australia. However, even while he is estranged from his father, and in spite of his rage at him, Anh often finds himself turning to his father's heroic moments for inspiration. In a different way, Anh's mother also models the values of courage and perseverance, by providing for her children—at a great cost to herself—once the family is abandoned by Anh's father. Anh's mother works tirelessly to feed and clothe her children, as well as pay for their school fees so that they can receive a good education. In persevering in this way, she ensures that her children have a better life than she had.

Anh follows in his parents' footsteps by acting on the values of courage and perseverance time and again in living out his own life. After finishing law school—an education which is intended to lift him, his mother, and his two younger siblings Khoa and Tram out of their poverty—he decides to abandon law for a career in comedy. Further, he does this in spite of a ready job offer from a large law firm upon graduation. Having had the courage to abandon the safe path of a law career, Anh works tirelessly to establish himself as a comedian, taking up any gigs—paid or unpaid—that come his way. Within a year and a half, he achieves what it takes many comedians a decade to accomplish, if they're lucky: he wins one of Australia's most important comedy prizes, and establishes himself as one of the

country's foremost comedians.

Anh not only reflects courage and perseverance when it comes to making choices about his career, but also when it comes to his personal life. In law school, he is smitten by Suzie, the beautiful blonde law student with a bright smile whom he meets on the first day of class. Time and again, Anh makes his feelings known to Suzie, and time and again, he suffers rejection, as Suzie tells him that while she appreciates his friendship, she has no romantic feelings for him. And yet, Anh doesn't give up hoping. Shortly after Suzie breaks up with a boyfriend, he again makes his feelings known, and this time they are reciprocated by Suzie. While Anh's perseverance in pursuing Suzie may seem problematic in some respects, his own account suggests that he was always respectful of Suzie's feelings and wishes, and was content to simply remain friends with her, as she wanted them to be. Suzie's own changed feelings towards Anh suggest that, while Anh repeatedly made his feelings known, he never did so in a way that disrespected her boundaries so that she was repelled. On the contrary: her love for him eventually develops and grows.

Anh's courage and perseverance lead him to immense success and prosperity. By choosing courage over cowardice again and again, he ends up not only as an extremely successful comedian, he also establishes an acting career, and becomes a celebrity recognized by many Australians on the street. He also finds fulfilment in a happy family life, one that is full of love.

In many ways, Anh's story is one of courage and perseverance, values instilled in him by his parents, who model these traits in overcoming obstacles they faced in making the difficult decision to leave Vietnam and start a new life elsewhere. While Anh's father does let Anh and his siblings down, Anh nevertheless adapts many of his father's good qualities—often turning to Tam's feats of heroism for inspiration in his own life. In telling his life story, therefore, Anh emphasizes that courage and perseverance played crucial roles in leading him to the success and prosperity that he now enjoys.



FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

While Anh Do's *The Happiest Refugee* is a memoir about his life, it is really also the story of a larger group—a family and a community. In telling the story of his family's **flight** from Vietnam shortly after the end of the Vietnam War, Anh makes it clear that that the success and prosperity he found in Australia, his adoptive country, was largely due to a collective effort—the sacrifices that many around him, especially his mother—made on his behalf. Anh's memoir emphasizes many instances of relatives helping each other, or family members helping the larger community. Ultimately, Anh doesn't take the support and assistance he receives from those around him for granted. In his memoir, he also speaks about the ways in which he tries to give back to family and community in turn.

Anh tells of how family members often supported each other as well as members of their broader community. The escape from Vietnam is largely a collective effort. While Anh's father Tam is responsible for overseeing the dangerous journey, numerous members of the extended family chip in what they can to make the journey a success: the entire family, for instance, pools together money to buy the boat on which they make their escape out of the country. Once in Australia, the family continues helping each other. Anh recounts that during his childhood, his parents often took in uncles, aunts, and their children to live with them in the large industrial building that they occupy before Anh's father abandons the family. Among the lodgers were his father's brothers Uncle Six and Uncle Two (referred to by their place in the birth order), as well as Uncle Two's wife and four children. Moreover, as they establish themselves in Australia, Anh's parents also take in Vietnamese immigrants and refugees from the larger community. Whenever they hear of someone struggling or needing a place to stay while finding their footing in the new country, Anh's parents offer their home.

Through their own struggles, Anh and his family are themselves helped by members of the larger Australian community. When they first move into their first home in Australia—a two-room flat—Anh and his family are supported by their neighbour Ms. Burke (whom they refer to, in a Vietnamese accent, as “Ms Buk”). Ms. Burke helps the family find their feet in their new adoptive country. In school, when Anh, his mother, and his siblings are struggling through extreme poverty after they are abandoned by his father, Anh finds support in his schoolmate Phil Keenan, who lends him the expensive textbooks that Anh can't afford to buy himself, so that he can keep up with his lessons. And, after law school, when Anh decides to become a comedian instead of following a career in law, he is encouraged by Dave, a comedian friend who helps guide his career in comedy.

Having been supported by his parents as well as the larger family and community throughout his childhood, Anh, as well as his brother Khoa, reciprocate by giving back to the community when they themselves achieve prosperity. One of the first things that Anh does when he has a steady job on a TV show, with a regular pay check, is to get a mortgage so that he can buy his mother her dream house. When she sees the house, his mother is so happy she cries. Once he becomes a successful celebrity, Anh also does TV shows that raise money to benefit others who are struggling. On the show “Deal or No Deal,” he wins \$200,000, which goes to an Australian father struggling to look after his ill wife and children. Likewise, Anh's brother Khoa also gives back. While undertaking charity work with Anh, the two brothers decide to make a film featuring the young, at-risk children with whom they volunteer. The film goes on to become a huge success, and Khoa's charity work is rewarded when he wins the prestigious Young Australian of the Year Award.

Anh's life story highlights how important family and community are in shaping Anh's own life. From his escape from Vietnam as a two-year-old to his success in school and his career as a comedian, Anh constantly references those members of his family and community who helped him along the way. But Anh doesn't take the help and support he receives for granted—realizing just how lucky he has been to have such support, he, as well as his brother, give back to their family and community by helping and supporting others in turn.



BETRAYAL AND FORGIVENESS

Anh Do's memoir *The Happiest Refugee* isn't just a story about a family's perilous **journey** from Vietnam to Australia. It's also a story about betrayal and forgiveness. In recounting how he was betrayed by his father Tam, who abandoned the family shortly after their arrival in Australia, Anh Do traces his own journey of accepting and reconnecting with the man who had been his role model as a child. Ultimately, Do suggests that forgiveness offers the only path forward to overcoming the bitterness and anger caused by betrayal.

As a child, Anh Do looked up to his father Tam as a model of courage, commitment, and bravery. In the memoir, Anh recounts many stories of his father's valiant actions under difficult circumstances. It was his father Tam, for instance, who saved his two brothers-in-law from a Vietnamese **re-education camp**—basically a concentration camp—shortly after the end of the Vietnam War. He did so by dressing up as a senior Vietnamese government official, then simply walking into the camp and demanding the release of his brothers-in-law Thanh and Huy. It was also Anh's father who oversaw the family's escape on a boat from Vietnam. Tam was the one who helped organize the entire perilous expedition, and steered the boat that sheltered forty relatives and family friends. His feats of bravery during the journey included evading a Vietnamese patrol boat, as well as fixing a broken engine when the family was out at sea. In Australia, Anh's father, along with Anh's mother, frequently came to the aid of needy family members or Vietnamese refugees, providing them with support and shelter in the industrial building Anh's family occupied for a time in Sydney. Furthermore, Anh's father gives his son crucial advice as Anh is growing up. One of the pieces of advice that Anh turns to when faced with difficult choices or situations is his father's assertion that “[t]here's now and there's too late.” This piece of advice often helped Anh when he was torn between different paths—for instance, whether to follow a law career or a career in comedy.

And yet, although Anh's father represented a wonderful role model to his son, he ultimately also lets Anh—and the rest of the family—down drastically. After losing the family's money on a risky farming venture (including the savings of two of his brothers), Anh's father turns to drink, becoming an alcoholic.

Eventually he abandons the family. Anh's father's betrayal of the family has dire consequences, as they are left to live in poverty and to struggle financially for years. As a single mother who makes a living sewing garments, Anh's mother is forced to fend for Anh and his two siblings Khoa and Tram alone, wearing herself out in the process. Furthermore, Anh's father doesn't attempt to maintain contact with his children, leaving them to face the difficult fate that he has condemned them to alone. As such, Anh and his siblings spend much of their childhood without any relationship to their father, and they all develop feelings of bitterness and rage towards Tam.

And yet, in spite of the fact that Anh is deeply wounded by his father's abandonment, he eventually finds it in his heart to forgive him. After eight long years of no contact with Tam, Anh decides to call him one day, and goes to visit him, only to discover that he has a new wife and a young infant boy. Ironically, he discovers that the infant boy is named Anh—after him. Although upon first meeting his father again, Anh is consumed by feelings of anger and bitterness, and is even overcome by an impulse towards revenge, he slowly begins to rediscover his father's positive side. News that his father is suffering from a potentially fatal brain tumour further forces him to re-evaluate his feelings of anger towards Tam.

Slowly, Anh manages to forgive his father for his betrayal, and even goes on to develop an affectionate relationship with him again. Anh's father is in turn grateful for his son's forgiveness, and becomes one of his biggest supporters and fans, as Anh goes from success to success in his comedy and celebrity career. By forgiving his father, Anh manages to overcome the feelings of hatred and bitterness that had consumed him during much of his childhood and adolescence. He even goes so far as to orchestrate a reconciliation between his younger siblings and his father, and notes that, by reconnecting with the man who had abandoned them, Khoa and Tram also manage to find peace.

In telling of his own journey from anger and resentment to reconciliation with his father, Anh Do suggests that having the strength to forgive enabled him to move on from the betrayal that had haunted much of his childhood and adolescence. As such, by depicting the happy end of this journey—one that leads to a renewed relationship with his father Tam—Anh emphasizes the value of forgiveness and mercy, values that ultimately allow for the flourishing of love, affection, and renewed family bonds.



THE JOURNEY

In Anh Do's *The Happiest Refugee*, the journey represents both the perils and rewards of migration. The book is framed by two boat journeys. The story of the family's escape from Vietnam on a small fishing boat, told at the beginning of the book, alludes to the perils of migration. This first journey is full of threats, including storms and pirates, which the family barely survives. This voyage encapsulates the family's vulnerability as refugees who are at the mercy of the forces—both natural and human—that threaten to destroy them. The boat journey that ends the book, however, is very different from the one that begins it. This is a leisurely trip that Anh takes with his wife, three children, and mother through Bobbin Head National Park in Australia, his adoptive home. The sense of gratitude and contentment that Anh feels on this journey through the beautiful Australian scenery points to the potential rewards of migration. By this point in his life, Anh is a successful celebrity in Australia; he leads a secure, happy life with his family, including the mother who had protected him on the perilous boat voyage out of Vietnam. These two boat voyages, therefore, mark contrasting aspects of the migration experience—both its dangers and its rewards. Anh is fortunate in that his own journey of migration ends in happiness and prosperity—and this is reflected in the peaceful, beautiful boat ride that he takes with his family at the end of the memoir.



THE RE-EDUCATION CAMPS

The “re-education camps” in which two of Anh's uncles serve time in Vietnam represent the brutality of the Communist regime that ruled the country after the end of the Vietnam War. The regime condemned those it deemed to be enemies—such as Anh's uncles Thanh and Huy, who had fought alongside American and Australian troops during the war—to these camps. While the purported purpose of the camps was to “re-educate” opponents of the regime, the camps were in fact centers of detention and punishment. There, prisoners face starvation, torture, disease, and hard labor. The conditions are so brutal that Anh's uncle Thanh almost dies as a result of an illness he picks up while undertaking backbreaking hard labor in the camp. The harsh conditions, as well as the brutality to which inmates are subjected, therefore, point to the ruthlessness and oppression of the regime that ruled the country in the aftermath of the war. It is one of the reasons why Anh's family flees the country on their boat [journey](#).



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Allen & Unwin edition of *The Happiest Refugee* published in 2010.


Chapter 1 Quotes

☛☛ One sunny afternoon my father walked into the remote re-education camp dressed as a high-ranking communist officer. He marched right through the front door of the commanding officer's room.

"These two men need to come with me," he demanded. The commanding officer was bewildered. He was afraid to disobey such a high-ranking official so he did not resist. My father then walked my uncles out of the camp, right through the front gate.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh's Father, Uncle Thanh, Uncle Huy

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In depicting his parents' life in Vietnam shortly after the end of the Vietnam war, Anh recounts the story of his father's courageous rescue of his two brothers-in-law Huy and Thanh. After the war, the two brothers were detained in a communist re-education camp, as they had fought against the communists during the war. Anh's father Tam dresses up as a high-ranking communist official one day and simply walks into the camp and demands their release.

Tam's daring rescue of his brothers-in-law reflects his courage and boldness. The rescue is extremely risky, and could have landed Tam in serious trouble with the communist authorities. The fact that he risks himself indicates just how brave Tam can be. Although Anh is eventually disappointed in his father after he abandons the family, Anh nonetheless takes inspiration from Tam's moments of courage and heroism—as reflected in this daring rescue.


The fact that Tam risks himself to save his brothers-in-law is also significant because it suggests the strength of the bonds of family and community amongst Anh's Vietnamese relatives. Tam puts himself in danger so that he can save his wife's brothers, and this indicates the importance of even extended family within this community of people.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☛☛ My extended family pooled all their money, called in favours with friends and relatives and sold everything they had—every possession—just to buy a boat. Getting your hands on a boat was an extremely risky business. They were only available on the black market and anyone caught trying to buy one could be jailed or killed.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh's Father, Anh's Mother

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis


In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Anh's family has decided to flee Vietnam. They gather their money together to buy a boat on which they can make their escape. The danger, as well as the sacrifices, that the family must subject themselves to in order to procure the boat point to the difficult and oppressive circumstances under which the family exists in Vietnam. Anh's family are clearly victims of the poverty that grips the country in the aftermath of the war, given that they have to sell "everything" in order to be able to afford a boat. This poverty, of course, is one of the reasons why they, and countless others like them, seek to flee Vietnam after the war.

The fact that the family risks prison or even death by procuring a boat also suggests the extremely oppressive political circumstances under which they live. The communist government clearly seeks to control every aspect of its citizens' lives and movements. Vietnamese individuals are not allowed to move freely within the country, let alone try to leave it, and therefore anyone caught trying to make an escape will be punished severely. As such, in Vietnam, the family faces not only economic destitution, but political oppression—both reasons why they are desperate to escape.

☛☛ Back on our boat one of the pirates grabbed hold of the smallest child. He lifted up the baby and ripped open the child's nappy. A tiny slice of gold fell out. The pirate picked up the metal and wantonly dangled the baby over the side of the boat, threatening to throw the infant in. My father screamed at the top of his lungs, "We must save the child! We will fight to the death to SAVE THE CHILD!"

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh's Father, Pirates, Khoa, Anh's Mother

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Over thirty members of Anh's family end up cramped on a small fishing boat in the middle of the ocean as they flee their native Vietnam. The journey does not go smoothly: the family is hijacked by pirates—twice. During this second pirate attack, the pirates are ruthless and threatening. They search and strip the family of all valuables, and even search baby Khoa, Anh's younger brother. One of the pirates threatens to kill the infant by dropping him into the ocean.

This frightening moment reveals the extent of the violence that the family faces during their boat journey. The family is at the mercy of ruthless forces, both natural (such as storms) and human (the pirates). Knowing that the refugees are unarmed and therefore powerless, the pirates feel emboldened to do whatever they wish. They even threaten the most innocent and helpless of the refugees.

As terrifying as this moment is for the family, it also reveals Anh's father acting with courage. Faced with the prospect of losing his infant son, he exhorts the others to act bravely, and is indeed ready to "fight to the death" to save his child. It is this courage that, fortunately, makes the pirates eventually retreat. This moment in the journey suggests both the family's powerlessness and the immense bravery of Anh's father Tam under dire circumstances.


☞ As their boat veered away, one of the pirates did something strange. He was a young kid according to my uncles, no more than eighteen years old, and had been less aggressive throughout the whole encounter. Suddenly and for no apparent reason he threw us a gallon of water.

That water saved our lives.

You can't drink jewelry or eat gold teeth caps, but that water meant everything because it bought us an extra day. That second pirate attack saved our lives.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh's Father, Pirates, Anh's Mother

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In relating the second brutal pirate attack that the family suffered on their boat escape from Vietnam, Anh tells of the lucky moment when, as the pirates are finally departing, one of them throws the family water. Anh's emphasis on the fact that the water "saved [their] lives," points to the role that luck and serendipity played in the family's survival. The pirate's generosity in throwing the family water is completely unexpected—especially given how brutal the pirates had behaved towards the family, stealing their things, and even threatening, at one point, to kill Anh's baby brother Khoa. Given these circumstances, this act of generosity on the part of the young pirate is almost miraculous—especially because that the family was on the brink of perishing without water. As such, this is one of several key moments in which the family encounters luck and good fortune on their otherwise extremely perilous journey.


Chapter 3 Quotes

☞☞ "What a great country!"

Almost every day we discovered something else that made Mum and Dad shake their heads at how lucky we'd been. If you got sick, you could go to the doctor for free. If you couldn't get a job straight away, the government gave you some money to help you get by.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh's Father, Anh's Mother

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Anh and his family have recently landed in Australia, the country which has offered them shelter as refugees after their perilous escape from Vietnam. Anh's parents are continually amazed by the privileges and resources they find in their new home.

The amazement and happiness of Anh's parents at the privileges of Australia contrast sharply with the destitution

and deprivation that the family suffered under back in Vietnam. There, the family was stuck in poverty and also suffered under oppressive political conditions. In this regard, Australia represents the fulfillment of all their hopes: here, they find the resources of support—government benefits, medical care, and so on—that they lacked in their native Vietnam. The fact that Anh’s parents feel “lucky” to be in Australia is also significant, because it suggests that they are aware that their new-found privilege is largely the result of chance. The family is indeed extremely fortunate to have survived the escape from Vietnam, a journey which many refugees did not.

☝ Dad picked me up from school and, after I told him I didn’t win, there was no change in his demeanour, he was just as exuberant. Maybe he knew it was always going to be a long shot. I’ll never know, but he called up everyone to celebrate anyway [...] my father treated that loss as if it were a win, and it was a lesson that stayed with me for a long time. If the worst happens, if you lose and fail, but you still celebrate coming second because you’ve given it a red hot go. There is no need to fear failure.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh’s Father

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 48



Explanation and Analysis

In his primary school in Australia, Anh runs for school captain and loses. Nonetheless, his father gathers together the family for a big celebration. Tam’s celebration is significant because it teaches Anh the lesson that effort is just as worthy of celebration as winning. Tam’s attitude towards Anh’s loss represents a moment in the relationship between father and son when the former acts as a positive role model, one who teaches his son the value of courage and perseverance. Later in life, Anh, in spite of estrangement from his father, continues to follow the lesson of this day. Time and again, he takes risks and finds the courage to make difficult choices (such as pursuing a comedy career, for instance). His capacity for risk taking and ability to overcome fear of failure stems back to the lesson that his father teaches him on this day.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ I also loved it when Dad taught me things. I felt so privileged to be learning the secrets only a chosen few would ever know.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh’s Father

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

On the waterfront farm that Tam and his brothers buy, Tam takes to teaching his children many things—such as how to open a locked car door with a hanger and how to build a cage for budgies. During this period in his childhood, Anh looks admires his father tremendously. This is apparent in the fact that Anh feels that his father has much to teach him, and that he is one of the “chosen few” to whom Tam reveals his secret knowledge. Anh’s positive feelings towards his father—his sense of privilege in being around him and learning from him—indicate what an inspiring role model Tam was to his children. His affectionate and inspiring engagement with his children on the farm reveals him to be at his best in his role as a father. This makes Tam’s abandonment of the family all the more painful.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ The school had two mottos. First: “Men for Others”—done deal as far as Mum was concerned. Here was a school that was going to teach her boys to look after others and, if she hadn’t drummed it into us enough at home, we’d get another dose at school. The other motto was: “Born for Greater Things.” *Boom!* Dad’s happy.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh’s Father, Uncle Huy, Khoa, Anh’s Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Anh and his parents must choose a high school which Anh and his brother Khoa will attend in Sydney, Australia. Anh’s Uncle Huy, a priest, suggests the Catholic private school of St. Aloysius, given its excellent reputation. Anh’s parents are won over by the school’s two mottos, which speak to the particular values that they each hold dear and seek to instill in their children. Anh’s mother is notable for her

compassion and generosity towards others—she constantly tries to help those in need. Anh’s father, while also generous, nevertheless also puts great emphasis on ambition and personal drive as important values.


Furthermore, the emphasis that Anh’s parents place on generosity and ambition is rooted in their own experience as refugees. They have personally benefited from the generosity of others, and it is for this reason that Anh’s mother feels an obligation to help those who are less fortunate. Likewise, Tam’s emphasis on ambition, on achieving “greater things,” has much to do with the fact that Australia provides his sons with opportunities that he, as a child growing up in Vietnam in the midst of war, did not have. As such, he wants his children take advantage of the freedoms and privileges Australia affords.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ Uncle Three passed out and woke up on a beach in Malaysia. After searching desperately for other survivors he found Uncle Nine alive. Eventually they found the dead bodies of uncles Five and Seven.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Pirates , Uncle Nine , Uncle Seven , Uncle Five , Uncle Three

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Anh recounts the tragic fate of two of his father’s brothers—Uncles Five and Seven. They had attempted to escape Vietnam by boat, setting out six months earlier than Anh and his family. They were accompanied by brothers Three and Nine. On their journey, they were hijacked by pirates, who sunk their boat. Only two of the brothers—Three and Nine—survived the shipwreck.

While Anh and his family are also hijacked by pirates during their escape, they are lucky enough not to have their boat sunk, and it is for this reason—among many other lucky breaks—that they manage to survive the journey. Thus, the tragic fates of brothers Five and Seven suggest the important role that fortune plays in the survival of refugees. This passage also underscores the immense danger refugees put themselves in by fleeing Vietnam, which in turn emphasizes how dire circumstances in their home

country must have been. By further illuminating the peril of his journey to Australia, Anh makes his ultimate success the more heartening and impressive.

☞ *If he lays a finger on Mum, I will kill him*, I said to myself. I took the largest kitchen knife I could find and stuck it under my bed. I was thirteen and at least as heavy as my dad, if not as tall. I figured I might stand a chance if I had a weapon.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh’s Father, Anh’s Mother

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

After losing the family’s money in real estate and farming ventures that go bust, Tam begins to unravel. He begins drinking heavily, and is even violent towards the family. He takes to disappearing for long periods of time, until Anh’s mother decides that she no longer wants him in the house. Anh, feeling protective of his mother, takes to sleeping with a kitchen knife under his bed to protect his mother should any threat arise.

Anh’s protective feelings towards his mother, and his corresponding feelings of violence towards his father, suggest a radical transformation in his relationship with Tam. While as a young child Anh looked up to his father as a role model—even as a hero, taking inspiration from his acts of courage and bravery—Tam’s spiral into alcoholism changes his son’s attitude towards his father drastically. Anh not only feels betrayed by his father, who lets the family down repeatedly, he also loses all respect for him. His feelings of rage are further reflected in the impulse towards violence that he feels towards Tam, which suggest the extent of Anh’s sense of betrayal.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☞ Lucky for me I had my good mate Phil Keenan. Phil was the only kid in school who knew I didn’t have all the books.

“What classes have you got today?” he would ask. When it was English, for example, he would lend me his books for my period and I would return them to him in time for his class. I always had to be thinking about how to plan the day, when to meet up with him, how to make sure the other boys didn’t catch on. This concern totally overtook my life; it was all-encompassing and supremely annoying.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh's Father, Anh's Mother, Phil Keenan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 82-83

Explanation and Analysis

In Sydney, Anh begins attending the expensive Catholic school St. Aloysius. However, Anh's father Tam has recently abandoned the family, leaving Anh's mother to provide for her children on her own. As such, Anh's family struggles to cover school expenses. Anh is unable even to afford the textbooks he needs for his lessons and must rely on his friend Phil Keenan to lend him the books.

The hardship that Anh and his family face is reflected in the struggle he confronts in acquiring even the basic necessities for his education. Anh's mother is poor to the point where she cannot fully provide for her children. Yet, Anh's reliance on his friend Phil also points to the ways in which, time and again, Anh turns not only to his family, but to his broader community for support. Phil's support is crucial to Anh's success in school. Without his friend's schoolbooks, Anh would not be able to follow his lessons. As such, the friendship and support that Phil provides represent an example of the strong bonds that Anh forges in Australia, and which see him, eventually, through to success. This moment also underscores the ultimate importance of education when it comes to lifting individuals out of poverty.

☝ I was feeling pretty dejected after my first attempt at being an employee but I still wanted to somehow make money and help out Mum. The solution came in the form of a large male Siamese fighting fish.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Anh's Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 95-96

Explanation and Analysis

In order to help his mother with expenses, Anh takes on a leafleting job, though it soon proves to be too difficult. He is dejected as a result of his failure at the job. However, he soon discovers that he can make good money by breeding Siamese fish and selling them for a profit.


The fact that Anh, as a teenager, feels an obligation to help his struggling mother suggests just how much responsibility he must shoulder at a young age as a result of his family's

poverty. The hardship that his family faces forces him to grow up quickly, compelling him to become concerned about money even while he is still in school and should be focused on his studies. However, Anh's ingenuity and determination are also apparent here. While he fails at the leafleting job, he finds a novel new way of making money by breeding fish. He does not, in other words, let his failure at the leafleting job deter him, but rather continues to cast about for other ways to help his mother. As such, Anh's determination, maturity, and creativity are all apparent in his quest to help his mother.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ I turned to sneak another look. She was chatting to a girl, and then she turned in my direction again and smiled. I don't really believe in love at first sight, but if it does exist then I had just been made a victim. I was smitten.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Suzie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis



On the first day of law school, Anh spots a beautiful blonde girl in class. This is Suzie, who will go on to become his wife and the mother of his children. Anh's instant attraction to Suzie in this moment alludes to the important role that Suzie will come to play in his life. While at first she is only a friend, eventually she also falls in love with Anh. Anh's strong feelings for Suzie mark the commencement of a new phase in his life. Now a young man pursuing studies in law, Anh is on the brink of adulthood. He will, like his parents, establish his own family soon, and it is with Suzie that Anh will do so.

The pleasant circumstances under which Anh and Suzie meet—in a class in law school in Sydney—contrast sharply with the oppressive circumstances under which Anh's parents had met in Vietnam. There, Anh's mother fell in love with Tam when he rescued her from Vietnamese guards who were harassing her. Anh's meeting with Suzie thus also calls attention to how much freedom and opportunity Anh has in Australia compared to what his parents faced in Vietnam.

☛ Law was perfect for some but not for me, I guess, so I enrolled in a visual arts course at Meadowbank TAFE. And I loved it.

People often asked me why I studied law and art at the same time “Why not?” was my answer. If there was a rule saying you couldn’t study full time at TAFE and uni simultaneously, I didn’t know about it. I’ve always found that if you apply yourself at the right time with the right intensity, you can accomplish just about anything. So many times in my life I think my naivety about what you supposedly *could* and *couldn't* do helped me make big leaps that others might think were over the top.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

During his first year at law school, Anh finds that he isn’t liking the subject as much as he’d thought. As such, he enrolls in art classes at another university. That Anh takes on art classes on top of his law classes suggests just how bold and ambitious he is. For most people, a full load of law classes would seem like a lot, and yet Anh, realizing that law doesn’t spark his passion, doesn’t hesitate to pursue art simultaneously. This reflects Anh’s willingness to take risks. Anh’s boldness is partly the consequence of naivety, yet it’s also a result of his genuine courage and ambition—qualities he shares with his father, who also acts boldly on various occasions in his life. Moreover, Anh’s turn to art indicates that he is ready to forge his *own* path forward, rather than do only what is expected of him. His turn to art furthermore suggests his strong creative drive.

☛ [...]I was eating my breakfast when Mum came running in the back door.

“What’s happened to the sewing machines?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The machines, they’re gone!”

I ran out the back and sure enough, our sewing machines had been stolen during the night.

I was angry, but Mum was absolutely shattered. She had saved up for years, and still owed money on those machines. The next month was desperately hard. My mum is an incredibly positive person but when those bastards took away the machines, they took away the opportunity for her to finally give her kids a better life. She tried to hide her pain but we could see it.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Anh’s Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

After Tam loses all the family’s money and abandons them, Anh’s mother is left to support her children on her own. The family save up for months so that Anh’s mother can buy three industrial sewing machines, which she had planned to use to earn more of an income to provide for the family. However, shortly after she buys the sewing machines, they are stolen from the garage where she had stored them.

The dedication of Anh’s mother to her children is apparent in her tireless efforts to provide for them the best life she can. It is for this reason that she works so hard in order to be able to buy the sewing machines. The theft of the machines represents one of the many obstacles that Anh, his mother, and siblings face in their poverty. The machines are incredibly valuable, and the entire family had to work in order to be able to afford them, and therefore their theft represents a massive setback for the family. Where they’ve been lucky many times in their lives, this is a moment of clear misfortune beyond their control.

The devastation of Anh’s mother over the loss of the machines also points to another difficult aspect of poverty for Anh: the fact that he must watch his mother suffer and struggle in order to provide for them. The emotional toll that poverty takes on both Anh’s mother and Anh is as significant, and as devastating, as the financial toll.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☛ [Dave] gave me a range [...] for an average headline comic, the salary was between fifty and hundred thousand. A light went on in my brain: That’s more than Andersen Consulting was asking me to do for a sixty-hour week. *That’s it*, I thought. *I’m going to switch.*

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Dave Grant

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

In his final year of law school, Anh is offered a high-paying job by Anderson Consulting, a top law firm. However, he discovers that he will be expected to work long hours at the

job, which he is also not very passionate about. Anh asks his friend Dave Grant, a comedian, about his comedy career. When he learns that Dave only works four hours a week, and that the averagely successful comedian earns more money than a rookie lawyer, Anh decides to switch to a career in comedy.

Anh's impulsive decision to drop law in favor of comedy points both to his boldness and courage, as well as his naivety. At this point, Anh does not realize that it takes the average comic between five and ten years of working in near-poverty before they can earn a good salary. Yet, Anh's impulsiveness also pays off: within just a year and half of working very hard, he has established himself as a successful comedian in Australia. Anh's decision to pursue comedy represents one of the key moments in his life when he chooses to take a leap into the unknown, which pays off. While his boldness can be read as recklessness on the one hand, on the other it also alludes to the immense courage that Anh time and again acts on whenever he is faced with difficult choices. It also alludes to Anh's tendency to follow his instincts, rather than pursue conventional paths or expectations that others may set for him.

☝ It's incredibly difficult to describe the feelings that go on inside you when you're on your way to see a father you once adored, but for eight long years have been fantasising about killing. You play out the whole thing over and over again with different scenarios: a joyful reunion full of happy tears; an angry reunion where you knock him out.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh's Father

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 150



Explanation and Analysis

At the age of twenty-two, Anh finally contacts his father Tam, from whom he has been estranged for eight years. He drives from Sydney to Melbourne—where his father lives—in order to meet him. Anh's turbulent emotions as he drives to see his father point to Anh's ambivalent and conflicted attitude towards Tam. On the one hand, as a child Anh had looked up to his father, who exhibited wonderful qualities such as courage and bravery—qualities and values that Anh himself has inherited. On the other hand, Tam also lets down the family in the most spectacular way—turning into an alcoholic and then abandoning them to poverty.

Anh's emotions suggest that he is torn between the desire for revenge and the desire for forgiveness and reconciliation. His turbulent feelings point to how much rage he continues to feel toward his father, even many years after Tam's initial act of betrayal. The fantasies of a happy reconciliation, meanwhile, suggest that Anh also longs to restore the relationship of love and affection that he had shared with Tam as a child. Familial relationships are complicated, even in a family as close as Anh's.

☝ I realised that, when he wasn't drunk, this guy was indeed the most wonderful dad in the world. Somehow, during the past eight years I had managed to block out all the good memories and focused solely on what he'd done wrong. I realised I still very much loved this laughing, beautiful, terribly flawed man.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh's Father, Suzie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis



Shortly after his engagement to Suzie, Anh goes to visit his father a second time, this time taking his new fiancée along to meet him. When they arrive, they find that Tam has prepared a massive seafood banquet for them and is at his most charming.

Anh's second visit to Tam marks a turning point in their relationship. During this visit, Anh sees his father as he remembers him from his early childhood—as a charismatic and lovely man. As such, Anh begins to remember—and to rediscover—many of his father's positive qualities. This visit thus marks the beginning of Anh's process of forgiveness, one which leads to a renewed bond with his father. That Anh is willing to focus on his father's good qualities, rather than linger on his betrayal, also points to the fact that Anh makes a choice to embrace the positive about his father and to use it to move on and to heal the relationship with Tam, rather than to allow his view of his father—and the relationship—to remain broken. Reconciliation, then, requires forgiveness and the recognition that good people can still be complicated, deeply flawed human beings.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☞ [...] I did a number of jokes about bull terriers and Datsuns and housing commission estates, and slowly I was getting a few chuckles. Then I moved on to footy jokes, farming jokes and kiwi jokes. Slowly, slowly, I won them over. The old guys finally realised that if they closed their eyes, this Vietnamese kid was actually just an Aussie comedian up there talking about his working-class childhood.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

One night, Anh has a stand-up comedy engagement. Only moments before he goes on stage, he realizes that his audience is a group of Australian veterans—among them many veterans of the Vietnam war. Their reception of Anh on stage is not welcoming: when he presents himself, they realize he is Vietnamese and are hostile.

This comedy performance is one of the most difficult that Anh ever does, as he has never faced such a hostile crowd. Yet Anh's ability to win over the veterans attests to the power of comedy to bridge divides. By focusing on their shared experiences as Australians, Anh makes the veterans realize that, in spite of having roots in Vietnam, a country that was Australia's enemy during the war, Anh is in fact an Australian just like them. In other words, he shows them through his comedy routine that he has more in common with them than what they might have at first assumed.

At the same time, Anh's struggle to win over the veterans also reflects his identity as a refugee and an immigrant—because of his looks and his name, he is not automatically accepted as Australian in the way that a white Australian comic would have been. This is one of the instances in his life when Anh must prove that he does, in fact, belong—that he is just as Australian as those in the audience.

☞ Dad volunteered to go, but Uncle One insisted that Dad should stay and wait, and that he'd go. So Dad and Uncle One split up the boat money between the two of them, and Uncle One went with the men, while Dad waited. An hour later . . . no Uncle One. An hour and a half later . . . no Uncle One.


"I had an ill feeling in my stomach, Anh, like something was wrong." Dad looked up to the ceiling, and his face turned a deep red. "I felt an urge to go down the track, to see what had happened . . . in fact, as soon as Uncle One left with them, I felt an urge to track behind them."

I listened stunned.

"I didn't follow. I just waited."

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Tam / Anh's Father, Uncle One

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

One night, during a visit to Melbourne, Anh's father tells him about the death of his older brother, Uncle One. Uncle One was supposed to accompany the family on their escape from Vietnam. Shortly beforehand however, he is murdered when he went with Tam to purchase a boat for the journey.

Uncle One's murder alludes to the fact that fortune is central to the fates of many of Anh's family members. While some, like Anh's father and the rest of the family, are visited by good luck during crucial moments of their escape from Vietnam, others, like Uncle One, are not so lucky. As such, whether family members survive or not seems to be largely arbitrary—it was quite possible, for instance, that Tam could have been killed in place of his brother.

That Anh's father feels immense guilt over the death of his brother—as suggested by the fact that he regrets not following his brother during the transaction—also points to the terrible burden that those family members who do survive carry as a result of the loss of their loved ones. Tam, in surviving the ordeal, is left to live with a feeling of responsibility and guilt for the death of Uncle One.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ There were a bunch of speeches and then the prime minister stepped up to the microphone.

“The 2005 Young Australian of the Year is . . . Khoa Do!”


Jesus Christ! Khoa's done it. My brother just won Young Australian of the Year.

Khoa, the baby dangled over the side of the boat by the pirates, the toddler that Mum dressed in little girls' dresses, the fat kid who thought the homeless woman was going to eat him... had just won Young Australian of the Year.

Mum was bawling tears of happiness.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Anh's Mother, Khoa

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

After Anh and Khoa volunteer with at-risk kids, Anh is so impressed by Khoa's devotion to the children that he decides to nominate him for the prestigious Young Australian of the Year Award. To the delight of the family, Khoa wins.



Khoa's winning of the award marks a milestone not only in Khoa's life, but in the life of the family. On one level, the award—which is competitive and prestigious—signals Khoa's success in his adopted country. It signals acceptance by an Australia that has at times been hostile towards the family. On another level, the award marks not only how far Khoa has come, but also how far the entire family has come since their journey of escape as refugees from Vietnam. The family—and Khoa, of course, who was dangled over the edge of the boat by pirates—have overcome many dangers, obstacles and setbacks, to arrive at this point where one of them is being celebrated for his achievements. Khoa's award confirms that their struggles have not been in vain—it is likely why Anh's mother, who has worked so hard to look after her children, cries with happiness during this moment.


The fact that Khoa wins such a prestigious award for charity work is also significant, because it suggests that Khoa (like Anh), has inherited his mother's impulse for generosity and giving. Anh's mother emphasizes these values to her children as they are growing up, and clearly the children follow in her footsteps.

☝☝ We handed them the big cheque and Daniel gave me a hug, his tears wetting my ear and my neck.

“Thank you, Anh. We've got the money to look after Sarah now . . . my wife's going to be okay now . . . thank you.”

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

On the show “Deal or No Deal,” Anh wins \$200,000. The money will go to a man, Daniel, who is struggling to provide for and look after his ill wife and two children. Anh surprises Daniel and his wife at home, carrying the check for \$200,000.


Many of the television shows that Anh participates in as his celebrity grows involve charity. As such, Anh leverages his stardom to help others who are struggling, such as Daniel and his wife Sarah. The encounter with Daniel and Sarah reveals Anh's altruistic tendencies. Like his mother and his brother Khoa, Anh commits himself to helping those who are less fortunate. As Anh finds more success and prosperity, this commitment grows. Anh's charity work reflects the values that were prioritized by his mother when he was growing up—the importance of helping others. Furthermore, Anh's efforts to give back to the larger community through his celebrity work also reflect his recognition of the fact that he and his family have benefitted immensely from the help of others, and that it is now his turn to give back to the country, and the community, that has helped him achieve a life of prosperity and success.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ I look across the water and am mesmerised by the beauty of this magnificent setting. My parents set off on a boat trip many years ago to provide their children and grandchildren a better life. And here we are, thanks to them, enjoying this perfect day. In that moment I know I am happy. I look up to the blue sky and give thanks.

Related Characters: Anh Do (speaker), Leon, Luc, Xavier, Suzie, Anh's Mother

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

On a sunny day, Anh, his wife Suzie, his three sons, and his mother take a trip to Bobbin National Park in Australia. In the park, they board a boat to take in the beautiful scenery from the water.

This last scene of the memoir brings Anh's life story full-circle. Sitting on a boat, Anh reflects on the initial boat journey that brought him and his parents to Australia from Vietnam. While that initial journey was dangerous, this boat journey in the park is about enjoyment and leisure. It marks how far Anh and his family have come from the poverty,

dangers, and stresses of their previous life in Vietnam—and from the hardships they initially faced in Australia as well. Ahn has now established his own family with Suzie, under much more comfortable and prosperous circumstances than the ones that his parents faced in Vietnam.

Anh's feelings of gratitude suggest that he does not take his good fortune for granted. Indeed, he is especially grateful to his parents for having made the huge effort necessary to provide him and his siblings with a better life. That he includes Tam in his gratitude is also significant, as it suggests that Anh has at peace with his father and has forgiven him for his betrayal of the family. Ultimately, Anh recognizes the critical role that his family and community have played in enabling him to achieve contentment and prosperity.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

Anh is on a highway, driving at 130 km per hour. He is crying as he drives. He's going to visit his father, whom he hasn't seen for nine years, since he was thirteen years old. Anh is consumed by feelings of rage as he thinks of the visit ahead, and is overcome by fantasies of doing violence to his father, in revenge for him abandoning his family—especially Anh's mother, who was left alone to look after three children.

The book's beginning focuses attention on Anh's conflicted relationship with his father. Anh's tremendous feelings of rage suggest that he has been betrayed, and hurt badly by his estranged father. The father's abandonment of the family has clearly led Anh, his mother, and his siblings to suffer terribly, and this is why Anh is so angry.



Anh arrives at the house, which is in a poor, dilapidated neighborhood, and knocks. A young woman opens the door. He can hear a baby screaming. The woman calls for Anh's father. He appears, and is happy to see his son—reaching for him with affection. Anh is invited inside, where he drinks with his father. He notices, however, that something is wrong with his father's speech—he seems to slur his words. Soon, Anh will learn that his father is seriously ill with a brain tumor. He doesn't know this yet, however, and asks his father what the baby's name is. His father tells him the infant's name is Anh—he named him after his eldest son.

Anh's visit to his father's house indicates that much has changed. Not only is his father terribly ill, as Anh will soon find out, but he has established a new family, and in this way has moved on from his first family. Yet his affection for Anh and his happiness upon seeing him suggest that he continues to feel a strong bond with his estranged child. Furthermore, the fact that Anh's father names his infant son after his eldest son indicates that he holds his eldest son in great esteem, in spite of their estrangement.



CHAPTER 1

It is 1975 in Saigon, Vietnam. It is the year marking the end of the Vietnam War. A young woman runs after a train slowing around a bend. She barely makes it—but someone helps her up. She has a bag with her, full of goods that she walks up and down the aisles of the train selling. This is the work she does to support her family.

At the end of the Vietnam war, Saigon, like much of the country, is devastated. Many people live in poverty. Given the hardship that her family—like many Vietnamese—evidently faces, the young woman must work to help her family make ends meet.



Just as the young woman begins her work, guards arrive and she sits down quickly, hiding her goods, which she is not allowed to sell because she doesn't have a permit from the authorities. One of the guards stops by her, and commands her to lift up her trousers so he can check whether she's hiding anything. The girl thinks she is about to get caught.

The arrival of the guards, and the young woman's fear of them, point to the oppressive circumstances under which Vietnamese lived under communist rule following the Vietnam War. This is a heavily policed society, one in which this young woman can't even sell goods on the train without official authorization.



However, a voice interrupts from the back. A thin twenty-one-year-old man scolds the guard, telling him that this is no way to treat a young woman. The woman immediately falls in love with him—he's saved her. The guard moves on. The next day, she meets the boy in the same carriage of the 4:30 train. They meet two more times on the train. Six months later, they are married, and less than a year later, Anh—their son—is born.

Anh's mother had seven brothers and sisters. Her two eldest brothers, who served as paratroopers alongside Australian and American troops, were condemned to communist **re-education camps** after the end of the Vietnam War. Uncle Thanh, a gentle, quiet man, almost died in the re-education camp, where he was forced to undertake hard labor. Suffering from malaria, he was operated on by the savage camp doctor without anesthesia, and then assumed to be dead—until he was discovered knocking in the coffin in which he had been placed for burial.

Uncle Huy also escaped death by a hair's breadth during the war. While in the army, he had missed a boat he was assigned to catch because of a late night out drinking with his friends. The next morning, as he watched the boat leave without him, it suddenly exploded before his eyes. In Australia, he went on to become a Jesuit priest.

Anh's father grew up in extreme poverty with his large family. In spite of her poverty, his mother (Anh's grandmother), who lost four children, adopted two more to raise along with her eight surviving children. The children were referred to by the number of their birth order. Anh's father Tam was known as Four, among his other siblings, One, Two, Three, Five, Six, Seven, Eight, Nine. Anh's grandmother supported all the children on the meager earnings of her husband's wages, who was a soldier with the army. The family was so poor that they ate mostly rice.

After his marriage to Anh's mother, Anh's father Tam rescues his brothers-in-law Thanh and Huy from the communist **re-education camp** to which they have been condemned, and he does so in a daring fashion. He has a friend whose uncle is a high-ranking official in the communist government. When the uncle is away, Tam has his friend steal the official's uniform, which Tam then puts on. He marches into the re-education camp and demands the release of Thanh and Huy. The camp guards, believing him to be a high-ranking official, comply with his order, and release the two men to him.

The boy's interruption of the guard marks a bold and courageous move on his part, given that the guard, as a state official, could have easily punished him for his insolence. This courageous act—in response to the harassment of the girl—leads to the beginning of a love affair that brings forth Anh, the author of the memoir.



Uncle Thanh's terrible experiences in the re-education camp point to the brutality of the communist government that came to power at the end of the Vietnam war. The re-education camps were essentially concentration camps in which opponents of the communists were punished. As such, Uncle Thanh's near-death experience points to the extreme oppression to which the communists subjected their opponents.



Uncle Huy's near-death experience alludes to the capriciousness, and the violence, of the Vietnam War. Huy survives the war by mere chance, thanks to missing his boat. Hundreds of thousands of others were not so lucky.



The poverty in which Anh's father grows up points to the dire circumstances under which many Vietnamese lived during the Vietnam War. With the country under siege, poverty and hardship were rife, making it very difficult for families—particularly large ones such as Anh's—to survive on anything beyond the most basic necessities. The presence of adopted children amongst the brothers also points to the fact that many children lost their parents during the war.



Tam's daring rescue of his brothers-in-law reflects some of his most charismatic and admirable qualities—his courage and bravery. It also reflects how seriously members of Anh's family take their responsibility towards family members, whether distant or near relations. Here, Tam risks himself to save his wife's brothers, because he is connected to them through his marriage. It is a feat that could have well cost him his freedom, or even his life.



CHAPTER 2

In Saigon, Anh's extended family pools money together to buy a boat—nine meters long by two and a half meters wide. Under Vietnamese communist law, it is illegal to purchase a boat, and therefore dangerous, so the family must carry out the purchase secretly. Anh's father huddles together with Anh's uncles, planning the family's **escape** from Vietnam on the boat. Anh's father is charged with navigating a smaller boat through the city's canals to get to the bigger boat. On the day of his departure, he kisses his wife and children, Anh and Khoa, good-bye. His brothers, Uncles Five and Seven, have already died trying to escape Vietnam.

In small groups, Anh's family and family friends, numbering forty people in total, leave in motorized canoes to the "Motherfish," the boat that they have purchased, which is docked out at sea. Anh, two and a half years old at the time, leaves with his Uncle Thanh and Aunt Huong in a canoe. His uncle and aunt, who have hidden him in the hatch of the canoe, have trouble keeping him silent. They are fearful of the Vietnamese patrols that go up and down the waters, looking to catch "boat people"—Vietnamese who are attempting to escape the country by boat.

Evading Vietnamese patrols, the entire family makes it safely to the "Motherfish." The first morning of their **voyage**, they must cross the border into international waters—one of the most dangerous parts of the trip, given that here, too, they must avoid Vietnamese patrol boats. Indeed, as they approach the border, they find themselves pursued by a patrol boat. Anh's father, who is in charge of navigating the Motherfish, cracks both boat's engines, but the patrol boat comes after them at great speed and begins shooting. One of the boat's engines cuts off. Suddenly, however, the patrol boat turns back—the family has crossed into international waters, and the patrol boat doesn't bother to follow them beyond the zone of surveillance.

On the second day of the **journey**, the family faces their second major test: a huge storm picks up. The women and children take shelter in the hatch of the boat, where they are tossed and turned by the heaving boat, crying and not knowing whether they will live or die. The conditions on the boat—with forty people on board—are extremely cramped and oppressive. Eventually, the weather settles, and the sea becomes calm. Anh's mother rushes up to the deck and is relieved to find that not only are her brothers and brothers-in-law alive, but also her husband, Tam, has survived the storm.

The elaborate and dangerous preparations that the family must undertake to buy the boat, and to prepare for their escape, allude to the oppressive circumstances under which they live in Vietnam. The government seeks total control over the movement of its population, therefore policing their attempts to escape the poverty-racked country. That two of Anh's uncles have died on a previous voyage also points to how dangerous such an attempt at escape can be.



The nerve-wracking moments when the family, in small groups, attempts to make it to the "Motherfish" underscore the danger of this undertaking. Given how heavily policed the country is, it is extremely dangerous to attempt to escape. Anything can go wrong—in this case, Anh's infant cries can land his aunt and uncle in trouble, should they be heard by the patrol guards.



The family faces their first moment of true danger when they are pursued by the Vietnamese patrol boat. The fact that the boat begins shooting at the family reveals the violence to which the Vietnamese authorities are prepared to resort to stop people from fleeing the country. Barely having embarked on their journey, the family's lives are already under threat. It is merely a matter of luck that they cross into international waters quickly enough that the patrol boat ultimately leaves them alone.



The terrible storm that overtakes the boat points to the many dangers that the family faces from all sides. Having just escaped Vietnamese patrol boats, the family is now at the mercy of the elements, and their lives are threatened once more as the boat is almost shipwrecked in the storm. Again, however, the family is lucky in that they survive the ordeal, all unharmed. The storm, however, emphasizes their vulnerability out in the open sea.



A boy named Loc, who has been sent by his mother on the **voyage**, has been having a hard time dealing with the cramped, difficult conditions on board the boat. He is hallucinating. One night, he jumps into the sea. The family members frantically look for him, but the sea is too dark, and there is no trace of him.

Loc's tragic suicide reveals just how unbearable conditions are on the boat. The cramped, meager, perilous conditions require huge psychological strength to withstand, and Loc's suicide indicates that some are unable to bear the strain.



One day, the passengers spot a boat in the distance. Thinking that they will be saved, they wave and jump. The boat that approaches is full of pirates, however, who descend on the family with guns and knives, and strip them of all their valuables, including their one working engine.

The pirates represent yet another threat that the family must contend with on the voyage. Completely at their mercy, the family must give up their few valuables. This pirate attack again reinforces the family's terrible vulnerability on the voyage.



The pirates take the big engine but thankfully miss the small broken engine in the back. Now, Anh's father Tam turns his attention to fixing it. Miraculously, he manages to get it going again using an elastic band from one of Uncle Eight's sandals. When the engine revs to life, everyone cheers, including Tam.

This moment of triumph represents one in which the vulnerable refugees exercise some agency and control over their fates. Tam's ability to fix the engine also alludes to his ingenuity and creativity as the leader of the expedition.



The family's elation is short-lived, however. They are again attacked by a pirate boat. These pirates are even more brutal than the previous lot. On top of again taking anything and everything the family has, one of them attempts to drag Auntie Huang to the pirate boat—where she will clearly be raped. Another pirate picks up Anh's baby brother Khoa and dangles him over the edge of the boat. When the baby's life is threatened, the family finds their courage. They are ready to fight to the death to save Khoa's life. Sensing this, the pirates board their own boat. As the pirates are leaving, one of them, a young man who seems gentler than the rest, throws the family a gallon of water. The family have again experienced incredible luck: the gallon of water saves their lives, as by this point, they are out of all provisions, including water.

That this second pirate attack is even more brutal than the first, attests to the fact that the dangers the family faces on the voyage are limitless. Each peril gives way to a greater one—even children and women are exposed to the threat of the pirates' violence. And yet, here too the family is lucky, as well as courageous. It is their courage in rising to defend infant Khoa that leads the pirates to retreat. They are extremely lucky, however, in gaining the gift of water from the young pirate who drops a gallon overboard to them. In the midst of their vulnerability and suffering, the family encounters fortune.



On the fifth day of the **voyage**, the family spots another boat on the horizon. This time they are fearful because of the terrible experiences they've had with the pirates. But they are in luck: this is a boat carrying German sailors, who, after rescuing the family by helping them board their own boat, take them to safety.

The family's good luck continues when they are spotted by a German merchant ship, ending their perilous journey on their small boat. They are extremely fortunate to have survived all of the perils that they have faced.



CHAPTER 3

The German ship takes the family to an island in the Malaysian archipelago. Three months later, the family receives news that Australia is willing to receive them as refugees. The family arrives in their new country in August 1980. They are given free clothes by nuns. The family is amazed by the many privileges to be found in Australia—including free healthcare and welfare. Anh's father Tam finds a factory job, and the family soon moves from the hostel they had been occupying to a two-room flat. Their neighbor, Ms. Burke (whom they refer to as "Ms. Buk" in a Vietnamese accent), is extremely generous in helping them find their feet.

In 1982, Anh begins school at St. Bridget's Primary—a Catholic school. His parents are so grateful to the Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke for giving them shelter that when Anh is asked in school what he wants to do when he grows up, he says he wants to be prime minister. From this early age, Anh is already absorbing his father's attitude of "You can do anything." However, he is influenced by his mother's advice that it is important to be generous to those less fortunate than himself.

The family moves to a two-bedroom house in the Earlwood neighborhood of Sydney. There, Anh's mother buys a sewing machine, with which she hopes to earn an income as she looks after Anh and Khoa's newborn sister Tram. Anh's father soon quits his factory job, and he and Anh's mother launch a business making clothes for wholesalers. The business is demanding—requiring many hours of work—and Anh's uncles and other members of the extended family also start working in the business.

As the business grows the family moves again to a factory building in Newton. Part of the building is filled with V8 sewing machines, which the family uses to make garments. Anh's father invites Uncle Two and his wife and four children to move in with them. Anh is happy to have the company of his cousins at home—the children play together and go to school together.

The family's amazement at the luxuries of Australia suggests the deprivation from which they come. In Vietnam, the family struggled to provide even for basic necessities, and it was largely for this reason that they fled. Australia represents the polar opposite of Vietnam: here there is prosperity and support everywhere, and the fact that Anh's father finds a job quickly, and the family is relatively independent soon after, indicates that they are ready to take advantage of the opportunities their new country affords them.



Anh's statement that he wants to become prime minister when he grows up reveals his ambitious impulses, even at this young age. It also reflects his mother and father's gratitude for the opportunities that Australia affords them and their children, given that Anh is influenced by his parents' statements about the sitting prime minister, Bob Hawke.



The family exhibits industriousness by launching their own garment-sewing business, proving that, like many refugees, they are ready to work hard to make the most of the opportunities they find in their new adoptive home of Australia. Furthermore, the extended family's involvement in the business also suggests how the family continues to work as a unit, and as a community, to support each other.



That Anh lives in a communal arrangement that includes extended members of the family points to how broad, and also how tightly-knit, his family bonds are. Family encompasses more than his father, mother, and siblings—it includes a community of relatives, such as his cousins, with whom he is very close.



Uncle Two and his family live with Anh and his family for two years, but then disagreements erupt between Anh's mother and father and Uncle Two and his wife. Uncle Two and his family leave, but are soon replaced by Uncle Three, an uncle who arrives from America, as well as Anh's grandmother (his father's mother), and Anh's father's younger sister, who arrive from Vietnam. Other people from the larger Vietnamese community stay with the family—Anh's parents are known for their generosity, always allowing needy members of the community to stay with them. Uncle Six, Tam's adopted brother, also arrives to live with them.

In primary school, Anh has his first public speaking engagement. He must give a speech to compete to become school captain. His English is still not very good, and he stumbles through the speech before the packed auditorium. Some of the children and even teachers laugh at him, but he's encouraged by his other classmates, who cheer him on. Anh doesn't win school captain, but his father Tam nonetheless throws a big celebration. This teaches Anh an important lesson: that what matters is trying, not winning. The following year, Anh wins a big school prize. His father is so proud as he goes up to collect his award that he gives him a standing ovation.

CHAPTER 4

In Year 5 in school, Anh has his first "relationship" with Karen, a Vietnamese girl. He impresses her with his rope skipping skills. But soon he gets tired of holding the rope for her and her friends while they skip during breaks, and the couple breaks up. Anh is distraught, and turns to Uncle Six, who is still living with them at the factory, for comfort. Anh is close to Uncle Six, who is like a second father to him.

Anh's father goes to Melbourne on a work trip. Anh and Khoa accompany Uncle Six on a visit to their father there. After the trip to Melbourne, however, Uncle Six suddenly disappears. He is not heard from again for two decades.

Anh's father Tam and his brothers Two, Three, and Nine buy a waterfront farm. Tam wants to launch a duck egg business. Anh, his siblings, and his cousins have a great time on the farm, where they spend their time fishing and exploring the landscape. While on the farm, Tam also teaches the children many useful skills—how to unlock a car door using a hanger, or how to build a cage for budgies. Anh likes to accompany his father to the livestock auctions, where his father always ends up buying strange animals.

The disagreements that emerge between Anh's parents and Uncle Two and his wife allude to the pressures and tensions that can erupt in the close living conditions under which the extended family lives. And yet, the arrival of other family members who come to live with Anh's family also suggests that these extended family bonds, while strained at times, are nonetheless strong. Furthermore, in taking in needier members of the Vietnamese community, Anh's parents show themselves to be generous and giving, now that they themselves have found some prosperity.



Tam's celebration of his son's run for school captain represents a moment when Tam is at his best as a father. Here, he models for his son an important lesson: the value of courage and effort, rather than the value of winning. Anh will take inspiration from his father's lesson on many occasions later in his life. His father's pride at Anh's achievement in winning the school prize the following year also signals Tam's devotion to and support of his son.



Growing up in an extended family household, Anh is fortunate to have more than one "father figure" around him. Uncle Six represents one such figure. That Anh has male role models and figures of support other than his father to turn to when he is distraught again points to how strong his extended family bonds are.



Uncle Six's sudden disappearance constitutes a blow to the family and to Anh especially, who had been very close to him. This disappearance signals that, as tight as the family relationships are, they are not immune to disruption.



The times that Anh and the family spend on the farm are in many ways the happiest that they spend together. Tam, here, also acts as a model father, one who teaches his children many valuable skills, impressing his son and the rest of the children. That Anh looks up to and enjoys his father's company is reflected by the fact that he likes to follow him to the livestock auctions.



One day, Tam buys cheap feed for the ducks the family is rearing on the farm. The feed turns out to be bad, and several thousand ducks die. The farm business ends, and the property bubble bursts. The family sells the farm for a loss, and returns to their sewing business.

Tam's decision to feed the ducks cheap feed reflects his risk-taking tendencies, but this time, the risk doesn't pay off, and the farm is destroyed. This is an example of Tam's impulsiveness landing the family in trouble.



CHAPTER 5

Anh's grandmother—Tam's mother—is a big part of Anh's childhood. Not only is she a passionate gardener, but she impresses Anh with her Nintendo skills. Unfortunately, she also has a knack for throwing away important papers. On several occasions, she throws official documents that she can't read into the trash.

Anh's grandmother represents another extended family figure who plays an important role in his life during his childhood. Anh's affectionate depiction of her suggests the esteem in which he holds her. Anh's childhood is full of figures other than his father and mother with whom he shares deep bonds, and his grandmother is no exception.



When the time comes for Anh to go to high school, his mother and father, who value education highly, begin looking around for a good school. On the suggestion of Uncle Huy—who has become a priest—the family sets its sights on the boys' school of St. Aloysius. The school has two mottos: "Men for others"—which pleases Anh's mother, and "Born for greater things," which pleases Anh's father.

The two school mottos of St. Aloysius, which satisfy Anh's mother and father, point to the values that are prioritized by Anh's parents and that reign supreme in the Do household: generosity and ambition.



The school is expensive, though, and the family is unsure if they can afford it. Anh and his brother Khoa sit for a scholarship exam, and manage to win partial scholarships. Even though they have not won full scholarships, Anh's mother and father are ecstatic. Anh begins to realize that his parents are working so hard so that they can give their children a better life. Although they have huge dreams for their children, his parents never put pressure on them. The family goes out to celebrate the boys' scholarship results over a McDonalds meal. Things are about to go downhill, however.

Once again, Anh's parents show their great love for and devotion to their children by celebrating their achievements, even if these achievements are only partially successful. His parents' loving support also reveals to Anh that they only want the best for their children, and that they are making great sacrifices in order to make a good life a reality for them. Anh, in other words, is arriving at a new appreciation of his parents' sacrifices and support.



CHAPTER 6

Anh's father Tam is incredibly optimistic. Two of his favorite sayings are "You can do anything," and "There's now and there's too late." When the duck farm was doing well, Tam and his brothers Three and Nine had invested in several properties. Eventually, however, interest rates went up, and they had to sell these properties at a huge loss. Tam—who had instigated both the duck farm and the property buying ventures—not only loses all the family's savings, but also the savings of his two brothers.

The loss of the duck farm, as well as the family money, marks a turning point in the family's fortunes in Australia. Tam is largely responsible for this loss. While optimism and courage are among Tam's more admirable qualities, at times they tend to tip into recklessness. Here his boldness has led the family to bankruptcy, and has jeopardized even the fortunes of his two brothers.



One night, not long after the family has lost all their money, Anh wakes up to find his father engaged in a physical fight with Uncle Three. Soon after, Uncle Three moves back to America. From this point on, Anh's father begins drinking heavily.

Uncle Three had left Vietnam with Uncles Five, Seven, and Nine six months before Anh and his family made their **voyage** of escape. On the journey, Anh's uncles had also been caught by pirates—who sank their boat. Only Uncles Three and Nine survived. The two surviving uncles ended up in America, before joining their brother Tam in Australia. But Tam lost all of their money, so now they are returning to America with nothing.

Anh's father Tam has become an alcoholic. He no longer helps Anh's mother with the garment business and is even occasionally violent towards his family. At times he disappears for weeks. One day, Anh's mother announces that Tam has returned to Vietnam. Anh is relieved to hear this news—he is glad not to have his alcoholic father in the house.

Six months later, Anh's mother tells the children that Tam is back from Vietnam, but she refuses to have him in the house. Anh, too, doesn't want him back. He takes to sleeping with a knife under his bed, to protect his mother and siblings in case his father shows up at the house.

One day, Tam indeed shows up at the house. Anh's mother is terrified. Anh gets his knife and goes to the door. There, he finds his father a wreck: he is sobbing, and walks away. Anh doesn't see him for the rest of his childhood.

CHAPTER 7

At their St. Aloysius school, Anh and his brother Khoa struggle to keep up with their wealthier schoolmates. They are terribly poor, living on their single mother's garment-sewing wages. They can't even afford their school uniforms, and must make do with recycled or patched together uniforms that are ill-fitting.

Tam's loss of the money leads fractures to emerge among the family. That he and Uncle Three end up in a physical fight suggests just how deep, and serious, these rifts are.



The death of Uncles Five and Seven during a previous journey with Uncles Three and Nine suggests the extent to which luck is responsible for the survival of remaining family members, including Anh and his family. It is simply a matter of chance that Uncles Three and Nine survive the pirate shipwreck, just as it is a matter of chance that Anh and his family survive their own journey of escape.



Tam's turn to alcohol marks the beginning of the end of his position as a positive role model and inspiration to his children. The fact that Anh is relieved to hear that his father is away in Vietnam also reflects the fact that his view of his father has changed drastically for the worse.



That Anh takes to sleeping with a knife in case his father reappears, reveals the extent to which he feels threatened by his father. This also marks a change in Anh's role. Whereas before, Tam had been the protector of the family, now it is Anh taking on that role.



The turbulence that Tam's alcoholism and aggression occasions amongst the family is apparent in this scene. Anh's family feels so threatened by Tam that Anh is pushed to the brink of doing violence to his father. Yet his father is also clearly suffering, as his weeping reveals.



The struggles that Anh and his brother Khoa face in keeping up with their school expenses reveal the financial toll of their father's abandonment of the family. They are left to make do on their mother's meager wages, which are not adequate.



In Year 8, half of Anh's class is picked to participate in drama. Anh wants to be picked because drama is an escape for him. To his disappointment, however, he isn't picked. However, another teacher, Mrs. Borny, decides to run drama for the reject boys anyway. She also teaches them to write stories. After reading his stories, she tells Anh that he's "a talented storyteller." This piece of encouragement is priceless to Anh. In fact, twenty years later, as a famous comedian, Anh thanks Mrs. Borny for her encouragement on a TV show called "Thank You."

At school, Anh also can't afford his textbooks—which cost \$1,000 per semester. Instead, he relies on his friend Phil Keenan to lend him his books, so Anh can follow his lessons. Still, Anh gets in trouble at times for "forgetting" his books, and must serve detention. Anh is so stressed out by his poverty that he tells his mother he wants to go to public school. This isn't true, but he wants his mother to stop suffering. She is working without break to provide for her children, even though she is also asthmatic.

Although they are very broke, Anh's mother continues inviting poorer relatives to stay with them. Once, she invites a destitute distant relative and her five-year-old son to stay with them. Seeing their poverty, Anh realizes how lucky he and his family are, even amidst their poverty.

Anh, who is in the school's basketball team, is determined to score thirty points in a game so as to win new Reeboks to replace the cheap sneakers that he wears. His sneakers are so bad that during games he must steep their soles in lemonade to make them stick to the floor. At one game, when Anh is close to scoring his target of thirty points, he runs out of lemonade. His friend Phil Keenan runs off to buy him Diet Coke to use instead—but the Diet Coke is a disaster. Anh slips all over the court, and misses making his thirty points. He fails, therefore, to win new Reeboks.

One day, coming back from school on the train, Anh is almost mugged by three boys, who make him show them his wallet. Thankfully, he has nothing on him, and they leave him alone. He watches as they bash another boy on the train and steal his Reeboks. He reflects that he is lucky he didn't win the Reeboks that he so badly wanted to win. If he had, they would have been stolen.

Mrs. Borny's encouragement of Anh represents a crucial moment of support during his adolescence. Her praise clearly gives Anh a boost of confidence that carries him a long way. It is a boost that is sorely needed at this time—given the financial struggles the family faces, as well as the emotional turmoil that has recently been occasioned by Tam's abandonment of the family.



Phil Keenan is one of the key figures who provides support during Anh's adolescence. He is one of the many figures in Anh's life—both family and friends—that provide support at crucial times. That Anh is so distraught at watching his mother work so hard also reveals that, on top of the financial struggles, Anh is also burdened by his mother's suffering.



Anh's mother's decision to invite a destitute relative to stay with them teaches Anh an important lesson: as much as he and his family struggle, they are better off than many others. It is important, he realizes, to be grateful for what he has, even if it is little.



Anh's attempt at winning new Reeboks points to the lengths to which he goes, and the creative means he employs, in order to overcome the circumstances of his poverty. And while, in some sense, Anh's escapade with the Diet Coke can be read as a disappointment, given that Anh doesn't score the 30 points he had hoped, he tells the story humorously, thus finding fun and laughter in a story that is, on another level, disheartening.



Anh's capacity for positivity and for gratitude is reflected in his attitude towards this incident. Seeing the boys steal another boy's Reeboks, Anh is grateful that he has not won the Reeboks he had so badly wanted. Thus, Anh here reflects a tremendous capacity to put a positive spin on things.



To help his mother, Anh gets a job delivering pamphlets around the neighborhood. But he quickly realizes that the massive stack he receives is too big to deliver in time for the deadline. The whole family has to help him, but still they finish late, and Anh doesn't even get paid. His mother then tells him to stop worrying about money, and to devote himself to his education.

However, Anh doesn't give up on making money. With his brother Khoa, he begins breeding fish, which they then sell for a profit. Unable to afford fish tanks, Anh makes the tanks himself, using whatever glass he can find. He makes a huge fish tank, which he keeps in the living room. One day, the fish tank cracks and breaks—spilling 1,000 liters of water into the living room. The family rushes to save the fish, depositing them in smaller containers. Anh narrowly avoids a serious injury when, rushing to switch off a power board before water reaches it, he is electrocuted—but is luckily unharmed.

In his final year of high school, Anh is impressed by an army recruiter who promises \$15,000 a year for joining up. He schedules an interview, and then asks his mother for her signature—as an underage potential enlistee, he needs her permission. His mother refuses to sign. Anh nonetheless forges her signature and goes to the interview. He's rejected, however, on account of his asthma. His mother, who discovers from Khoa that he had gone for the interview without her consent, tells him that war has destroyed too many people's lives already.

In Year 12, Anh has to pick a university course to follow. Given his experience with poverty, he is first and foremost interested in making money, and so settles on studying law, as it can lead to a lucrative career that can lift him and his family out of poverty.

CHAPTER 8

On the first day of law school, Anh locks eyes with a beautiful blonde girl, and he is immediately smitten. Her name is Suzie. They become fast friends. When he confesses his feelings to her, however, she tells him that she thinks of him as no more than a friend.

That Anh desires to help his mother by taking on the leafleting job reflects his urge to relieve her of her struggle to provide for them. And although he fails, his attempt shows that at a young age, Anh already carries a huge burden of responsibility that is beyond his years.



Anh's creativity and ingeniousness are reflected in the fish-breeding business, which is a success. Yet Anh's youthfulness is also suggested by his recklessness—he clearly does not do a very good job constructing the fish tanks, and this leads to an accident. The large water spillage could even have led to tragedy, as reflected in the fact that Anh almost electrocutes himself.



Anh's insistence on interviewing with the army recruiter—even going behind his mother's back to do so—points to his naivety when it comes to war. Unlike his parents, who lived through the Vietnam War, Anh has not experienced war firsthand and therefore thinks of the recruiter's offer merely as a chance at money. His mother's admonishment is a reminder that she, unlike her son, understands the true costs of war.



Anh, on the brink of adulthood, seeks to resolve the problem of his and his family's poverty. That Anh thinks of money first and foremost in choosing a career suggests how responsible he feels to help his family out of poverty.



Anh's immediate attraction to Suzie points to the fact that law school opens up more than career opportunities for Anh; it also opens up romantic possibilities, even though Suzie is not immediately interested in him.



Anh discovers that he doesn't like law very much, and enrolls simultaneously in art school, often skipping his law classes for art. He feels obliged to continue with law because he knows he can secure a good livelihood for himself and his family through it, but he feels that his true vocation is art. He begins dating girls in art school, but his heart is still with Suzie. Every time he hints at his feelings, however, she rejects him, telling him they can only be friends.

Anh's decision to enroll in art school on top of law school reveals his boldness and audacity, given that few students would think of enrolling in more than one university course at once. In enrolling in art school, Anh also reveals his instinct for forging his own path forward, rather than being limited to the path made for him.



One day, while driving to the local shops near his home, Anh is hit by a bus. The car he is driving is completely destroyed, but he's fine. His mother, seeing the crash, runs screaming out of the house. Once she reassures herself that he's fine, she turns to comforting the shaken bus driver. Anh is full of love for her at this moment—as always, she acts out of immense compassion, even for the bus driver who has almost killed her son.

The car crash represents a frightening moment for the family—that Anh is not hurt is almost a miracle. His mother's distress indicates just how terrifying the crash is. However, her turn to comforting the bus driver, as Anh notes, reveals the immense depth of her empathy and generosity.



The family receives \$4,000 in insurance money for the destroyed car. They are ecstatic—especially as they had paid only \$3,500 for the car. They use most of the money to buy a computer, which Anh and his brother Khoa use to type up their school work and essays with.

Although the children are growing up and attending university, they are clearly still struggling with money, as revealed in their ecstasy over the insurance money they receive. They put the money toward a practical consideration, underscoring the importance of education for improving their lives.



In his second year of law school, Anh is juggling a lot. On top of law classes, he has his art classes and is helping his mother with her garment sewing work. He also takes on several odd jobs—including one as a mail sorter—to earn extra cash.

The multiple responsibilities that Anh carries on his shoulders point to just how much pressure he continues to be under as a result of the family's poverty.



The whole family works hard to save money. Finally, they have enough—\$15,000—to buy three industrial strength sewing machines, which Anh's mother will use to earn more money. They store the machines in the back garage of their house in Yagoona. But one day, Anh's mother goes to check on the machines, only to discover that they have been stolen. She is completely devastated.

The theft of the machines that the family had worked so hard to save for represents one of the major setbacks that the family faces as a result of their poverty. This is one of the many moments of ill fortune that mark their struggles with financial hardship.



Anh is heartbroken to see his mother suffering so much over the theft of the sewing machines, and curses his father for abandoning them and not being there to help them. He wants to make his father pay. He calls up Uncle Eight, and finds out his father is living in Melbourne. He gets his number from Uncle Eight, but doesn't call for another two years.

Watching his mother suffer reawakens feelings of rage and anger in Anh at his father's abandonment. Anh acquires his father's number from Uncle Eight not out of desire for reconciliation, therefore, but out of a desire for revenge, and this indicates just how raw his father's betrayal still is for Anh.



Anh, who has a new girlfriend called Rachel, decides to go into business with her. She gives him her savings so that he can start a market stall selling crystals. Competitors, however, soon arrive, and to give himself an edge, Anh begins selling Native American souvenirs. Given his dark looks, his buyers often assume that he's Native American, and he begins playing along, saying he belongs to the Chippewa tribe. Eventually, however, he and Rachel break up, and Anh returns to her all the profits from the business.

As an art student, Anh embraces the alternative lifestyle. He hangs out with hippies and grows his hair long. He is in search of an identity. At a festival, he meets a woman by the name of Amanda, who becomes his girlfriend. To please Amanda, who is vegan, Anh also becomes vegan. When they break up after six months however, Anh immediately returns to eating meat, which he has missed.

As he cycles through various girlfriends, Anh remains good friends with Suzie, whom he often turns to for relationship advice. In the meantime, he continues running the crystal business he had first launched with his ex-girlfriend Rachel.

Anh's entrepreneurial talents are put to good use through the establishment of the market stall business he starts with Rachel's money. Again, Anh's ability to find creative ways to make money reflects his ingenuity and originality. The fact that he plays along with his buyers' belief that he is Native American suggests that he uses their ignorance to his own advantage.



Anh is clearly in search of an identity during his law and art school years. His embrace of the alternative lifestyle, and his temporary adoption of veganism thanks to Amanda, reveal a young man who is experimenting with different modes of being as a means of discovering himself.



That Anh's friendship with Suzie lasts, in spite of the fact that he has romantic feelings for her that she doesn't reciprocate, suggests that, even just as friends, Anh and Suzie share a strong bond.



CHAPTER 9

Anh continues seeing Suzie in his law classes. He is happy when she comes to his defense one day in class, when a friend of his, Steve, jokingly makes fun of Anh for snuggling up to him during a recent camping trip, during which the two friends shared a tent.

One evening, Anh accompanies Steve to the Harold Park Hotel, a famous comedy club. With Steve's encouragement, Anh signs up for an open mic night at the club to do a 5-minute routine about a disastrous holiday he'd once gone on. To his surprise, the routine goes over well with the audience. Not only that, but a woman comes up to him after the show and books him to do a 10-minute routine at another comedy club.

In his fourth year of law school, Anh begins interviewing for top law firms, but at a three-day retreat interview for the law firm Anderson Consulting, he realizes once and for all that law isn't for him. And yet, Anh gets offered a job at Anderson Consulting—a job that would resolve all of his family's financial problems. Upon discovering that he would be working 60-65 hours a week at the job, however, he is in two minds about taking it, especially given that he doesn't like law work.

Suzie is clearly still the woman whose opinion Anh most esteems. His happiness when she comes to his defense against his friend also suggests that she, too, feels protective of him.



Anh's attendance at the comedy club marks a key moment in his life, given that this experience opens up the door to another career for him. Indeed, the fact that Anh is immediately booked to do another routine after his first presentation also indicates that he clearly has a talent for comedy.



Almost at the end of his studies, Anh must face the knowledge that he does not like the law, and has no interest in it. He is at a crossroads here: the job offer from Anderson Consulting would solve his family's financial problems, but it would also mean that he must commit himself to drudgery and long hours that he has no appetite for.



At a comedy event, Anh learns from his friend Dave, a comedian, that he works only four hours a week. Dave also informs Anh that the averagely successful comedian earns between \$50,000-100,000 a year, which is more than what Anh would earn at a law job with Anderson Consulting. What Anh doesn't quite realize at this point is that it takes the average comedian five to ten years of working for very little money to achieve this kind of income. But, when he hears about what a good life Dave has, he decides to switch to comedy. He turns down the law job at Anderson Consulting. His mother, always supportive, tells him to go for the comedy career if he thinks he can do it.

Anh works extremely hard for a year taking any performances that come his way. In 1999, he wins the Harold Park Hotels Comedian of the Year award. This is soon followed by another big award—he wins a comedy competition in Canberra, for a prize of \$5,000. He uses the award money to get his sister Tram braces. Tram, throughout her childhood, has been so self-conscious over her misaligned teeth that she barely smiles. Finally, Anh can afford to help her.

Anh calls up Suzie one day and discovers that she has recently broken up with a boyfriend. They go to see a film, and then spend all night talking. Something has changed in their relationship. Anh again shares his feelings for her, and this time, to his delight, Suzie confesses that she also has feelings for him.

As a result of his comedy work, Anh begins getting small television parts, and a year and half into his comedy career, he is offered a job hosting the television show "Rush TV." With a regular income for the first time in his life, Anh secures a mortgage to buy a house for his mother in the neighborhood of Yagoona in Sydney. When he takes her to see the house, his mother is so happy that she begins weeping.

Three months into his relationship with Suzie, Anh realizes that he's very happy, and remembers his father's advice that if he finds the right woman, he should marry her. Anh proposes, and Suzie accepts. Engaged at 22, Anh suddenly feels an urge to contact his father and to tell him that he has found the right woman. He takes out the number that he has kept in his wallet for two years, and calls his father. He gets his address in Melbourne and drives to see him.

Anh's impulsive decision to turn down the job with Anderson Consulting and to take up comedy instead reveals the courage and boldness that Anh demonstrates during key junctures in his life. Of course, such courage is also the result of naivety, and yet it shows that Anh is unafraid to follow his own path when he feels called to do so. That his mother is supportive of the move also suggests that Anh's courage and boldness have their roots in his parents'—in this case his mother's—support.



Anh's incredible capacity for hard work is revealed by the fact that within a year a half, he achieves what it takes some comedians years and years to achieve: he establishes his reputation as a major comedian by winning big awards. His decision to use his award money to get his sister braces also shows his immense sense of responsibility as Tram's older brother. In his success, he thinks of his family first.



Suzie's changed feelings for Anh indicate that, with time, she has gained a new appreciation for him. His devotion to her, as well as his respect for her feelings throughout their friendship, is finally paying off, as Suzie comes to realize how special he is.



With each successful step he takes, Anh thinks of his family, and how to help them. This is reflected here in Anh's procuring of a mortgage to buy his mother a home. Just as he had helped his sister afford braces when he won the comedy award, here he uses his income to provide his mother with her dream house. Anh's thoughtfulness reflects how important family bonds are to him.



Anh's engagement to Suzie marks a milestone in his life—he has now set off on the path to establishing his own family. That his father comes to mind at this time suggests that, even if Anh's link to Tam is attenuated, it is still very much there. This is particularly reflected in the fact that Anh remembers Tam's advice when deciding to propose to Suzie.



At his father's house in Melbourne, Anh sits for an hour talking to him. It has been nine years since he last saw him. He discovers that his father's new baby son has been named Anh, after him. When he leaves, he gives his father a wrong number. He had hoped, that his father would apologize for abandoning the family all those years ago, and is upset that Tam has behaved instead as though it has been only a short while since they last saw each other.

Nonetheless, Anh calls his father again. This time, on the phone, he notices that his father's speech is not quite right. He returns a month later to visit his father, this time taking Suzie along. When they arrive, they find that Tam has prepared a massive seafood banquet for them. Anh's father—whose speech has returned to normal—is at his most charming as he tells funny stories to Suzie and Anh. After Suzie leaves, Anh continues to sit with Tam late into the night. He again notices that his father is slurring his speech, and suddenly, his father collapses, crying.

Anh and Suzie go shopping for an engagement ring. The couple decides to have a big engagement party in the Vietnamese style. The party is held at Suzie's family home, and Anh's family arrives on the day carrying a large roasted pig, according to Vietnamese tradition. Anh's mother and the rest of his family are overwhelmed by the opulence of Suzie's neighborhood, as well as her home, and Anh's mother frets that perhaps they haven't brought a big enough pig. Nonetheless, upon arrival, Anh's mother gives a moving speech in broken English. The engagement party goes off without a hitch. Both families enjoy the Vietnamese banquet that Anh's family has prepared.

As the couple spend more time with their families after their engagement, cultural differences begin to emerge. Anh's family likes to subject Suzie to all kinds of elaborate and strange Vietnamese dishes, which she dutifully eats. Anh, for his part, often feels like he is visiting a restaurant when he goes to Suzie's family home—so immaculate and formal are the surroundings and the meals.

Anh and Suzie celebrate their wedding day in the school chapel of St. Aloysius, his old school, with their families. To Anh's relief, Suzie's father has insisted on paying for most of the wedding expenses. At the church wedding, Anh cries when a distant relative sings a song dedicated to the couple's parents. The song makes Anh think about his father, who is not present at the celebration, having excused himself from attending. Anh had been glad initially that his father wouldn't attend, but now he misses him, although he also thinks of the hardships that his mother and siblings have endured in his father's absence.

This first visit with Tam does not meet expectations. While the visit is cordial and polite on the surface, Anh's decision to give Tam the wrong number suggests that he is not yet satisfied with his father's behavior, and that he seeks some sort of acknowledgement and apology for the hurt and betrayal that his father has caused.



The second visit with Tam marks the beginning of a change in Anh's relationship with his father. During this visit, Tam's impeccable behavior towards Suzie and Anh reminds Anh of his father's many good qualities. Yet Tam's breakdown after Suzie's departure—as well as his slurred speech—indicates that all is not entirely well with Tam. Like his son, he is also experiencing turmoil.



The engagement party is the first meeting of two families who come from extremely different backgrounds and experiences. That Anh's family is overwhelmed by the wealth and opulence of Suzie's family home reveals the large gap in affluence between them. That the party is ultimately a success indicates that in spite of the obvious contrasts between the families, Anh and Suzie's engagement works to bring them together and to forge bonds that cross the cultural and economic divides.



In dwelling on the cultural differences between his family and Suzie's, Anh alludes to the gulf that separates the families. He describes these differences largely in a humorous tone, however, and in doing so suggests that they are ultimately more amusing than anything else.



Anh's sudden sense of sadness at his father's lack of attendance points to the very conflicted feelings that Anh still holds towards Tam, even though he has resumed contact with him. Anh is sad that his father is absent, and he is still somewhat angry at him. He also clearly feels some guilt at having not wanted his father to attend his wedding, and there seems to be some regret that he had not shown more generosity towards him by insisting on his attendance.



Anh and Suzie move into a flat in north Sydney. Suzie works as a lawyer while Anh continues with his comedy career. At times, he travels to Melbourne for his shows, where his father takes to accompanying him to the performances, helping to carry his props. After one show in Melbourne, Tam confesses to Anh that he has a brain tumor. He also tells him that he wants to meet Anh's siblings, Khoa and Tram, to tell them that he loves them. But when Anh talks to Khoa about meeting Tam, Khoa refuses to go.

As Anh and Suzie establish their new life together, Anh's relationship with his father grows. In taking such a deep interest in his son's life and work, Tam also clearly seeks to mend his relationship with Anh. His revelation that he has a brain tumor suggests that he is aware of his mortality. Khoa's refusal to see his father, however, suggests that not all of the children are ready to overcome their anger at his betrayal.



CHAPTER 10

Anh travels around Australia to for his comedy gigs. He is accompanied by Suzie, who has quit her law job to pursue writing and photography. At times, Anh has racist experiences—as when a bouncer at one club he is supposed to perform in refuses to let him and Suzie enter.

While Anh emphasizes that he has had few racist experiences during his comedy career, the encounter with the bouncer points to the fact that, in Australia, Anh is perceived to be “other” by some white Australians regardless of his accomplishments.



Anh's most difficult comedy performance, however, involves performing in front of 200 Australian war veterans—among them Vietnam veterans. When Anh walks on stage, the veterans are brimming with hostility; they don't laugh at his jokes. Over the course of the performance, however, Anh wins them over, and they soon realize that, in spite of his Vietnamese roots, Anh is an “Aussie” just like them.

While this comedy performance before 200 veterans tests Anh's limits as a comedian, it also ultimately reveals the power of comedy's capacity to overcome divides. While the veterans view Anh as an enemy at the beginning of the show, by the end of it they view him as one of them.



Anh begins getting more TV work, including appearances on bigger shows shot in Melbourne. After one big show that Anh appears in, which also features the American actor Will Smith, he and his father Tam spend the evening drinking.

Anh's gamble to pursue a career in comedy is paying off. Another advantage to his career is that it takes him to Melbourne, where his father lives, and therefore gives him and his father the opportunity to reconnect.



On that evening, his father reminisces, remembering his eldest brother Binh, or Uncle One. Uncle One had been the gentlest and kindest of the brothers, Tam tells Anh. He and Tam had gone together to purchase the boat on which the family was to make their **escape** from Vietnam. When they met the three men from whom they were supposed to purchase the boat, however, the men insisted that only one brother could come with them to see the vessel. Uncle One left with them. As Tam watched him depart with the men, he was overcome by a terrible feeling—but he didn't follow his brother. Uncle One never returned. The next day, Tam had discovered his brother's body in a wooded area. He had been murdered by the men. Tam was devastated, and felt terrible guilt, especially when returning his brother's body to Anh's grandmother.

The tragic story of Uncle One's murder clearly marks an terrible moment in Tam's life. Because of Tam's presence on the night of the murder, he is left to live with guilt, especially as he had made the choice not to follow his brother and the three men. Uncle One's murder also reveals in stark form the role that luck or ill fortune play in the family's lives. Tam survives the evening simply because he had not gone with the three men, while Uncle One dies. This again highlights how fortunate Tam as well as his children are in surviving so many odds.



On this evening, Tam also tells Anh that, in spite of his reputation for courage and daredevilry, he has always been terrified whenever undertaking a courageous action. This includes the time when he walked into the Communist **re-education camp**, dressed in a senior official's uniform, to rescue his two brothers-in-law Thanh and Huy. He had also been terrified while guiding the family on the "Motherfish" boat during their **escape** from Vietnam.

Anh's acknowledgment of his fear here represents a moment when he makes himself vulnerable before his son, revealing himself to be human. In doing so, Tam also shows his strength—he has undertaken many courageous and brave acts, in spite of the terrible fear that he felt.



CHAPTER 11

Anh auditions for a children's show called "Don't Blame Me." His love of animals, which the show features, serves him well. He arrives to the audition with a budgie on his head, and gets the part.

Anh's originality and creativity are again on display here, as he comes up with an inventive way to get the attention of the show's producers in order to win the part.



Anh and his brother Khoa also undertake charity work. The two brothers volunteer with at-risk kids, and Khoa comes up with the idea of making a feature film with them. They manage to fundraise for the film, and a year and a half later, their film, entitled "The Finished People," is released in theatres, and receives critical acclaim.

Anh and Khoa's work with the at-risk children shows how, as they begin to find prosperity, they do not forget about those less fortunate than themselves. They bring their creative talents to bear in a way that benefits others.



Impressed by Khoa's devotion and work with the at-risk children, Anh nominates him for the Young Australian of the Year Award. To everyone's delight—most especially Anh's mother—Khoa wins the award. This marks a milestone not only in Khoa's life, but also in the family's. As he watches the award ceremony, Anh reflects that Khoa is that same child who had almost lost his life on the "Motherfish," when, during the family's **escape** from Vietnam, he had been dangled over the edge of the boat by pirates.

Anh's winning of the Young Australian of the Year Award is an important moment for the family because it marks just how far they have come from poverty and hardship. Khoa and his siblings are now in a position to help others, and their efforts and their struggles are being recognized and rewarded.



After Anh's show "Don't Blame Me" ends, he finds it difficult getting parts as an Asian actor. As a result, he decides to write his own script, for a film he calls "Footy Legends." The whole family becomes involved in the making of the film, and the film is released successfully.

In scripting the film "Footy Legends," Anh once again shows his capacity for ingenuity and creativity. Rather than being held back by the lack of availability of parts for Asian actors, he creates his own, with the help of his family.



"Footy Legends" takes Anh's career to a whole new level. Suddenly, he gets calls to appear on big TV shows such "Thank God You're Here." He also receives a call to appear on the show "Dancing with the Stars." Although Anh can't dance for his life, he agrees to do the show, especially when he is informed that he will be teamed up with dancing legend Luda Kroitor.

Anh's decision to take matters into his own hands by scripting and making "Footy Legends" pays off, as it leads to many more opportunities opening up for him. In accepting to take part in "Dancing with the Stars," he also shows his adventurousness and fearlessness, especially given that he can't dance.



During his participation in “Dancing with the Stars,” Anh visits a children’s hospital, which will be partly supported by proceeds from the show. The visit to the hospital reinforces his desire to succeed on the show, and he begins practicing much harder. His efforts pay off: he makes it to the show’s finale, although he doesn’t win.

The fact that Anh redoubles his efforts on the show after visiting the children’s hospital suggests the extent to which he is motivated by altruism. As someone who has suffered hardship himself, Anh is very sensitive to the suffering of others and wants to do well on the show simply to benefit the children’s hospital.



Anh’s family are ecstatic over Anh’s newly-found celebrity on “Dancing with the Stars.” Both his father and mother host big gatherings whenever he’s on television.

The joy that Anh’s parents take in his television success points to their position as his biggest fans and supporters. Just as they cheered him on as a child, they cheer him now on as well.



Strangers begin recognizing Anh in the street. One day, he is stopped by Uncle Six—the uncle who had lived with Anh and his family twenty years ago, soon after their arrival in Australia, and who had disappeared mysteriously. Uncle Six tells Anh he’s been watching him on television. Anh had heard from his father that Uncle Six, who is adopted, had turned his back on the family—even ignoring his grandmother on the street.

Anh’s newfound celebrity leads to contact with strangers as well as renewed contact with figures from his past, such as Uncle Six, to whom Anh had been very close as a child. Yet Anh believes that his Uncle has behaved ungratefully towards the family by turning his back on them. Uncle Six’s disappearance so many years ago points to the fact that, while Anh’s family bonds are strong, they are not without conflict.



While undertaking research for his memoir, however, Anh delves deeper into Uncle Six’s story. He discovers from his grandmother that Uncle Six was in fact not an adopted child—he was the love child of her husband, who had him with another woman while serving as a soldier during the Vietnam War. No one in the family, except Anh’s grandmother, knew this secret.

The discovery that Uncle Six is in fact not an adopted child, but a love child of Anh’s grandfather, suggests that there are skeletons in the family’s closet. Not everything is always as it seems in Anh’s family, as Anh himself comes to realize through Uncle Six’s story.



On the show “Celebrity Deal or No Deal,” Anh wins \$200,000 dollars, which goes to a man looking after his sick wife and two children. When Anh goes to hand the check to the couple, they are extremely grateful, and everyone is moved to tears.

Anh’s appearance on this show reflects yet another instance when Anh uses his celebrity to help others. Anh’s emphasis on benefitting others suggests that, like his brother Khoa, he has inherited his mother’s impulse for altruism.



Anh continues to pick up television work: he is offered to do a travelogue on the Beijing Olympics. He appears on other shows, including the sports quiz show “The Squiz” and “Top Gear.” In the television show “Thank You,” he thanks his Year 8 teacher Mrs. Borny, who, back in St. Aloysius, had encouraged his storytelling talents. He surprises her one day in her classroom in the school, appearing with a camera crew to say thank you in person, fifteen years since he had himself been in her class.

Anh’s surprising of Mrs. Borny in her classroom points to the depths of the gratitude that Anh feels for this teacher, who encouraged him at a crucial point in his adolescence. Even after decades, Anh has not forgotten her. Anh’s thanking of Mrs. Borny indicates that he does not take for granted all the help and support he has received from others throughout his life.



Throughout these successes, Anh continues to enjoy above all the company of his family—his wife Suzie and the three boys they have had together. His ties and bonds to his Vietnamese family also remain unbroken.

The prosperity and happiness that Anh finds not only in his career, but also with his family has largely to do with the fact that Anh does not take his family for granted: he realizes that they are the bedrock of his happiness.



CHAPTER 12

The first time Anh travels back to Vietnam is in 1998. After saving up, he goes there on vacation with his mother and his siblings Khoa and Tram. His mother is delighted to be back. She always gives money to the many poor people they encounter in Vietnam. Although Anh had left the country when he was two and half years old, while walking around in Vietnam he realizes that he recognizes the smells and sounds of the country.

The family's return to Vietnam in 1998 represents a return to their roots—to the place where their journey started. The familiarity of the smells and sounds of Vietnam to Anh is significant in that it suggests that Vietnam left an indelible mark on Anh, even though he was too young to remember anything concrete about the country.



Once her children have grown up and are secure, Anh's mother stops working, and happily devotes herself to learning English and to looking after her grandchildren. Anh, always the entrepreneur, manages to get his mother involved in public speaking—getting her engagements that pay \$2,000 a night.

The extremely well-paid gigs that Anh manages to get his mother allude to how far the family has come in their prosperity. Once barely able to earn enough to cover her children's school expenses, now Anh's mother is earning huge amounts of money, thanks to her son.



While Anh's family has fared quite well, he realizes that not all members of the extended family have. One day, he sees Uncle Two on television. He is in a mental institution. When Anh calls his father to find out more, Tam informs him that indeed Uncle Two has been suffering from mental problems, and has been living in an institution for a year. Tam stands in for Uncle Two at his son's wedding. On that day, Tam admits to Anh that he is still in love with Anh's mother.

Uncle Two's institutionalization reinforces the fact that fortune has not treated all members of the family equally. Some members of the family, such as Anh, have fared much better than others. Yet the family continues to function as strongly-bonded unit, reflected in the fact that Tam stands in for his brother at his nephew's wedding. In admitting that he is still in love with Anh's mother, Tam also exhibits some sense of regret over his poor treatment of his ex-wife.



When Tam falls quite ill again with the brain tumor, Anh finally convinces his siblings Khoa and Tram to meet him. Anh feels that the reconciliation is good for everyone: his siblings seem to heal as a result of their renewed contact with their father.

Khoa and Tram's reconciliation marks another milestone for the family, as it is the point when all the siblings choose forgiveness and love over anger and rage—and in doing so, renew their bond with their ill father.



Six months later, Anh receives wonderful news: his father is healthy. The doctors have reassured him that his brain tumor is benign, and he will recover fully. He and his father are so happy at this news that they sob in the Melbourne airport, where Tam shares the good news. Tam credits his recovery to the reunion with his estranged children. Soon, Tam fathers another baby son with his new partner.

The happiness that Anh shares with his father upon discovering that he has recovered from the brain tumor reveals just how far they have come in renewing their relationship. The forgiveness that Anh and his siblings have shown Tam has allowed them to heal, and, as Tam himself contends, also allowed him to heal and recover from the tumor.



Anh finally confesses to his mother that he is in contact with his father. She tells him that she knows this already. She also knows that he has children with another woman. She is still full of rage at her ex-husband, but when Anh tells her that Tam thinks she is the most beautiful woman in the world, her demeanor changes. Still, she is terribly hurt by her husband's abandonment.

Anh takes a trip to a Bobbin National Park with his children Xavier, Luc, and Leon, his wife Suzie, and his mother. It's a beautiful day, with perfect weather. On the boat, his son Xavier helps Anh start the engine. As the boat pulls away, Anh reflects on the fact that his parents had undertaken a perilous **journey** decades earlier, to provide him and his siblings with a good life. As he enjoys the scenery and the company of his family, Anh gives deep thanks to them on this day.

In telling his mother about his renewed contact with his father, Anh must navigate her feelings—even though she already knows about Tam's new life and family. Clearly, Anh's mother still feels a lot of anger towards the husband who has betrayed her. But there is also sadness and hurt, which are not entirely alleviated by Anh's reassurance that Tam thinks she is the most beautiful woman in the world.



The final boat ride with which Anh's memoir ends marks how far he has come from that initial boat journey that saw him and his family flee Vietnam. Anh recognizes how lucky he is to have arrived at this prosperous point in his life, one which is full of success, happiness and the love of his family. The gratitude that he feels compelled to express to his parents suggests that he feels a deep debt to them for making it all possible.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Abbas, Fatin. "The Happiest Refugee." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 27 Feb 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Abbas, Fatin. "The Happiest Refugee." LitCharts LLC, February 27, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-happiest-refugee>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Happiest Refugee* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Do, Anh. *The Happiest Refugee*. Allen & Unwin. 2010.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Do, Anh. *The Happiest Refugee*. Crow's Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin. 2010.