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“Diary 1: Leaving”

Number one is realizing that leaving isn't about escape: it's about survival. But survival doesn't always feel like progress. Instead of moving forward, my life felt stuck in a loop, rewinding over and over, like a broken tape player when I first heard the words: “*Chúng tôi sẽ chuyển đến Mỹ*” (*We are moving to the USA*).

The weight of those words hit me so hard that I fell into an endless spiral of thoughts. Many would say they are walking on eggshells in times of uncertainty, but to me, it was like stepping on Legos—sharp, jarring, and relentless. The jolts of pain were never caused by the Legos themselves, but by the silent realization that I was leaving. Leaving not to find a home but to escape the pool of red: a pool that barely reached my knees but drowned so many others along the way. It was a life where bodies would pile up, turning into unscalable mountains of loss.

My parents believed this leap was necessary to escape the shallow pool of chaos, but for me, it felt like leaping into a void. Moving somewhere that made my hometown of Saigon, Vietnam feel farther than the sun was to the moon. Somewhere the streets didn't know my name nor my language. Somewhere I wouldn't even be recognized, not even by myself. The streets of my hometown were chaotic, yet something that I had grown to love.

They saw leaving as salvation and survival, but I saw distance: distance from the brightly lit streets, from the villagers on the side of the road urging you to buy their food, from the continuous honking of the motorbikes, and from children like myself, running and laughing so hard until our ribs started to hurt. It was never the blue padded walls of my house that made it home or the fridge lined with sharpies to track my growth.

A home is supposed to hold you, not trap you. Some cages don't have bars. Some prisons feel like home.

As the translucent stained window of my old life blurred into my memory, I finally understood that nothing would ever be the same. The debris of war stretched so far that it became the ground we walked on. Routinely, men armed with guns and false promises from the government would run past, wounded and crying out for their mothers. At the time, I didn't understand. Later, I learned this was war.

Religion wasn't something that had been taught to me, but that night I kneeled on the hard ground, my knees hardened and dark like the night sky. I prayed without knowing to whom or for what. The screams around me became the first thing heard in the morning and the last thing at night. I told myself tomorrow would be better. But tomorrow came and went, and that weight only grew heavier.

Tomorrow quickly became today, the day everything would change. I packed my bags, stuffing them with everything I thought mattered. Yet no matter how much I packed, the

bag felt empty. My closet was full of clothes, accessories, and everything that I thought I ever wanted, but that wasn't what made my house a home. What mattered most to me was something I couldn't take: the laughter on the streets, the festivals with lanterns lighting up the night, the memories, the people. It was *Saigon*.

As we prepared to leave, I realized this was it. I wasn't just leaving behind family and friends; I was leaving behind me: the person who belonged to that world, who knew every dirt street and every face like the back of my hand. The debris of war drove me out of my own home, but some part of me was left and rooted there—something that couldn't change. And now, as we move forward into the future, I carry the echoes of my past life, hoping one day I can bridge the gap between the place I left and the person I will become.