What Matters to Boatpeople: Shirts, Spoons, and Sleep

Kim Huynh

My family left Vietnam by boat in April 1979 with a small bag of possessions and $400 USD hidden in the seams of our clothes.

What follows is my translation of conversations in Vietnamese that I had with my parents about what remains from our journey—in particular, a shirt and spoon.

As with many items, their value is linked to the history and symbolism we assign to them.

While my mother's recollections seem detailed and clear, my father's memory has been affected by sustained hardship, two strokes, Alzheimer's disease, and chronic insomnia.

Together, Mum and Dad offer insights into what matters to boatpeople and non-boatpeople alike.

When did you last sleep through the night, Dad?
I have no idea.

I asked your mother, and she can't remember either. She suggested the night our boat reached that tiny island without a name. We were exhausted and fell asleep on the beach. But even then, I recall lying on the sand and peering into the night sky as I tried to figure out what to do next.

What I do know is that since we've been in Australia, I've hardly ever slept for more than four hours straight.

Figure 7.1: The Huynh family, 1975.

Source: The author's family archive.

I've tried acupuncture, sleep specialists, laboratory studies, meditation, yoga, herbal remedies, those whirring sleep apnea machines. None of them have helped.

I'm ashamed to say that I'm in the habit of taking half a sleeping tablet before bed. Sometimes, I need a full one.

That's very frustrating for you, isn't it?
Of course. For almost half a century I've been telling myself, "You can get on top of this."

I'm very strong-willed. Maybe that's the problem.

Every morning, I swim fourteen laps. When I can't get to the pool because my heart's acting up, then I walk up and down the lounge room. If I don't tire myself out in the day, I'll pay for it at night.

Often, I remind myself that I'm a well-educated man of reason, and some accomplishment. I know that all I have to do is nothing. But when the sun sets, I lose my senses.

The doctor says I'm "sundowning." That's why I get so frightened and confused. She's probably right. But isn't everyone prone to "sundowning"? Don't we all crave the fresh hope that morning brings?

When I was little, we used to say that day and night were like *xoi dau*, sticky rice and dried beans. Rice is warm and soft, while beans are hard and unforgiving. I learned that darkness also means chaos and terror. That's when the Viet Minh revolutionaries *di ve* ("came home") from the jungles into the villages. And with them would be gunfire and mortars. I remember the thump of the mortars, "AHM! AHM! AHM!" and being thrust into shelters in the ground.

The Viet Minh used to say that the people were the water that sustained them and through which they moved like fish. But their real water was the darkness. I should know. When I was twelve, I learned to swim with them.

What do you think about at night?
The other day, as I fell in and out of a daytime nap, I saw the mountains that loomed over my village.

For us, the mountains were the edge of the world, even though they were only a few kilometers away. Quang Nam province was wedged between the mountains to the west and the East Sea. In fact, instead of using "west" or "east," we'd say "Head down river and turn towards the mountains," or "Take this bushel of rice to the market stall that faces the sea." That's how quaint life was.

Other memories from Vietnam are not so quaint. You'd think that with my Alzheimer's, some of them would fade. But if anything, the scenes from my past have become more vivid as I "approach one hundred years," which is what we Vietnamese say instead of "kicking the bucket."

Sometimes, I see my father. I was only six or seven when he was killed during the war against the French. "Assassinated" is a better word. Your grandmother told me that his hands were tied behind his back when the Viet Minh kicked him into a shallow grave. He called out to relatives and friends who were highly ranked revolutionaries, there to witness his sham trial. None of them helped.

I don't recall his face, yet my father haunts me in his absence. Unlike most Vietnamese, I don't believe in ghosts. But my father, or my memory of him, comes close.

My brother Nho's face I remember very well. Your grandmother said that Nho resembled my father—and that you, my son, resemble Nho.

Your uncle died in the jungle, fighting for the Republic of Vietnam, a few days after his daughter was born. Like me, when he was a teenager he supported the Viet Minh, but soon came to realize that Ho Chi Minh and the communists were ruthless liars.

With Nho's death came waves of grief and resentment. It confirmed in my mind that there's no justice or cosmic force looking out for us.

For your grandmother, tragedy fueled superstition. She could not accept that Nho was gone. And when she finally did, she became obsessed with finding his body and laying his soul to rest. She spent money that we didn't have on fortune tellers and soothsayers, all of them scammers who sent us trekking into the jungle looking for remains that could have belonged to anyone or anything. Looking back, that only made it harder for me to come to grips with my brother's passing.

Is that when your insomnia started?
No. I slept fine during the French and American wars.

It was afterwards, when I was planning our escape, that I began to *mat ngu* ("lose sleep").

You know what it's like before you go on a big trip. How you feel the night of an important exam or job interview. You're a father now, so you've experienced the incredible anticipation that builds up when your wife's pregnant. Well, escaping your homeland is like all those things combined, but far more uncertain, intense, and frightening.

Lots of people were leaving. There was a saying at the time, "If light posts could walk, they would go too." Everyone was suspicious of everyone else. A neighbor could tell the local authorities about our suspicious behavior. Someone at work could report us to gain favor with those higher up. An innocent rumor could ruin everything. The pressure was immense.

First, we organized our own small boat in 1978 with another family. But we were swindled and lost our savings. There was no backup plan. We had almost lost hope.

Then, at the start of 1979, your mother's cousin confided in her that she had found a way out for her children. It was with a Chinese syndicate. They would have fake papers saying that they were Chinese-Vietnamese. Due to conflict in the region, the government was eager to get rid of the Chinese, while confiscating their property and wealth.

We didn't have the money to go with them. But despite not wanting us to leave, your grandmother came to the rescue, giving us just enough for the trip. With that, our hope was reignited, but so too was the stress and anticipation.

But I'll let you in on a secret. It was thrilling too. How could it not be? To have a chance of a new beginning after so many dead ends. To risk everything for my family's future.

So with all the fear and dread of getting caught, while trying my best to stay stable amidst the tumult, I started to lose sleep.

Often, I crept out of bed to not disturb your mother, and took out a compass and map that I bought on the black market. In secret, I calcu-

lated the routes and distances that our boat might take from oppression to freedom, to a new place to call "home."

What was it like on the boat?
The KG-1170. There's a number I'll never forget. Even more important is 392, because we were the 392nd boat to reach Palau Bidong in Malaysia.

That's how they called us up for rations, mail, and for that all-important resettlement interview. "Thiet Van Huynh from Boat 392!"

There's another memorable number, 507. That's how many people were on our twenty-meter boat.

I sat at the front with your brother, sweating and entwined on the deck. It was worse for the young men who were shoved into the hull. Your cousin was down there, not far from the clanking engine. He didn't know whether he was more desperate for water or air. They had to be locked in to ensure that they didn't rush on deck and scuttle the boat. The locked latch was near where your brother and I sat. I can still hear the thumping and hollering from below.

You once asked whether I cried on the boat. I said "never." I don't think any of the adults cried. We were too worried.

Did you see Mum and me on the boat?
Yes. You and your mother were in the cabin because you were so small and sick.

Amazingly, your mother found a way to visit us. It was after a couple of days, when the storms had passed and the ocean was calm. We had not eaten anything since leaving and, like everyone around us, had been seasick. Your brother and I were famished.

It was even more amazing that your mum brought us food. She had shimmied around the edge of the boat, with you and a bowl of rice soup in one arm, while holding on to the railing on the outside of the cabin with the other. Note that there was nothing but the Gulf of Thailand below her, and your mother could not swim, not even a meter.

But when she appeared standing over us, the sunshine framing her silhouette, with you and the soup in hand, I did not question the risk

she had taken. I just accepted the reward, most of which I gave to your brother, saving a mouthful for myself.

I assumed you and your mother had had some soup too. But she said that you would not eat. You were so weak, lying still in her arms wearing that yellow shirt. Your brother's shirt was in good condition. It had been washed by the rain and dried in the sun. Yours was awfully stained, not with blood but with the medicines, carrots, betel nut, everything that we could find that might give you a chance to live. All of it, you spewed and shat out.

Figure 7.2: The shirt that Kim Huynh wore when he escaped Vietnam.

Source: The author's family archive

We still have that shirt. Tell me about it.

I loathed that shirt from the moment I saw it and refuse to believe that somehow it "worked," that it helped you survive. In truth, it probably put us all in more danger.

It was your grandmother's doing. She was very much against our escape. She thought it was too dangerous. But as tough as she was, your grandmother was never one to challenge fate. I, on the other hand, couldn't live under the communists who had designated us *nguy*, which means we were traitors, dishonest, despicable, losers.

But because she loved you and your brother so dearly, your grandmother helped pay for our journey. And with the same love, she bought you those shirts.

This did not, however, occur to me when she brought them to us.

At that time, when we were trying desperately to keep our plans secret, your grandmother headed off to buy those shirts without a travel permit, without informing us, following some hearsay, and probably blathering to every *cyclo* driver and bystander on the way that her son's family was going to *vuot bien*, flee the country.

At a Cho Lon temple, she divulged everything to the head nun, who she hardly knew and who we could not trust. The nun told her that they cared for orphans who were hardy and who had been blessed by the Buddha. Their hardiness and blessings, she said, could be passed on to you and your brother through the saffron-colored shirts that they wore. Knowing that your grandmother would offer a sizable donation, the nun promised that the shirts would provide more protection on our journey than any life jacket.

I can't recall what I said to your grandmother when she presented me with the shirts. Maybe I yelled at her. I was under terrible strain, but I regret that being one of the last exchanges we had together.

And that's another reason why I can't abide that shirt of yours.

What else do you remember about the journey?

I haven't mentioned when our boat crashed. It was on the first night, before we even left Vietnamese waters.

We'd been waiting at Rach Gia port for a week, hiding in a filthy little hut. That's where you got really sick. For all that time, your mother held you and sang lullabies and folk songs.

Then finally, we were told to board the boat, but again we waited, this time for another boat to join us, and to be led by the coast guard into international waters. There was no moon. No stars. Just darkness. And I remember admiring how the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was not only letting us go but escorting us to freedom. So it was with relief that I fell asleep on the deck.

Not long afterwards, I woke with a mighty jolt. I've since wondered about how two boats—none more or less seaworthy than the other—could crash in such a way that one would be undamaged, while ours would end up with a hole the size of a large jackfruit in its hull. The hole was not far from where I was sitting. We were fortunate that the hole was just above the water line and that only one person below deck suffered head injuries. But we could not carry on.

The coast guard let the other boat sail into international waters and escorted us back to Son Rai Island where the boat could be repaired. In 2023, Son Rai Island is something of a tourist destination. In 1979, many of the fishing families from the Island had escaped, so it was deserted and there was no shortage of houses in which we could lodge.

That night, when I took you from your mother, I saw that your arms poked out of your tiny yellow shirt. They were as skinny as my fingers. I felt how light you were, and how close you were to leaving us.

I'm not sure whether it was reason or desperation that took hold of me, but the next morning, I asked the owner of the place where we were staying for help.

"This is my baby boy, Kim. He's famished and will not survive. Can you look after him, just until he's stronger? Then, when it's safe, take him back to Saigon, to my mother. I'll give you my wedding ring. And my wife's ring too. Please take him. I'm begging you."

She thought about it, but refused. And there was no time to find someone else because our boat was ready to go again.

What I'm trying to tell you, my son, is that when we escaped Vietnam, I had to make choices. I don't regret them, because I felt like I had no choice. But sometimes, at night, that's what I think about.

*

Mum, can you respond to what Dad has said?
Of course, your father has gotten many things wrong.

I know exactly how he sleeps, what haunts him, and how he is.

It's true, he's never slept well. And he's up a lot nowadays, because of his racing mind and active bladder. Sometimes he says he lies awake all night. But I'm right next to him. I can hear him breathing. And I can tell you that he sleeps okay.

Your father exaggerates. He's always been like that.

I know wives who say their husbands totally change after having a stroke or dementia. Suddenly, a man who was placid is full of rage or a thoughtful and kind husband turns selfish. This is not the case with your father. His stroke has made him more himself: more frantic, more determined.

No one knows entirely what goes on in your father's head. But I've got a good idea after fifty years of trying to calm him.

I tell him what's in the past has passed. I remind him that we've had a good life and have nothing to worry about. The news makes him anxious, so I tell him that there's nothing he can do about Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Nor can he sail to the Spratly and Paracel Islands and hold back the Chinese navy. The world is fine. And even if it isn't, it's for young people to sort out now.

But your father can't rest. His will—to study, to work, to support his family, to fight, to live—continues to astonish me. But it's taken a toll.

Has it taken a toll on you?
Well, I'm his wife. If he can't sleep, then I can't either. But I'm used to napping in the day if need be.

Of course, it's not easy now that your father needs care. But it wasn't easy when you were a baby either. Back then, I looked after you. Now, I stay up looking after him.

But let me tell you about your shirt. Because your father's not right about that either.

I've never believed that it had magical powers. It wasn't blessed by Buddha. Who cares if it was? And who knows whether some orphan ever wore it?

But it's not just a worthless rag either.

Your father, he only sees the shirt's cost, its material value.

I'm not sure he's ever noticed the stitching, but if he did, he'd point out that it's uneven. And he might lament that it was sewn by hand, because there were so few sewing machines and overlockers after the war. The communists repossessed them, and when sewing machines broke, there were no spare parts to get them going again. For him, the shirt represents the sanctions, backwardness, and poverty imposed on our homeland.

But the fact that it was handmade is also a sign of our resilience.

So yes. Your shirt *is* precious to me. I know it very well. In 1977, I held you in my womb for nine months. Then in 1979, I held you in my arms for nine months more, when you were wearing that shirt.

As I look at it now, the stitching remains strong, even if it's crooked. The fabric is intact, even its edges are tattered. And in my view, it's still vibrant, despite the stains.

Is there anything else that Dad said that you want to dispute?

If we're revisiting history, the truth is your father never consulted me when we were on Son Rai Island about sending you back to Saigon.

He said afterwards that the landlady told him there was no guarantee she could get to Saigon and find your grandmother without a travel permit. It would have been easier, she said, for her to follow us by boat and track us down in some refugee camp.

I suspect she didn't want the weight on her conscience of you dying. Looking back, we should have just given her our wedding rings, because they were the first things the pirates took.

Did you say anything when you found out that Dad tried to give me away? And why did you bring your wedding rings when you knew there would be pirates?
I said nothing to your father about it. I wasn't happy, of course. But it didn't matter. We were on our way. And your father was under so much stress. I wasn't about to add to that.

In any case, I can tell you now, if the landlady had accepted his offer, I wouldn't have let you go.

As for the wedding rings, we took them because they were precious to us. They symbolized our love and commitment. It was that simple.

And just as simply, when the pirates pointed their knives at us, we gave them up. In that instant, and in many that followed, we were concerned only with staying alive and keeping you and your brother safe.

So I don't regret anything that I brought or lost.

What was it like for you on the boat?
As you sit there now, it's hard to explain how scared I was.

Every choice—Should I feed you this or that? Should I cradle you or set you down? Should I let you crawl on the floor or force you to stay on the mat?—could have made the difference between keeping and losing you. At the same time, I felt powerless with the tangled mass of people around me, as our boat was thrown from one wave to another.

You know that we made it, and today we are safe in our house with a fridge full of food. But back then, I didn't know anything. I was always frightened, so terribly afraid.

I did have a moment of courage. And I'm glad your father still savors that soup.

I certainly recall wobbling more like a clown than an acrobat on the outside ledge of the boat. As I juggled you and the soup, it struck me how foolish I was to take such a risk. I stopped, breathed, and told myself that all I had to do was slide one foot away from the other and then bring them together again.

After I forced my way onto the deck, I called out for your father and, when I found him, stood tall and valiant with the still-warm rice soup in hand. I'll never forget your father and brother looking up at me and saying in unison, "I'm soooo hungry."

After they'd eaten, we took you boys to the edge of the boat and peeled off your dirty shirts and shorts. Then we reached over the edge and bathed you in the streaming water. Someone warned, "Watch out for sharks!" But the ocean was as still and clear as glass, so we were sure we could see any incoming threats. Feeling the sea spray over his body, your brother giggled with delight. You, on the other hand, didn't react all that much.

Figure 7.3: The Huynh family's spoon.

Source: The author's family archive

What happened to my brother's shirt?
I don't remember. He was terribly sick too, but not for as long or as bad as you.

We probably lost it in the refugee camp. I got lost myself in that winding maze of tents and tracks.

We also lost two sky-blue outfits that I had sewn for you. Our neighbors said you and your brother looked like adorable Russian dolls when you wore them.

That was the only compliment we received. Even after you two had recovered, you would cry out all day and night. Especially you. "Oh Mum. Oh Dad. Oh Mum. Oh Dad." Our house was not so affectionately known as "Oh Mum and oh Dad's house." Of course, it wasn't a house, but rather a tent made of four sticks and a tarpaulin.

One day, I hung the blue outfits out to dry, and when I turned around, they were gone. Weeks later, I saw them hanging by another tent and took them back. Then someone snatched them again from us and I never saw them again. I imagine the same thing happened to your brother's yellow shirt. Maybe your shirt was so small, ragged, and dirty that nobody wanted it. That's why it's still with us.

What else is still with us from Vietnam?
There's the spoon. The one you and your brother as teenagers used to eat cereal in the morning and ice cream at night.

It was never special or treasured, even though it was the last thing that we took from Saigon.

You know, for weeks I thought about what to pack. Carefully, I sewed all the money we had in the world into the seams of my shirt and to the front of your father's trousers. I made an energy powder by soaking sugar with lemon juice and drying it again. All of it was soon gone, but still we have your shirt, and that spoon, which I never wanted anyway.

It was the morning of 19 April 1979 when we said goodbye. We stayed the night at your grandmother's house. Neither your father nor I slept very much.

Your grandmother's heart was breaking, but she was very strong. On the doorstep, she kissed you and your brother and announced loudly that we were off home to see my mother, who was living with us at the time. If the neighbors were watching, they wouldn't have suspected a thing.

Your grandmother remembered that she had boiled some eggs for you boys and asked your aunt to fetch them. I too remembered that I didn't have anything to feed you with and asked for a spoon. Perhaps

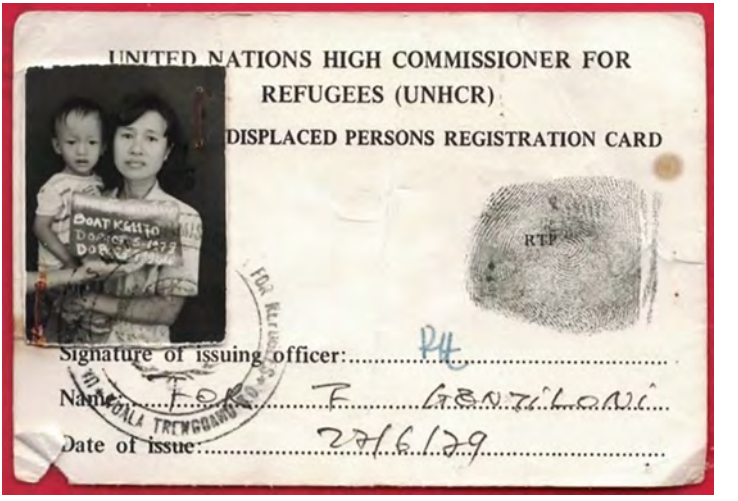
your aunt was so overwhelmed with emotion that she didn't think and grabbed the first thing that came to hand. In any case, she returned with the stainless-steel US Army spoon that had been used to boil the eggs. It was far too big to feed you with. But I was in no mood for delay, so I threw the spoon into my bag, thinking that I'd replace it with a more suitable one.

Little did I know that we would use that relic from the war in the camp not only to feed you and your brother, but also to cook meals, dig holes, and scale fish.

If you had asked me to choose two things that I could keep from our escape, that shirt and spoon would not be on my list. But they mean a great deal to me now because of the memories they hold.

You can listen on ABC Radio Canberra to Kim's parents describe "What it was like on the boat" *and his father recount surviving his stroke in* "I have to live."

Figure 7.4: UNHCR Displaced Persons Registration Card



Source: The author's family archive