

Dear reader,

At a Buddhist temple in San Diego, there is a memorial room filled with tiny photographs of those who have passed. Mostly, the portraits show people with gray hair who I hope lived full lives. One section of the wall, however, is reserved for black-and-white images. All are in their teens, twenties, thirties, forties. Young. The hairstyles date back to the late seventies, early eighties. It is not explained, but visitors know they are looking at those who lost their lives at sea in hopeful attempts to become refugees. Every Vietnamese knows of at least one such person.

On one visit, I kept staring at a particular girl. Her hair was short and jagged, her eyes intense, her lips tight. I researched what might have caused her to join the thousands of Vietnamese who escaped post-war Việt Nam. Then I imagined the details of what she witnessed at sea.

Years later, her face continued to visit me. By now I wanted to focus on what happened to her upon landing in a safe place. How does she return to herself?

I put a name to a face and she became Hằng. I placed her in a land she could not have imagined, the opposite of the lush green she loved yet needed to flee. Enter the Panhandle in Texas. I spent my adolescence in Texas, so I know of its dry flat landscape to the west.

Then I needed a buddy for Hằng. Enter LeeRoy. He was a boy I might have gone to high school with in Fort Worth. A cowboy wannabe, dreaming of rodeo glory while trudging through the halls with horse dung on his boots. His innate kindness would soothe Hằng's fiery vulnerabilities. Together, in spite of themselves, they would trade humor and solace.

Sometimes true connection sprouts between two most unlikely people. And sometimes healing is spurred in a place that reminds you of nothing you have known. Hằng begins to thaw as she gets to know LeeRoy and West Texas. I hope you enjoy getting to know all three.

To life's lovely surprises,

Thanh Hà Lại