

**“A BOOK TO BREAK YOUR HEART AND HEAL IT.”**  
—Viet Thanh Nguyen, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Sympathizer*

# THE BEST WE COULD DO



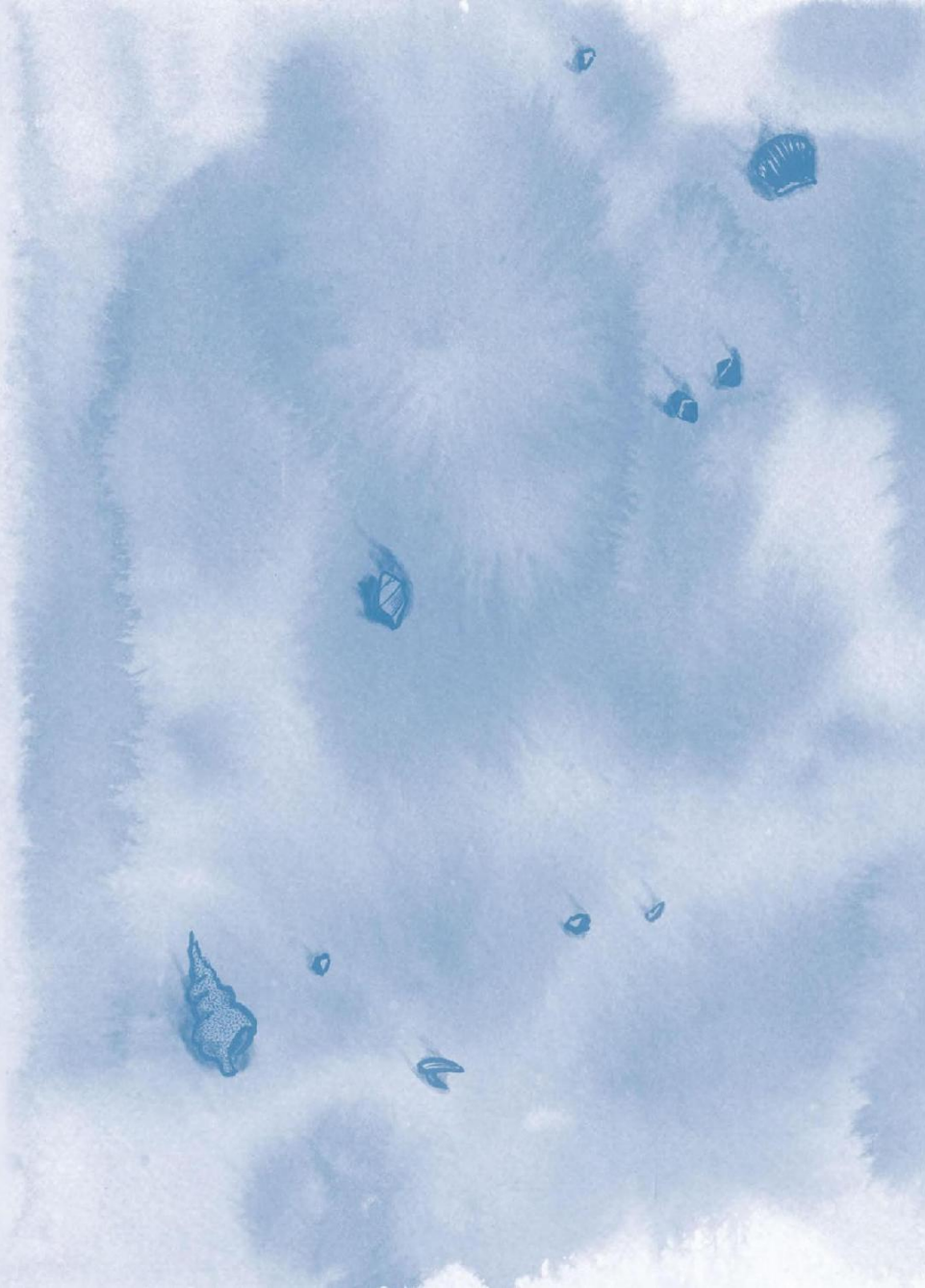
AN ILLUSTRATED MEMOIR  
**THI BUI**





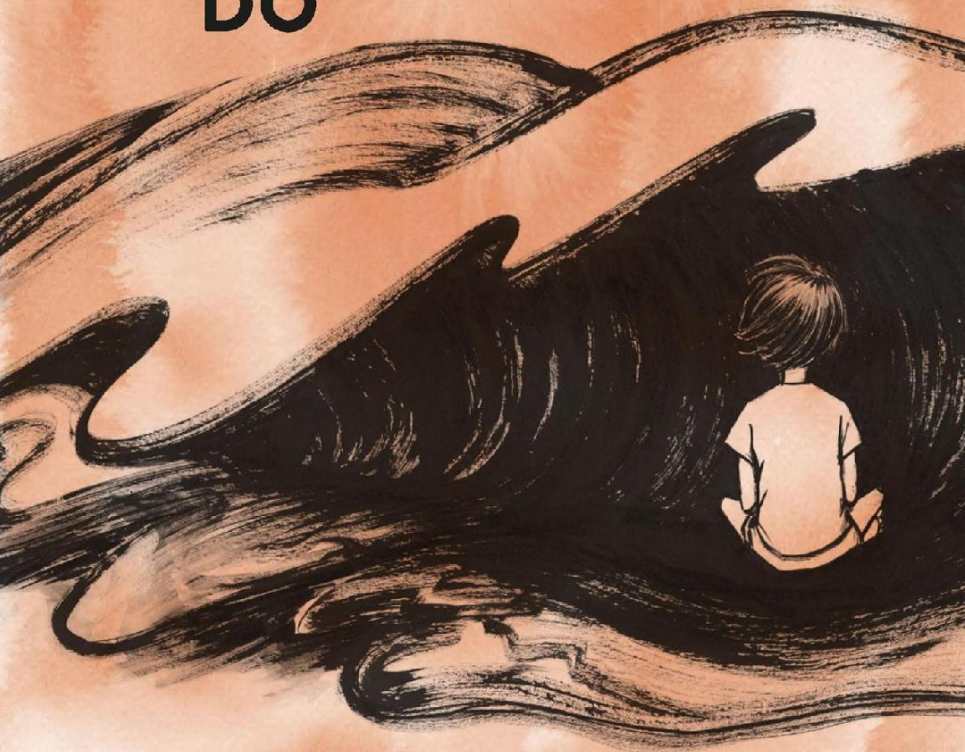








# THE BEST WE COULD DO



AN ILLUSTRATED MEMOIR  
**THI BUI**

ABRAMS COMICARTS • NEW YORK



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## PREFACE

The seeds of this book were planted around 2002, when I was a graduate student and took a detour from my art education training to get lost in the world of oral history. The transcripts of my family's stories (and the clumsy, homemade book that I produced) from that time were more meaningful than any art I had made before. I was trying to understand the forces that caused my family, in the late seventies, to flee one country and start over in another. I titled my project "Buis in Vietnam and America: A Memory Reconstruction." It had photographs and some art, but mostly writing, and it was pretty academic. However, I didn't feel like I had solved the storytelling problem of how to present history in a way that is human and relatable and not oversimplified. I thought that turning it into a graphic novel might help. So then I had to learn how to do comics! I drew the initial draft of the first pages in 2005, and it's been a steep learning curve working in this medium.

For that and other reasons, this book has taken me a very long time to make. When my son was one, and the book was also just a baby, my family and I moved from New York to California. I helped open an alternative public high school for immigrants in Oakland, where I taught for the next seven years. It was difficult to carve out the time and headspace to work on something that not only required a lot of historical research, but was also intensely personal and at times painful. I often wanted to quit. With my mind on current immigration issues and the lives of my students, I gave my book the name *Refugee Reflex* and worked on it during school holidays. Besides sounding an awful lot like "reflux," this title was problematic because it didn't quite encompass everything the book was about. In 2011, while I was reorganizing my life so that my aging parents could be more involved in it, I realized that the book was about parents and children, and it became *The Best We Could Do*.

On the long road to getting this book made, I received many gifts from the people I encountered: The opportunity to pitch this book to a wonderful publisher. Unwavering support and generous guidance from artists, writers, and editors I admire. The camaraderie of storytellers and magic makers. And the unconditional love and trust that were placed in me by my family. My head spins in amazement. My heart swells with gratitude.

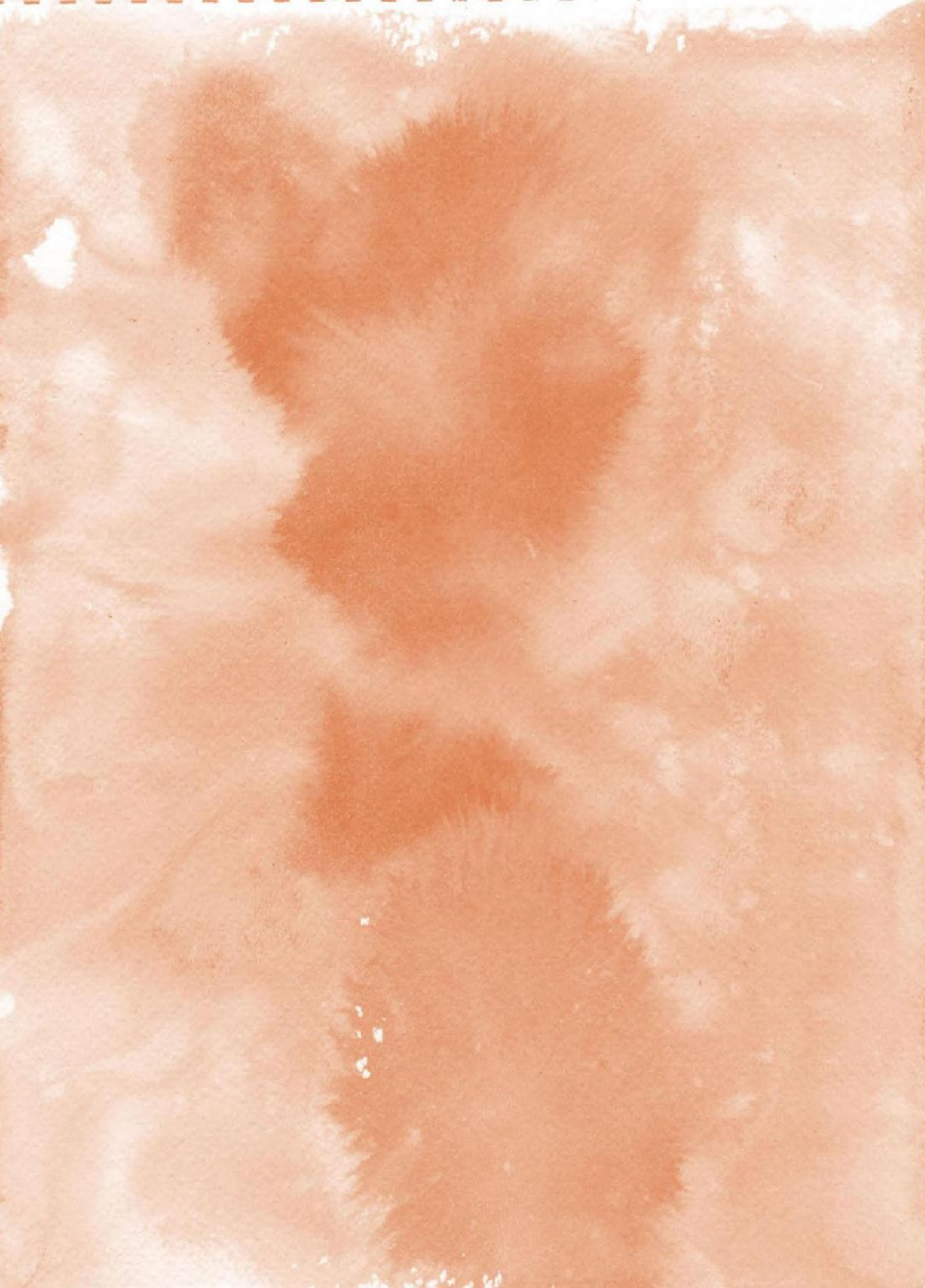
-Thi

Thi Bui

Berkeley, California

July 2016





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CHAPTER 1  
**LABOR**

New York  
Methodist Hospital  
November 28, 2005

I'm in labor.

The pain comes in  
twenty-foot waves and  
Má has disappeared.







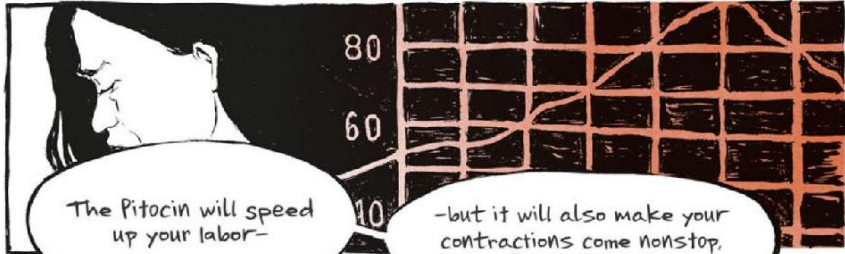
Mã flew all the way from California to help me have her first grandchild.

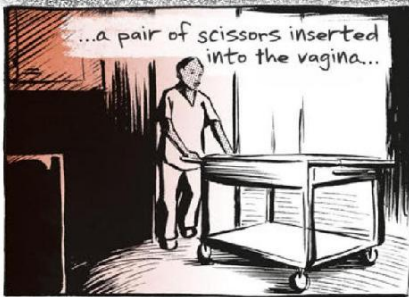
But now that she's here, she can't bear to be in the same room.

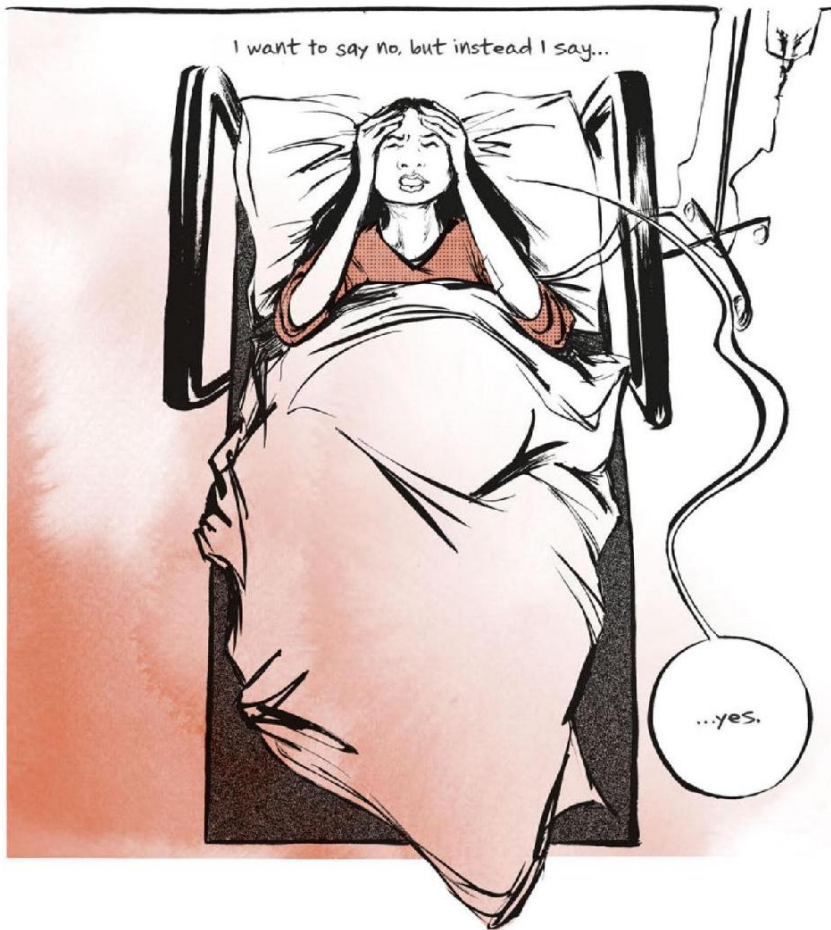




















Doctor?

Could I... try to do this without the episiotomy?

I had heard from a friend that doctors often perform this procedure in the hospital.

They cut the perineum, enlarging the vagina for the baby to pass.

I didn't expect the doctor's response:



We'll do what's necessary! If Baby comes out too big, he could tear you open from front to back! I had one woman, when Baby came out, it tore her to

**STOP!!**

Please, stop.



Wake up.  
It's time.



But I can't feel  
anything. I don't know  
how to push.

Bring in  
more help.



Hands descend upon me.

They push me, roll  
me, press and shout.  
Travis rubs me. Mā  
hovers and retreats.

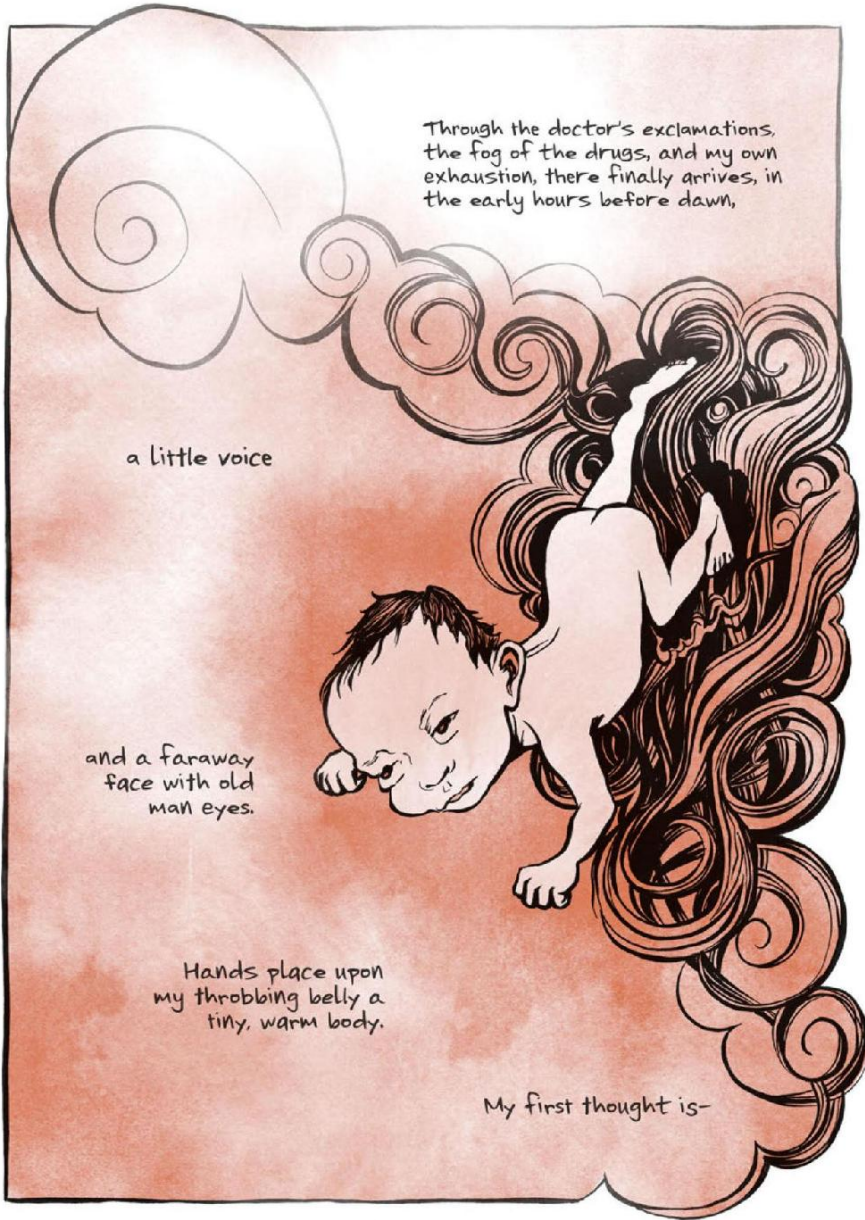
Through the doctor's exclamations,  
the fog of the drugs, and my own  
exhaustion, there finally arrives, in  
the early hours before dawn,

a little voice

and a faraway  
face with old  
man eyes.

Hands place upon  
my throbbing belly a  
tiny, warm body.

My first thought is-







Then hands lift him away.





More contractions come.

I am bound to the bed with the remaining business of expelling the placenta-

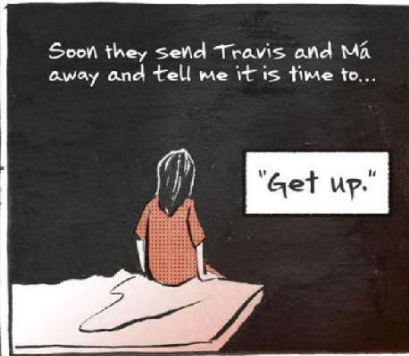


-while life comes back to Má.



Do you want to keep this?

Hmph!



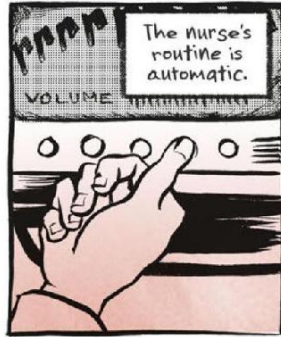
Soon they send Travis and Má away and tell me it is time to...

"Get up."

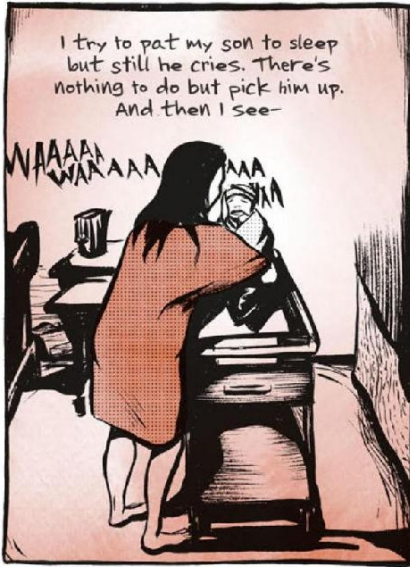


"Walk."

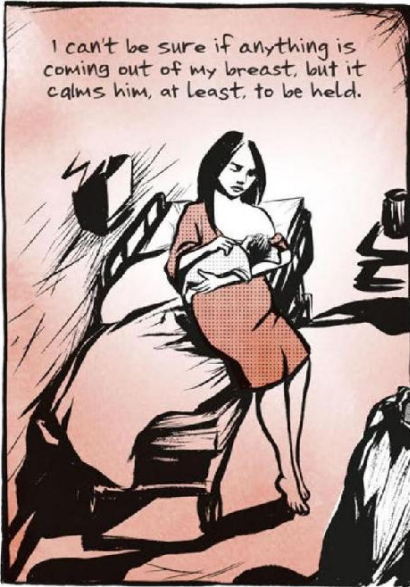








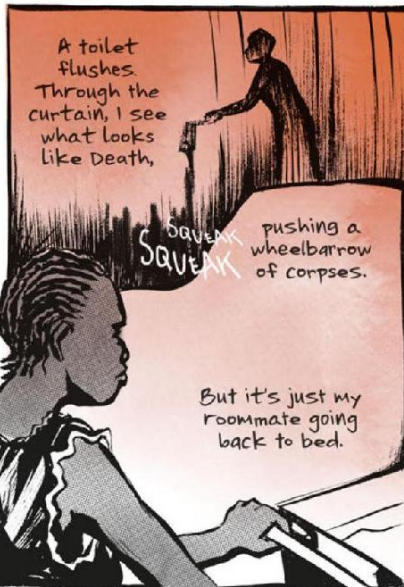
I try to pat my son to sleep but still he cries. There's nothing to do but pick him up. And then I see-



I can't be sure if anything is coming out of my breast, but it calms him, at least, to be held.



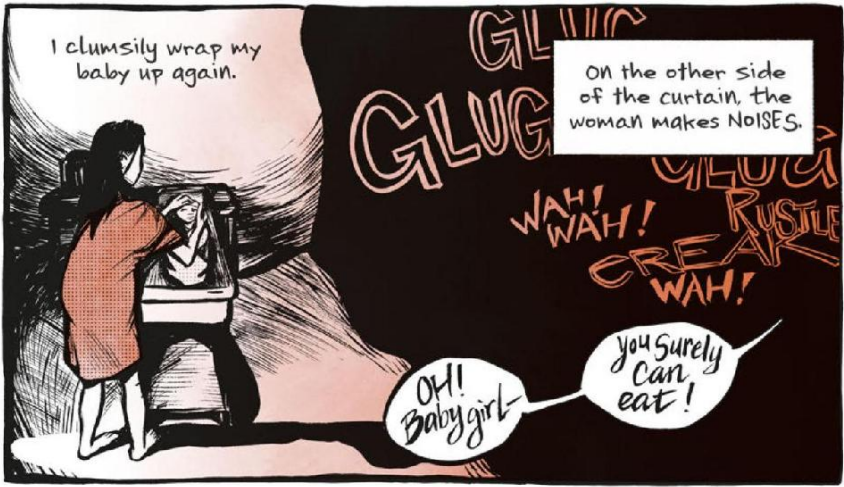
-he is trying to eat his fists.



A toilet flushes. Through the curtain, I see what looks like Death,

~~SQUEAK~~ ~~SQUEAK~~ pushing a wheelbarrow of corpses.

But it's just my roommate going back to bed.



I clumsily wrap my baby up again.

On the other side of the curtain, the woman makes NOISES.

OH! Babygirl

you surely can eat!



Her baby sounds so satisfied.

GLUNK GLUNK GLUNK URP!



For the rest of the night, my roommate and I take turns waking each other with the sounds of our babies crying.









He is a mystery-crystalline, breathing, and growing.



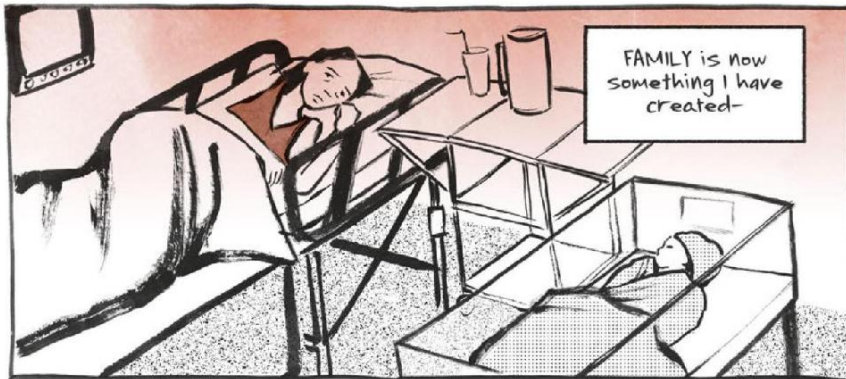








Mā leaves me, but I'm not alone, and a terrifying thought creeps into my head.



FAMILY is now something I have created-



-and not just something I was born into.



The responsibility is immense.

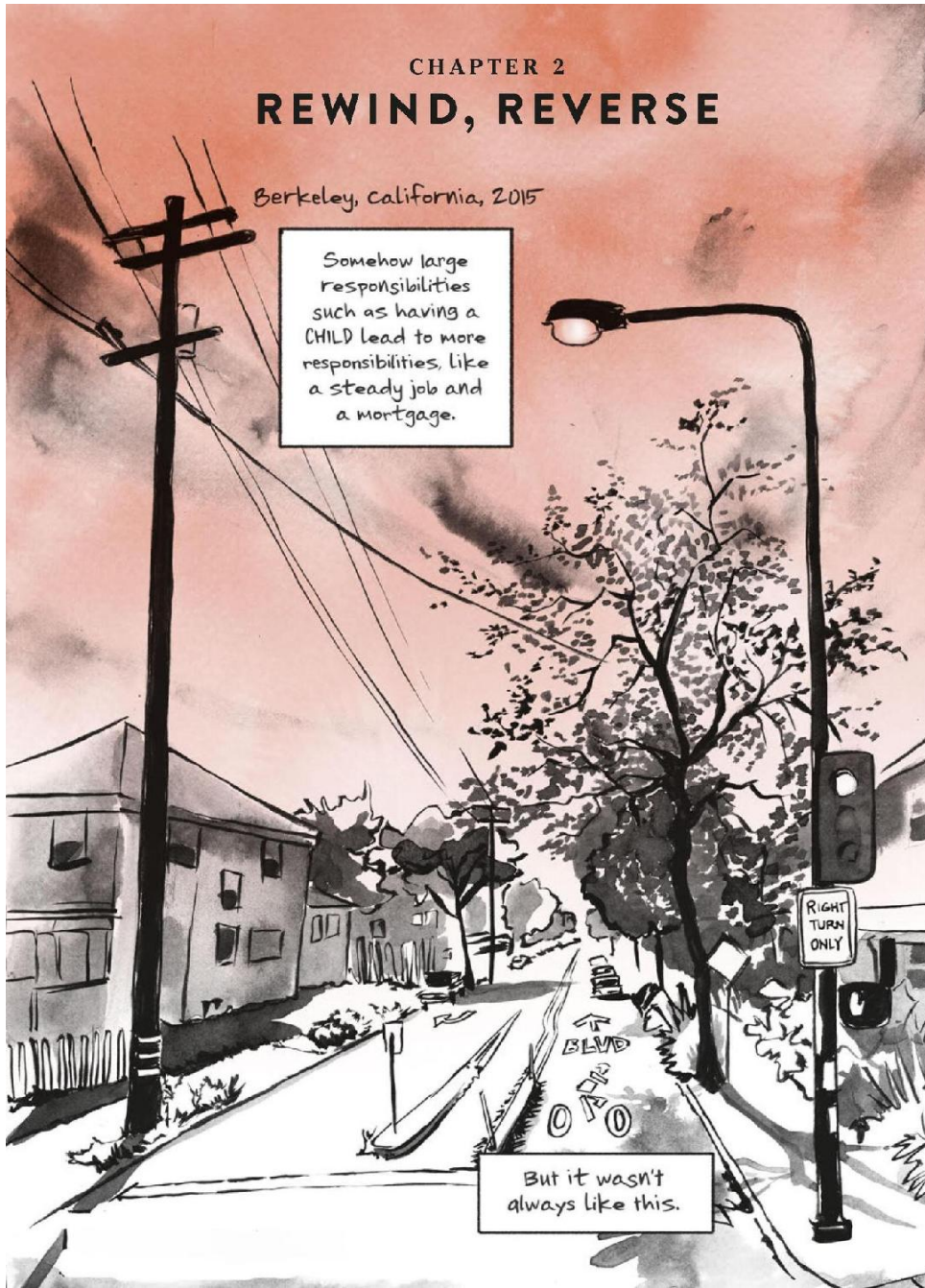
A wave of empathy for my mother washes over me.

CHAPTER 2  
**REWIND, REVERSE**

Berkeley, California, 2015

Somehow large responsibilities such as having a CHILD lead to more responsibilities, like a steady job and a mortgage.

But it wasn't always like this.





San Diego, California, 1999

Once upon a time, I was young and moving to New York to be an artist and live with my artist boyfriend...

...and my mother didn't disown me.



Are you going to live together?



Um...

Yes?



...



I see.



For an immigrant kid, that's living the dream.

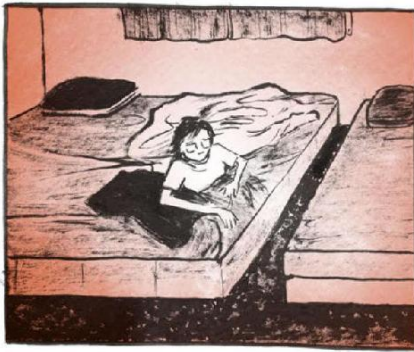
Whew!

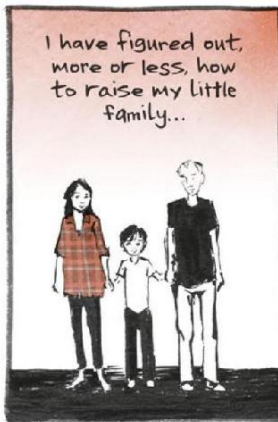
















My parents escaped Việt Nam on a boat so their children could grow up in freedom.

You'd think I could be more grateful.



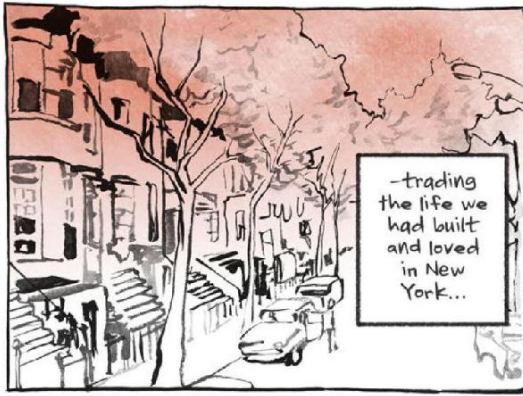
I am now older than my parents were when they made that incredible journey.



But I fear that around them, I will always be a child...

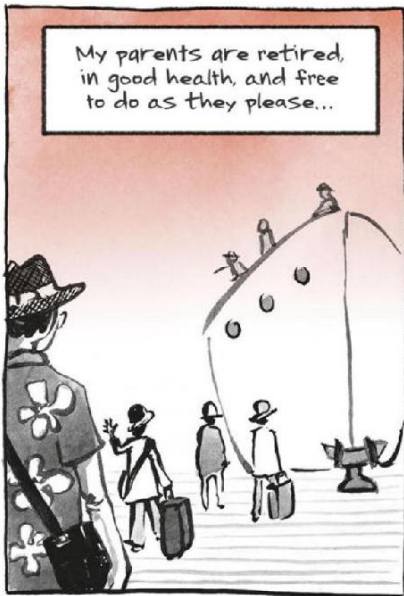


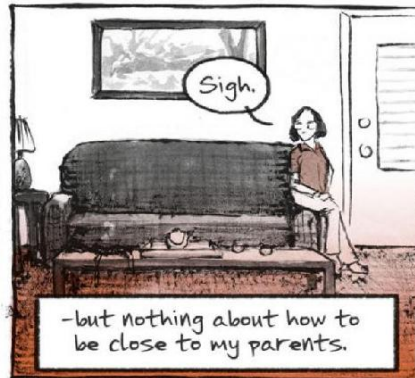
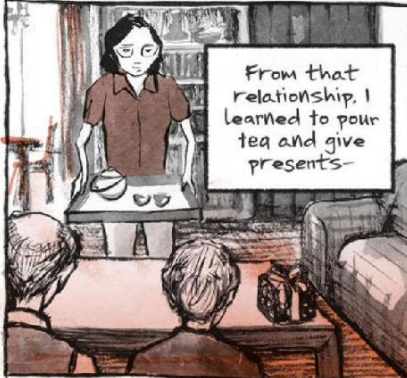
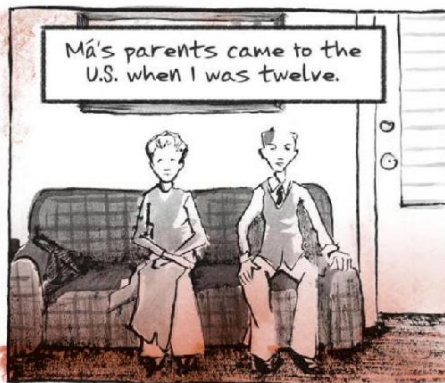
...and they a symbol to me - two sides of a chasm, full of meaning and resentment.

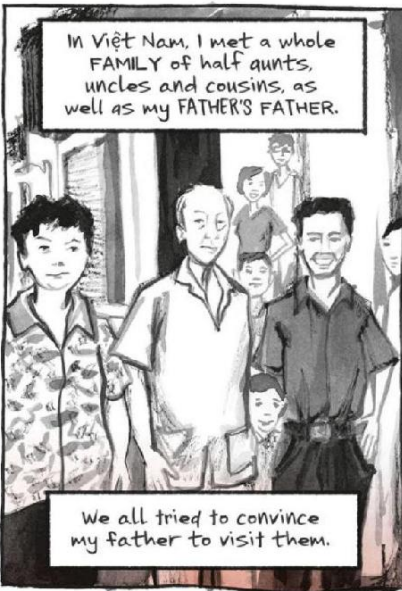




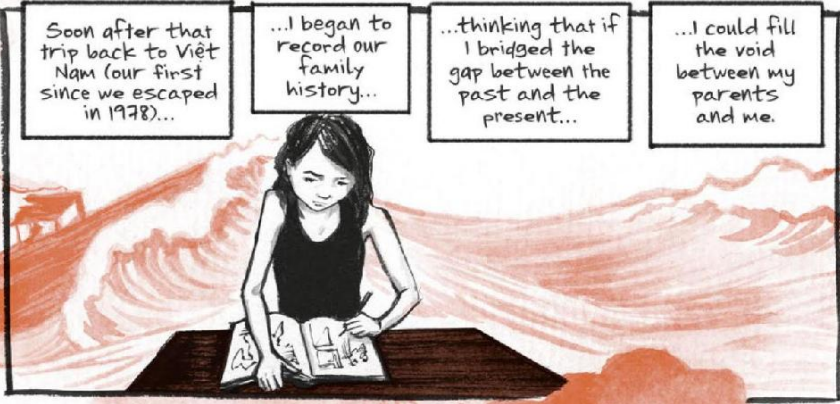












Soon after that trip back to Việt Nam (our first since we escaped in 1978)...

...I began to record our family history...

...thinking that if I bridged the gap between the past and the present...

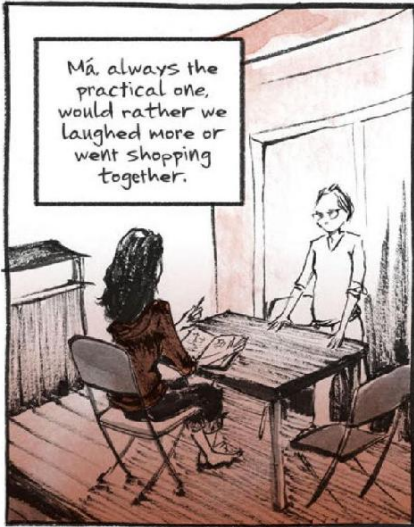
...I could fill the void between my parents and me.

And that if I could see Việt Nam as a real place, and not a symbol of something lost...



...I would see my parents as real people...

...and learn to love them better.





I don't want to talk about dinner when there are so many important things we haven't said to each other.



I suppose for my mother,

"I love you" sticks in the throat.



So she buys gifts...

Try it on!

It won't fit!

Just TRY it!



Really, Mã, we can take care of dinner.

I've already made dinner!

...and cooks.

Any green vegetables?



Oh no... white rice...

AGAIN?



I suppose I don't say "I love you" either.





How did we  
get to such a  
lonely place?



We live so  
close to each  
other and  
yet feel so  
far apart.



I keep  
looking  
toward  
the past...



tracing our journey  
in reverse...

...over the  
ocean





through  
the war

seeking an  
origin story

that will set  
everything  
right.









At the ferry crossing, everyone returned to camp except for Bô, Uncle Hải, and a friend of theirs.

They called the police to send a boat.



The midwife was inside hulling grain when they arrived at her hut.

It didn't take much English to communicate what was happening.



My sister...



HMMPH-

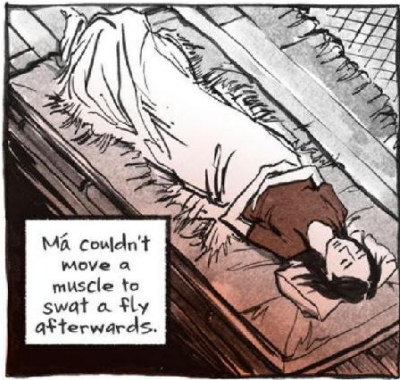


HAH!



OH! Yes! Come inside.





THẢO'S BIRTH  
Sài Gòn, 1974

The year before I  
was born, my mother  
had another baby.



MY BIRTH  
Sài Gòn, 1975

That same year,  
Bố's grandfather  
died and I was  
conceived.



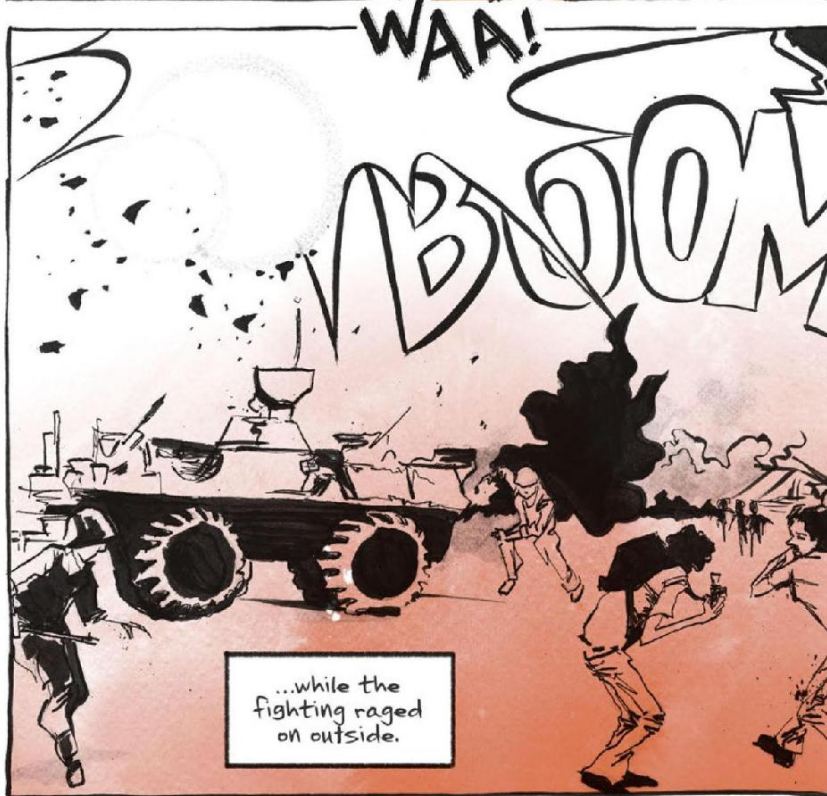
On the road to  
Đi An to visit  
his grave, my  
parents would  
pass a large  
statue of Phật  
Bà Quan Âm,  
the Goddess  
of Mercy.

After praying for  
months to keep me  
safe, my parents said I  
was born with her face.





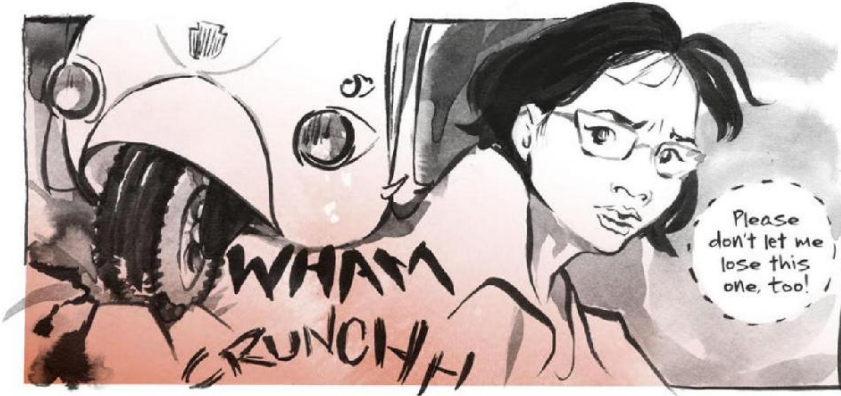
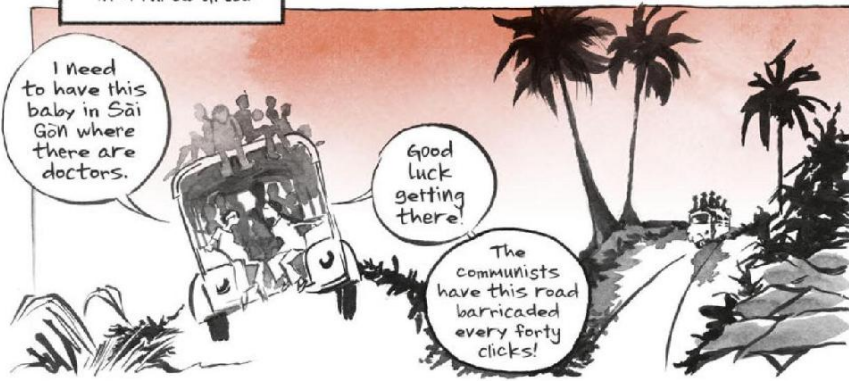




LAN'S BIRTH, Mekong Delta, 1966



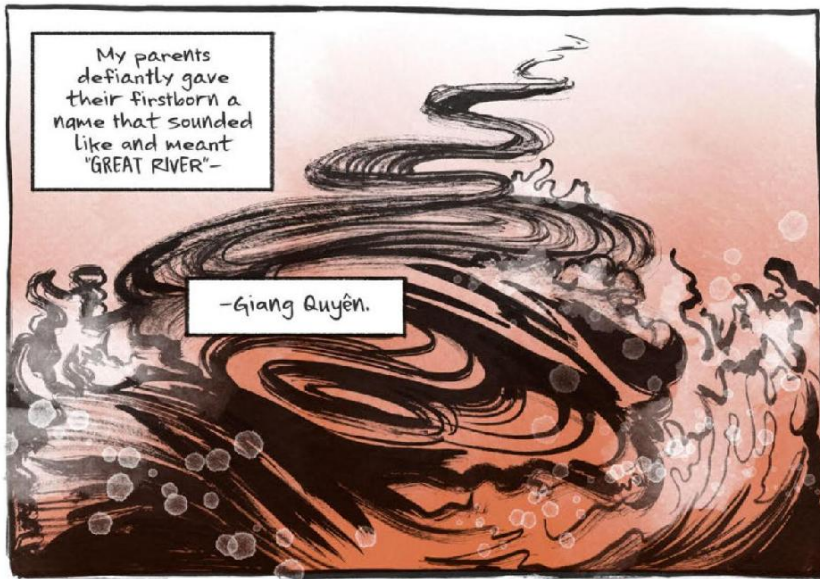
Mã was a teacher in a rural area.











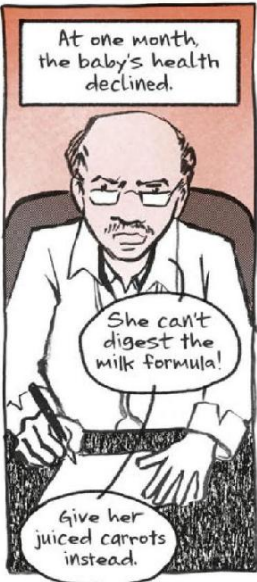
My parents defiantly gave their firstborn a name that sounded like and meant "GREAT RIVER"-

-Giang Quyên.



Mã's mother, a well-to-do woman, told her not to breast-feed.

I didn't, and I had seven children!



At one month, the baby's health declined.

She can't digest the milk formula!

Give her juiced carrots instead.



The baby's skin turned a strange yellow from the carrot diet. Bô's grandmother, who lived with them, lamented:

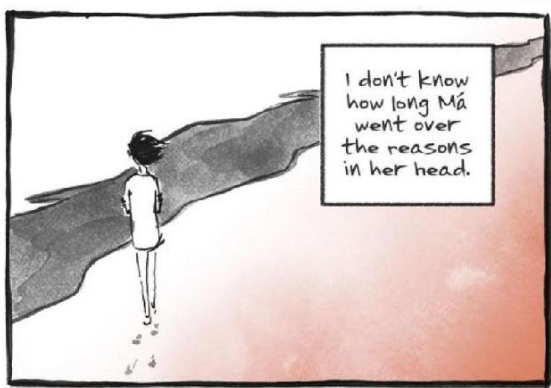
Look at the poor child!

CANT you just put a LITTLE MILK in her juice?





# HÔPITAL GRALL, SEPTEMBER 1965













And though my  
parents took  
us far away  
from the site  
of their grief..

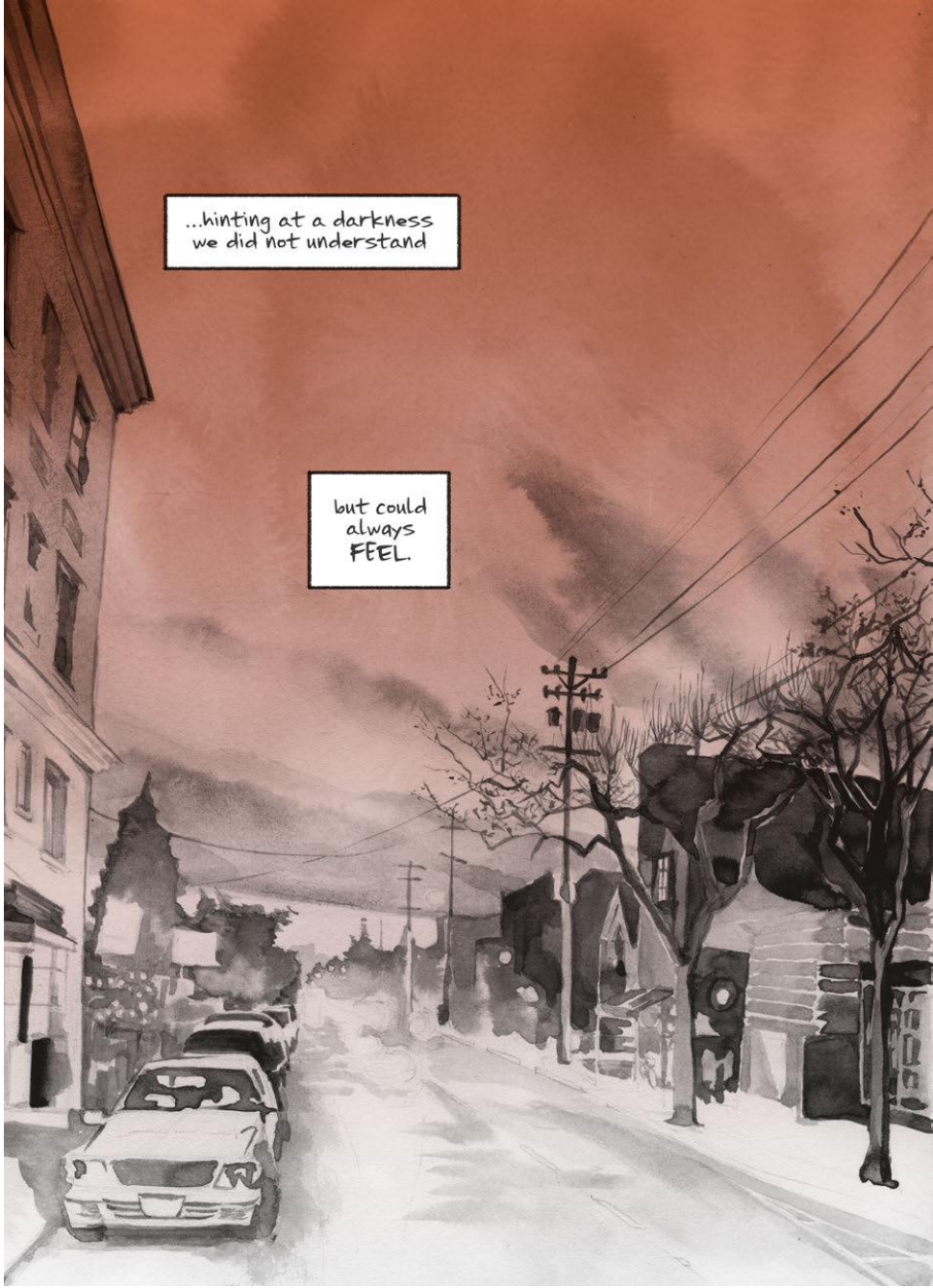


...certain shadows  
stretched far,  
casting a gray  
stillness over our  
childhood...



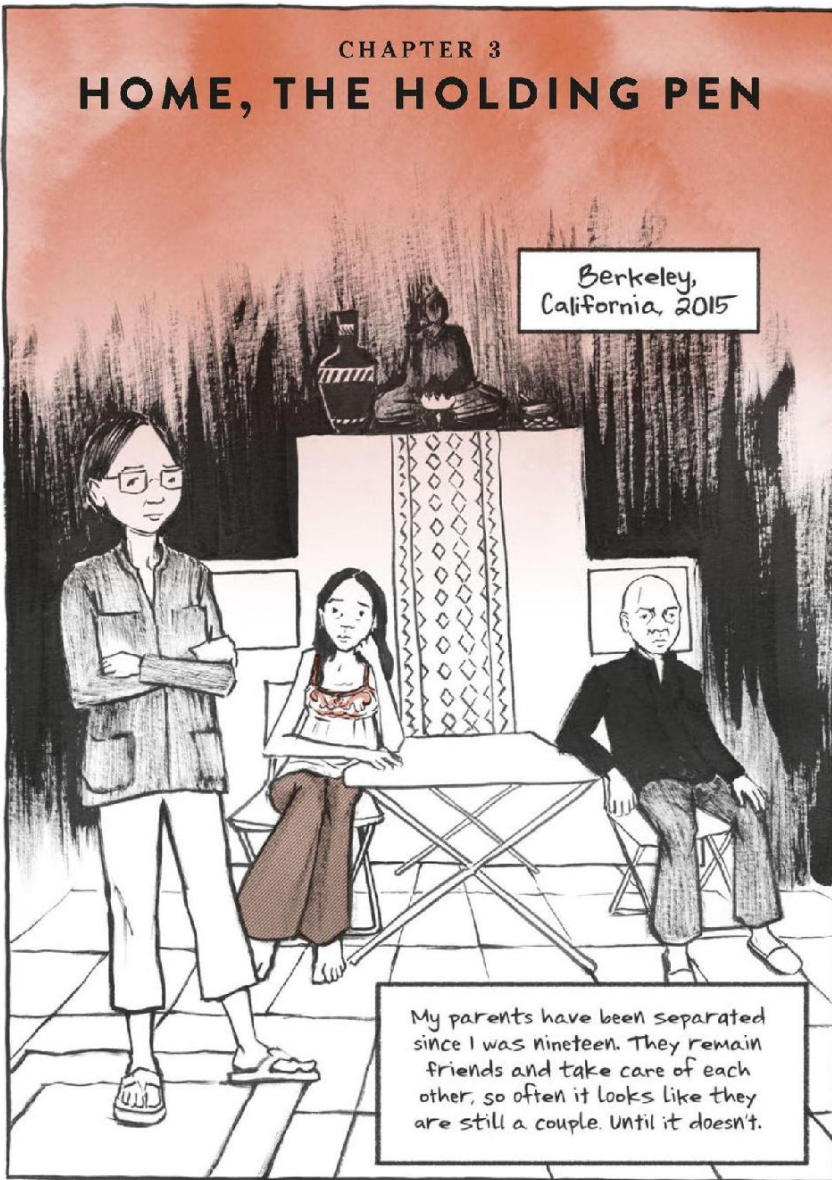
...hinting at a darkness  
we did not understand

but could  
always  
**FEEL.**



CHAPTER 3  
HOME, THE HOLDING PEN

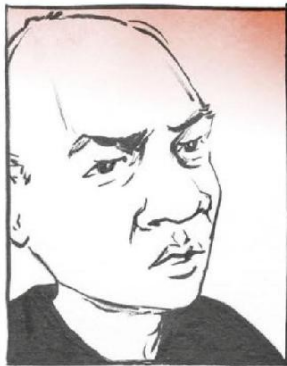
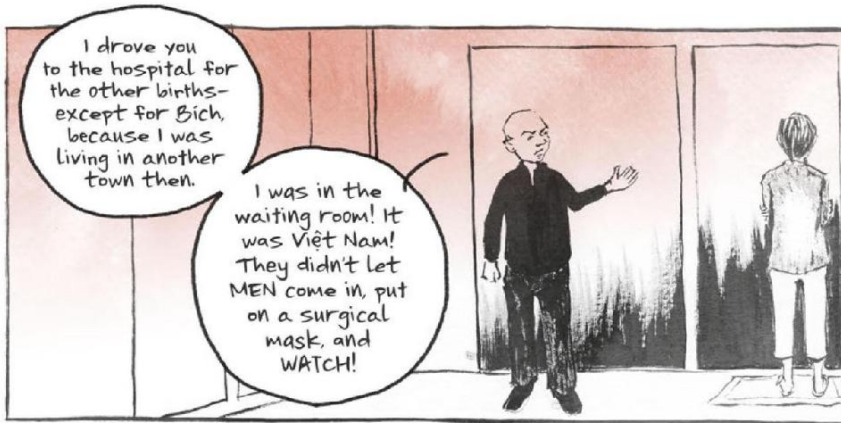
Berkeley,  
California, 2015

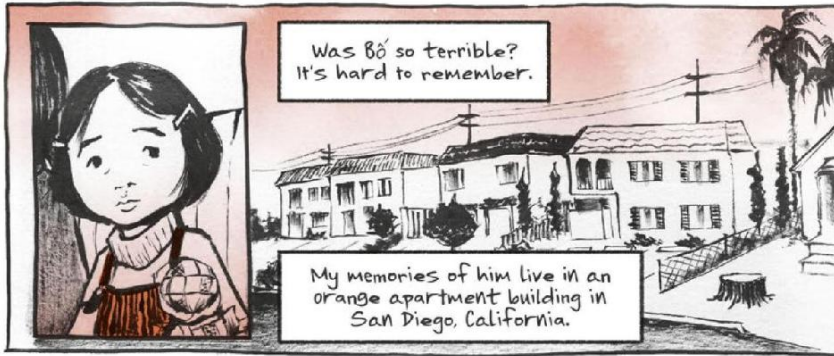


My parents have been separated since I was nineteen. They remain friends and take care of each other, so often it looks like they are still a couple. Until it doesn't.













The same month we moved into the orange building, a sixteen-year-old girl in San Diego aimed her rifle



at the elementary school children across the street from her house, killing two people and injuring nine.



The mayor at the time was PETE WILSON,



the same California governor I would hate many years later

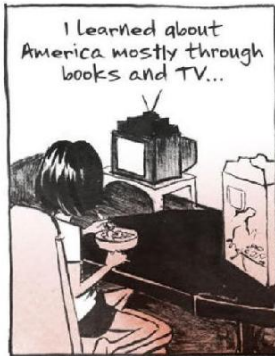


for backing one of the most anti-immigrant laws in history.

San Diego was a naval and marine corps base, where the wounds of the Vietnam War were still fresh,



and not everyone welcomed our presence.





For my parents, already fully formed in another time and place to which they could never go back...



...home became the holding pen for the frustrations



and the unexorcised demons that had nowhere to go in America's Finest City.







Looking back, it was a bad decision for Bó to be the one



to stay home with two small children.



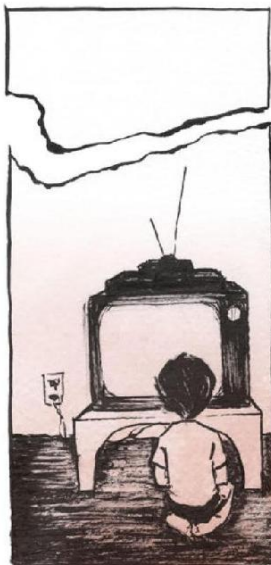
At the time, I only knew that Mã would be gone before the sun was up.



And Tân would be at the window crying if he missed her



or if she forgot to look up and wave good-bye.



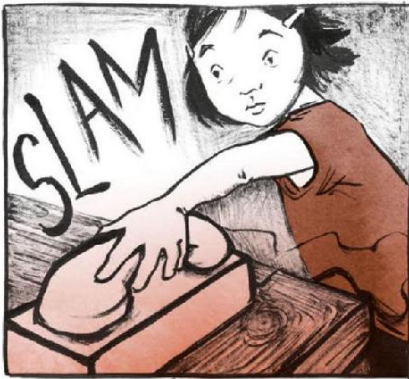
















only made it harder to ignore the shadows outside.



Tam would hold his breath



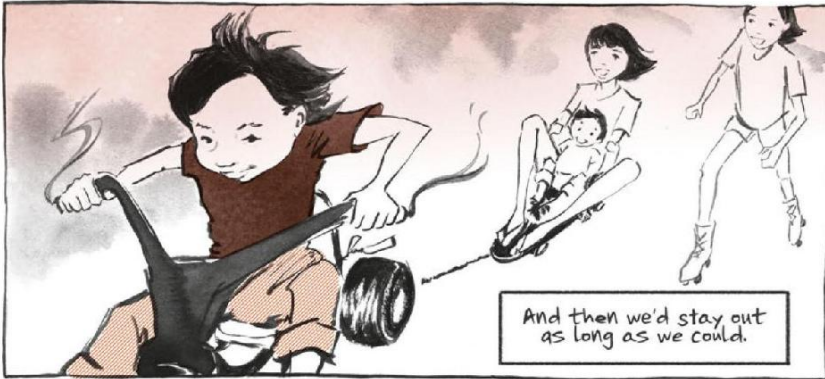
till he couldn't hold it any longer.

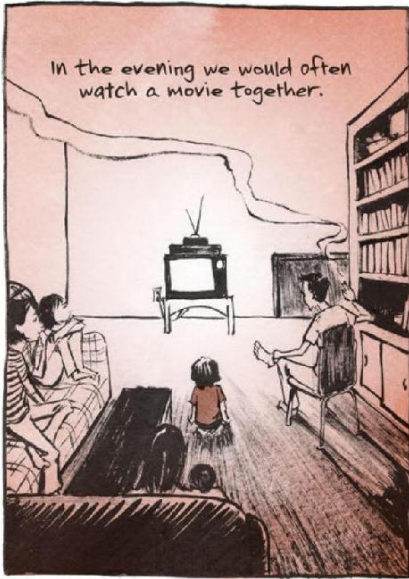


But even his hiding place was fraught with danger.

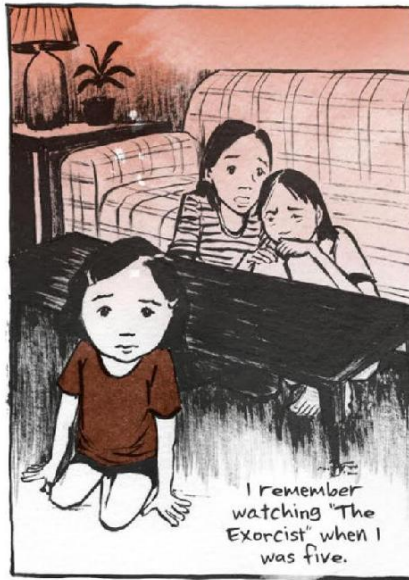








In the evening we would often watch a movie together.



I remember watching "The Exorcist" when I was five.

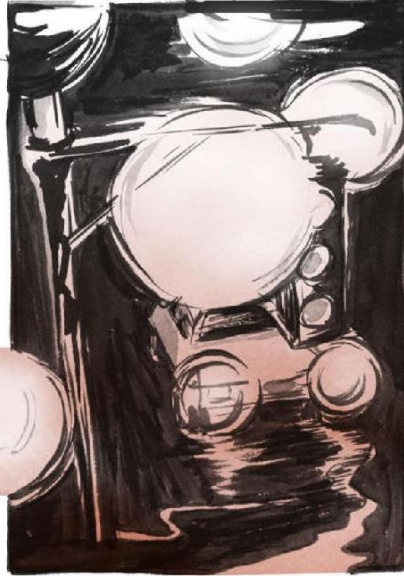


We didn't have restrictions on what we could watch.



and we didn't have a bedtime like other children did.













I never had dreams about flying, or thoughts of running away from home.

I remember Bô told us about astral projection, and a terrible prank that had happened in Việt Nam.



A friend of your uncle's was known to project in his sleep.



"As a joke, his friends dressed him up while he slept.



"His spirit didn't recognize his body when it tried to return.



"other spirits possessed him...



"...so afterward it was as if he had gone insane."



Bô slept alone in his bed at night and practiced leaving his body.

I practiced being brave.











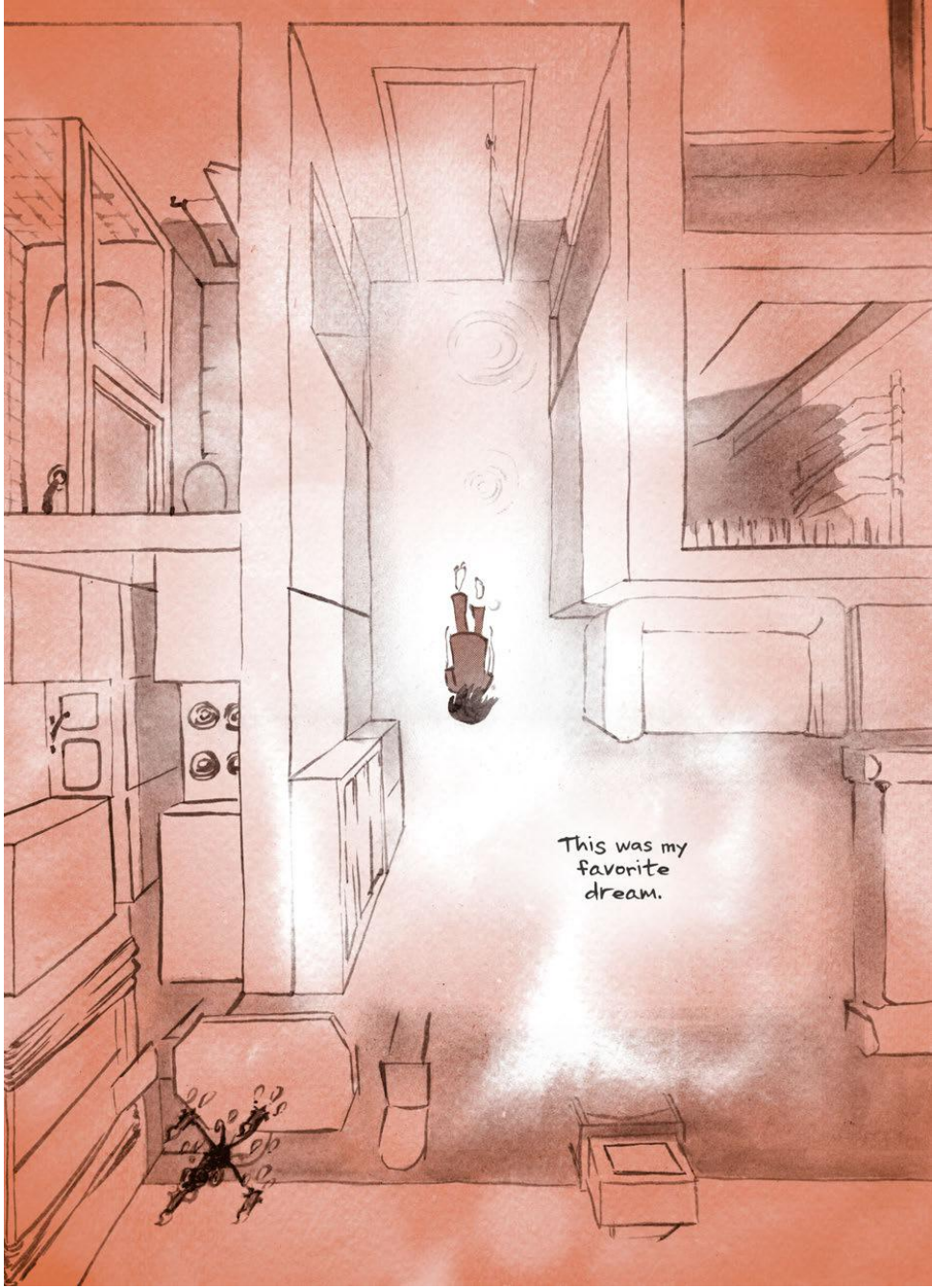
Though my world  
was small,



I would  
sometimes  
dream of  
being free  
in it.







This was my  
favorite  
dream.

CHAPTER 4  
**BLOOD AND RICE**

Me and Bô, we're okay now.



To stop being scared of him,  
I grew up and went away.



And now that I've come back,  
we can sit in my mother's  
studio, both of us visitors,  
neither one owing the other.







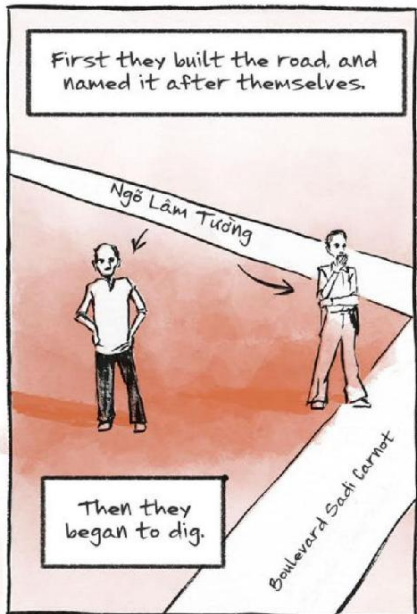
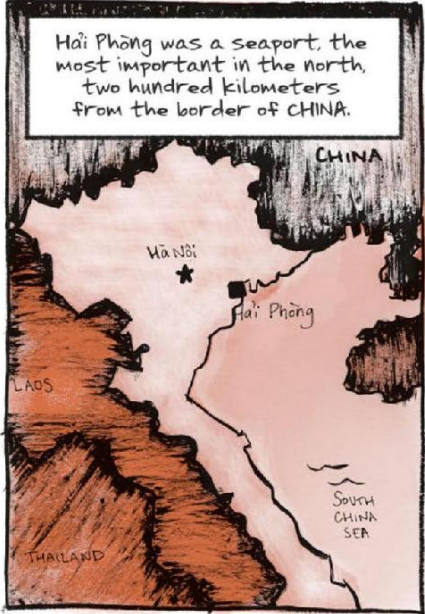
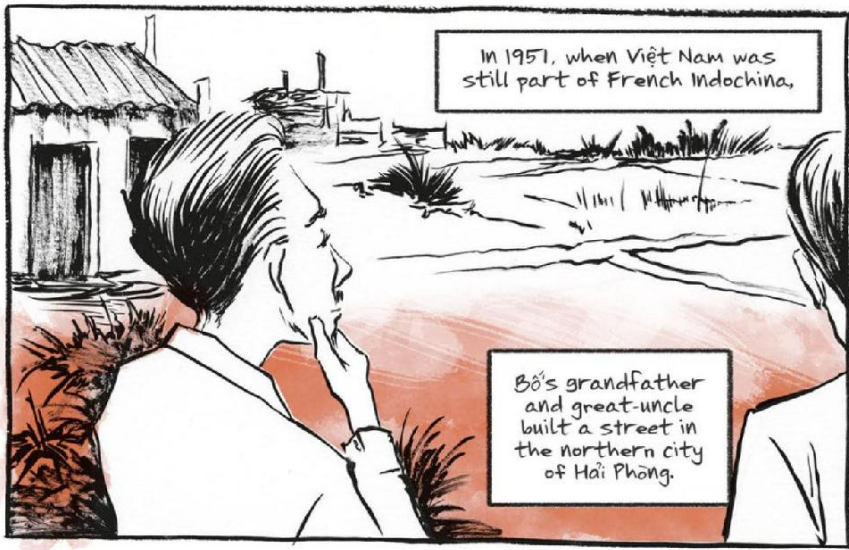


When I did, the stories poured forth with no beginning or end-

-anecdotes without shape,

wounds beneath wounds.

Shall I begin with the story of the pond in HẢI PHÒNG?

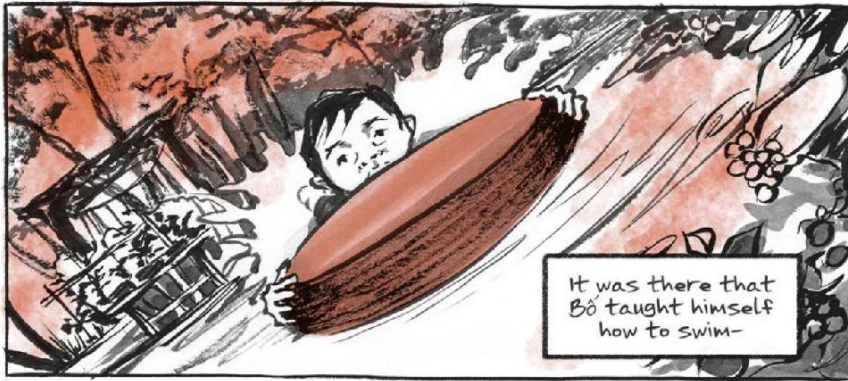










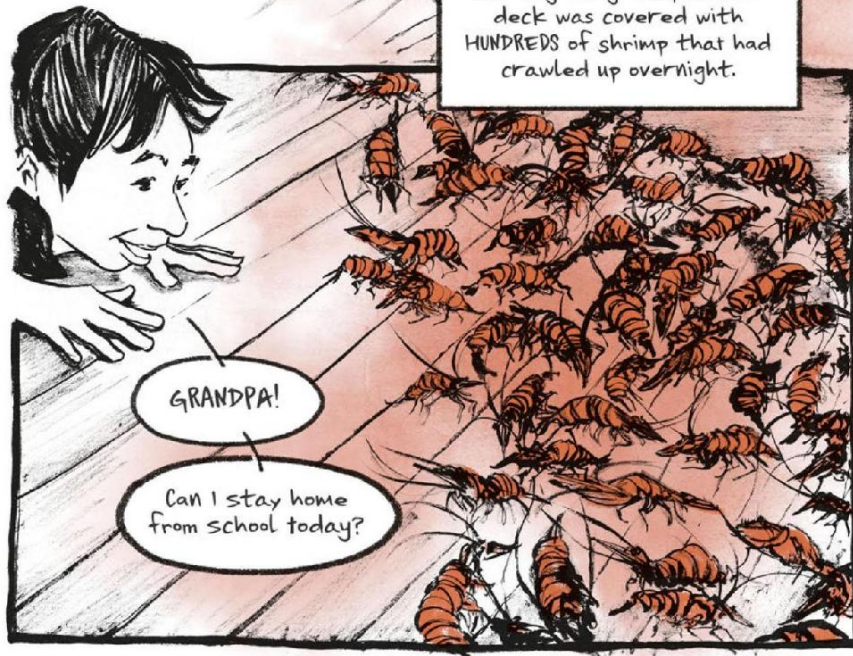




My father fished for small shrimp.



which were so plentiful, one morning his grandparents' deck was covered with HUNDREDS of shrimp that had crawled up overnight.





A fabric dyer  
moved into one  
of the houses.



Eventually,  
the dyes he  
poured into  
the water



killed all  
the pond life



and there was  
no more fishing.

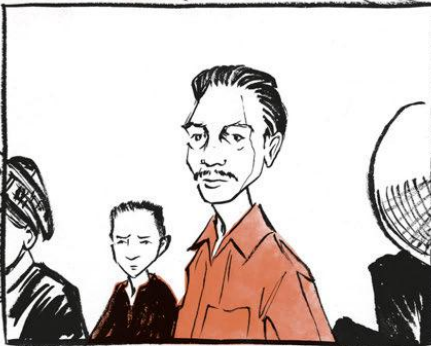


Each of Bô's stories about childhood has a different shape but the same ending.

This one begins north of Hải Phòng, on the other side of Đèo Mountain...

...in a village called LÔI ĐÔNG, sometime in the 1930s.

One day, a man and a boy arrived in the village with nothing but the clothes they wore.



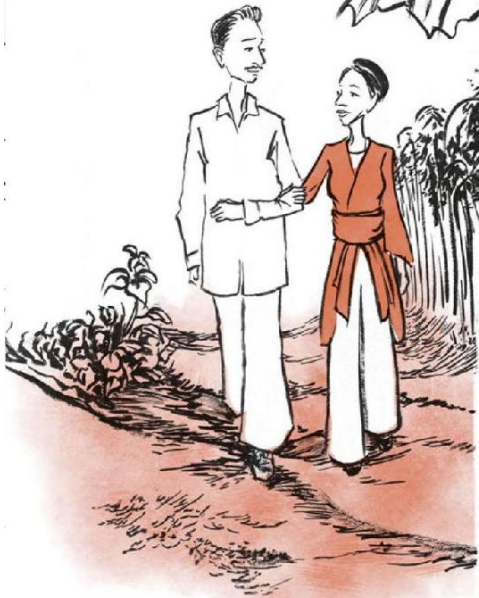
The man was a dapper gentleman.



Using his wits and good looks, he found work as a secretary to the village chief, a distant relative...



...and successfully wooed the village chief's daughter, a widow with money.



His son, however, was never quite accepted into the family.

There's the gold digger's boy!





When the son got older, he married a plain, little woman, who gave him a son—MY FATHER.

Our little Nam!

I don't think they had many prospects.



It was 1940, and the world was plunging headlong into CHAOS.

The Second World War had already begun in Europe...

...France had just surrendered to Nazi Germany...



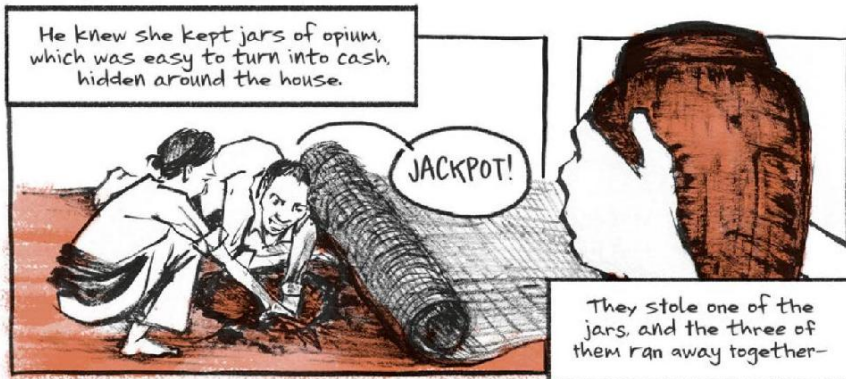
...and Japan, at war with China, sent troops to occupy northern French Indochina and block Chinese supply routes.

In the path of war, people built their makeshift lives and survived by whatever means they had.



When Bô was two, his parents went along with a dubious scheme cooked up by his grandfather.

The dapper gentleman had already begun to cheat on his wife.



He knew she kept jars of opium, which was easy to turn into cash, hidden around the house.

JACKPOT!

They stole one of the jars, and the three of them ran away together-



-dragging along Bô to the dense forests and mountains of the North-

-to Lang Sơn, where they hoped to start a lumber business.





But transport for the lumber was often disrupted by fighting between Vietnamese insurgents and French and Japanese forces in the area.

And there were too many French officials to bribe.



To make matters worse, Bô got very sick.

What's wrong with him now?

He's burning up, and he has boils all over his body!

Keep him on wet leaves and keep changing them.



He could DIE out here!

The jungle is no place for a child!

We'll have to go back to the city.



War caused shortages and inflation.



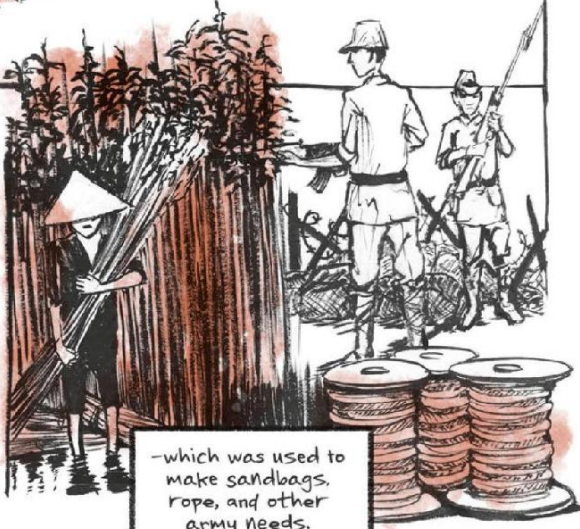
While the people had less to eat, the French and Japanese armies hoarded rice-



-and even burned it as fuel for trains when oil was scarce.



Farmers were forced to uproot their rice and plant jute-



-which was used to make sandbags, rope, and other army needs.





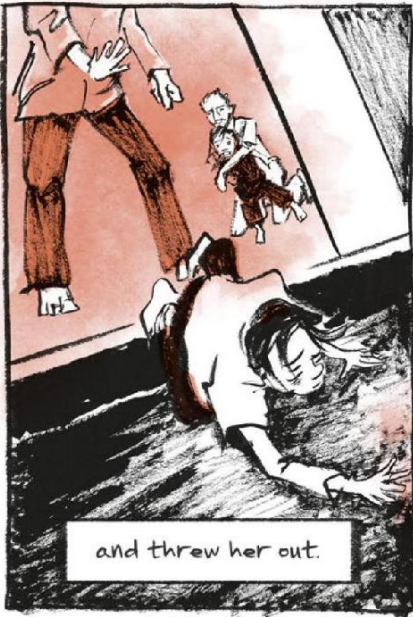












and threw her out.



That was the last time Bô ever saw his mother.





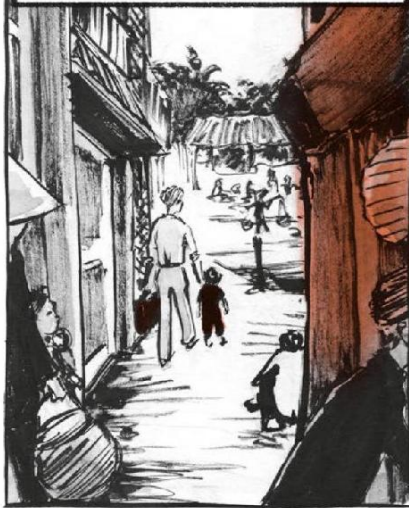
The family disbanded. Bô's father and grandfather, each focused on his own survival, went separate ways.



Bô's father joined the Việt Minh, partly because his paramour, the pretty neighbor, was a recruiter for them, and partly because they would feed him.



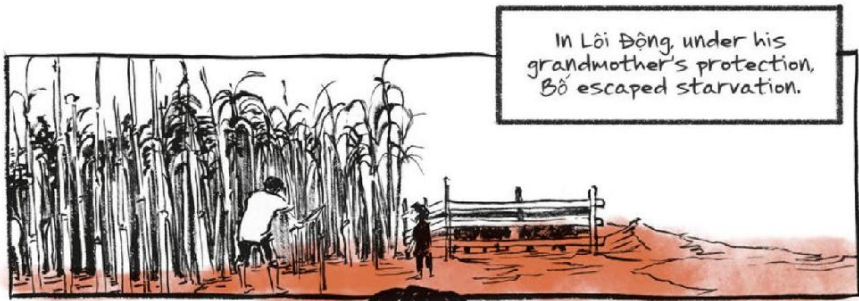
Bô's grandfather went to Lôi Đổng to make amends with his wife—



—hoping that a hungry, helpless grandchild would help her forgive his lying, cheating, and stealing.















I had never, before researching the background of my father's stories, imagined that these horrible events were connected to my family history...



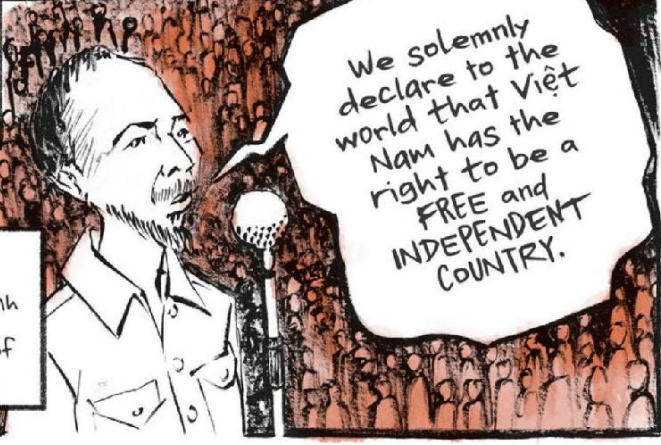
...or that they ushered in a brief but hopeful moment in Việt Nam's history.



The fall of Japan left a power vacuum in Indochina.

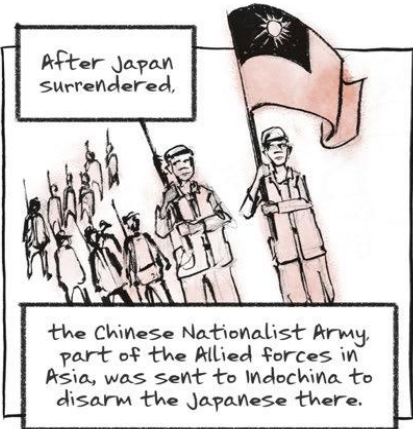
Việt Minh forces took control of the capital city Hà Nội-

-and on September 2, 1945, Hồ Chí Minh proclaimed a free Republic of Việt Nam.



We solemnly declare to the world that Việt Nam has the right to be a FREE and INDEPENDENT COUNTRY.



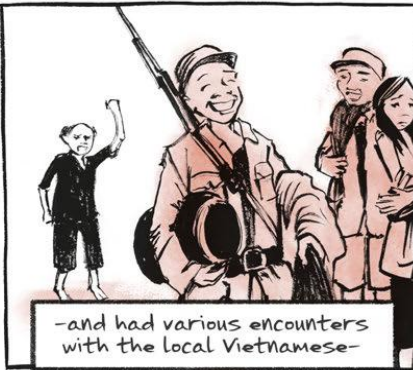


After Japan surrendered,

the Chinese Nationalist Army, part of the Allied forces in Asia, was sent to Indochina to disarm the Japanese there.



Ragged and starving after years of fighting, the Nationalists sold many of those arms to the Việt Minh-



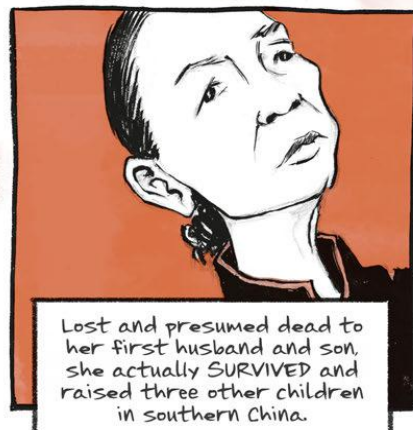
-and had various encounters with the local Vietnamese-



-among them Bô's mother-



-who went with one such soldier back to China.



Lost and presumed dead to her first husband and son, she actually SURVIVED and raised three other children in southern China.

1945 could have been the moment for a union of Vietnamese leaders from the North, Center and South to create a self-determining democracy.



Had they succeeded...

...the next thirty years of war might have been avoided...

...millions of lives spared.

My life, who knows how different?

But the French came back.

WE HAVE COME TO RECLAIM OUR INHERITANCE.

Was it hubris?

After being occupied by Germany, was it a way to repair their injured identity?



How does the expression go... shit rolls downhill?





The Việt Minh withdrew to the rural north, where they could fight a guerrilla resistance.



Peasants, tenant farmers, and laborers flocked to their cause...



...because they had long been abused and exploited by landowners and lords who preferred the colonizers to the Communists.

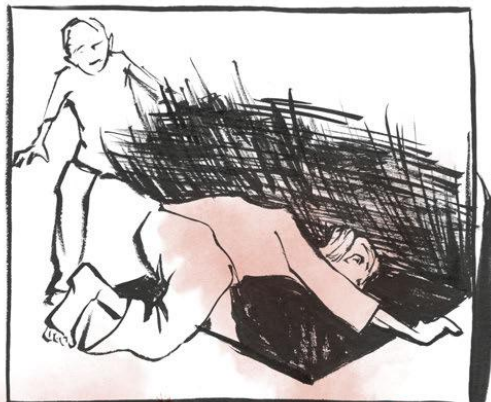


Unable to tell a Communist peasant from a non-Communist one, the French made this war a hell for villagers.

They all look the same!

Shoot anything moving just to be sure.

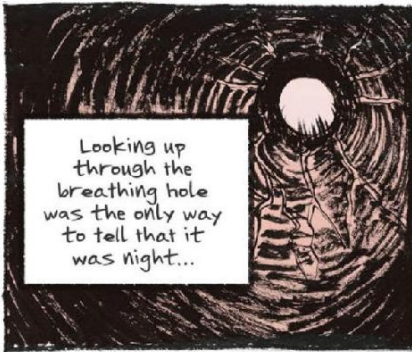








Above ground, the soldiers burned houses, killed women and children.





On the fourth day of the raid,  
two Việt Minh came to take  
those villagers still alive to a  
hideout in the mountains.



By night,  
the  
villagers  
waded  
through  
dark  
waters...



...to Cửa Cấm, the estuary  
that bordered Hải Phòng.

French guards heard them  
and fired into the water.



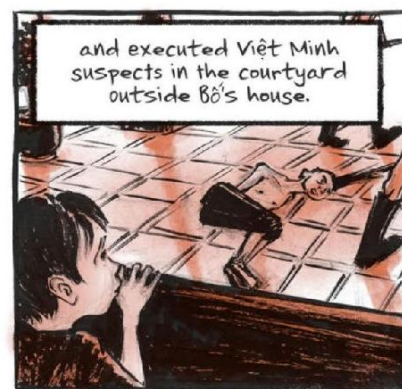
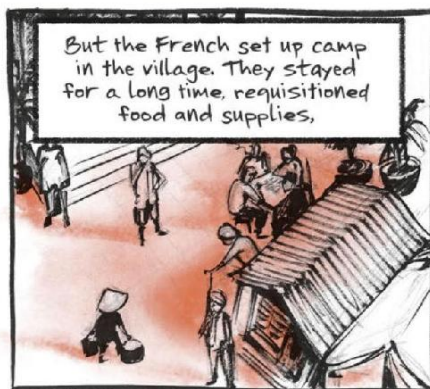
The two  
Việt Minh  
fled.

And the villagers,  
with no other option,



turned around and  
waded all the way  
back to Lôi Động.









One night, the Việt Minh took revenge on the village chief.

Why did you BETRAY us?



They tied him to a post and beat him. No one dared to intervene.



Next time, old man, we'll cut your throat!

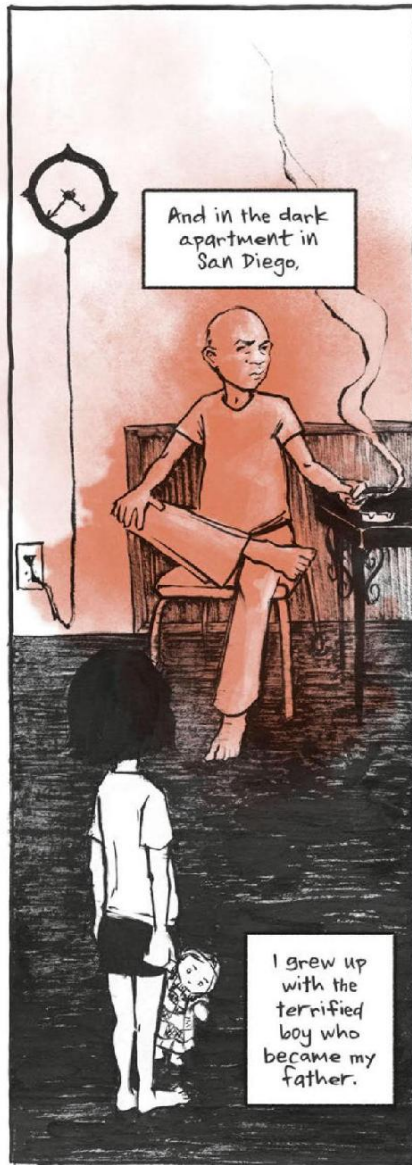


The next day, the village chief called his family together.

We can't stay here any longer!









Afraid of my father,  
craving safety and  
comfort.



I had no idea that the  
terror I felt was only the  
long shadow of his own.

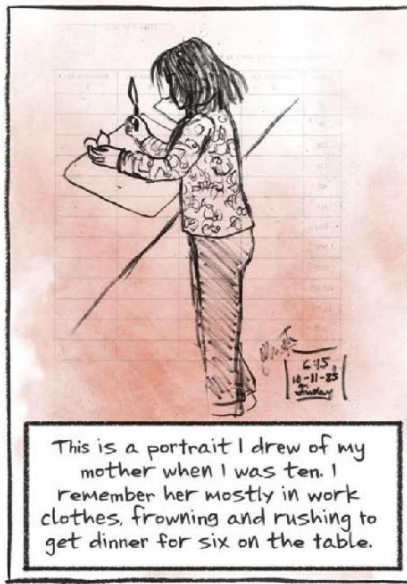
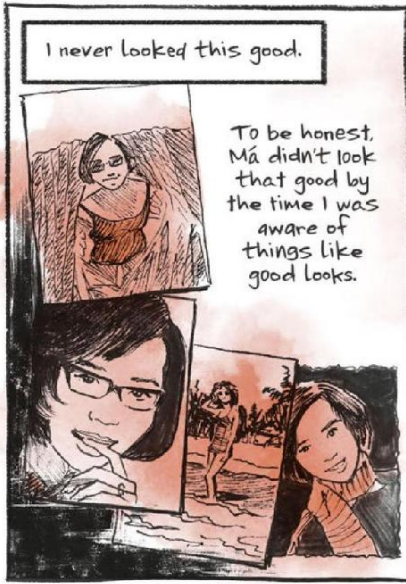


CHAPTER 5  
**EITHER, OR**





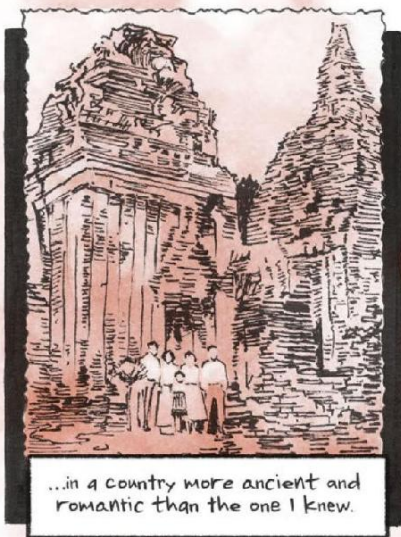














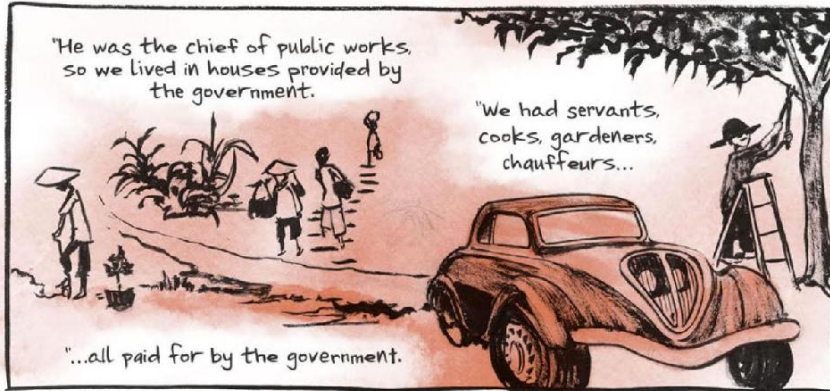




In 1943, when I was born, we were living in Cambodia in a big house in the capital.



"My father was a civil engineer. He worked for the French, then later for the South Vietnamese government."



"He was the chief of public works, so we lived in houses provided by the government."

"We had servants, cooks, gardeners, chauffeurs..."

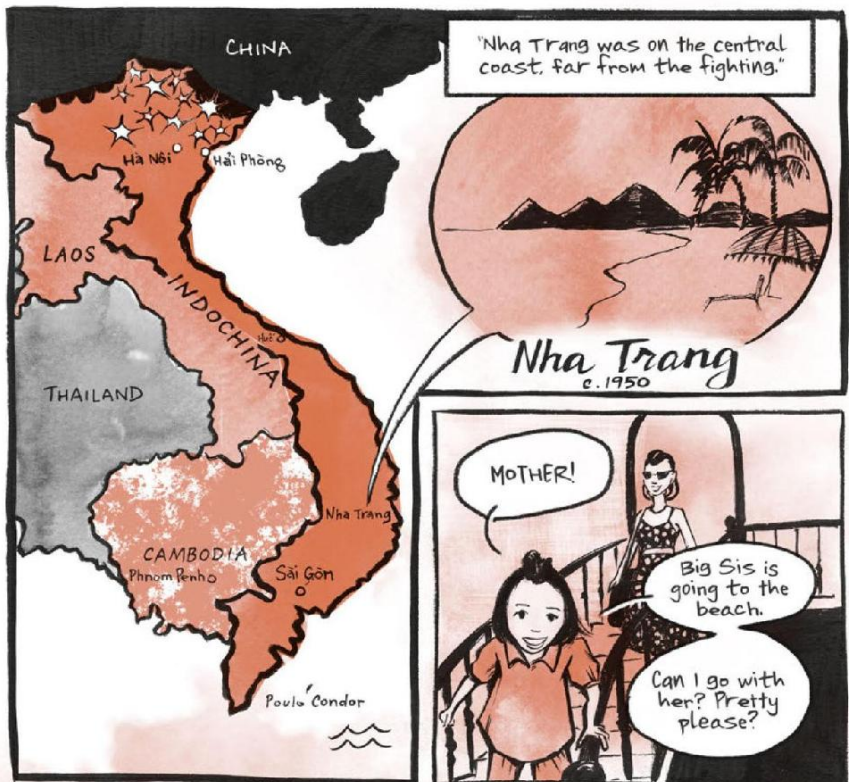
"...all paid for by the government."



"Then there was trouble in Cambodia—they were killing Vietnamese people."

"So we were forced to go back to Viet Nam. After that, I grew up in Nha Trang."







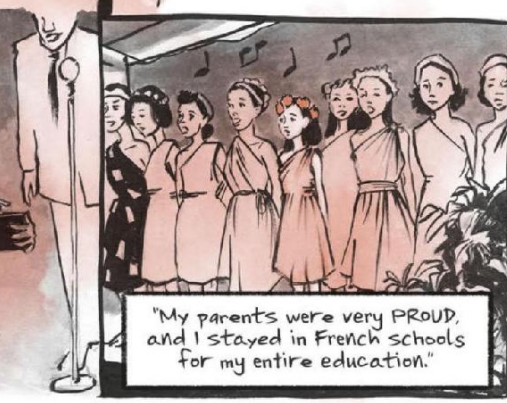




"Everyone called me baby..."



"My father put all of his children in French school, but none of my brothers or sisters did well."







"When I was a child, my head was always in a book."

Don't read so much! You'll RUIN your EYESIGHT!

Yes, Mother.



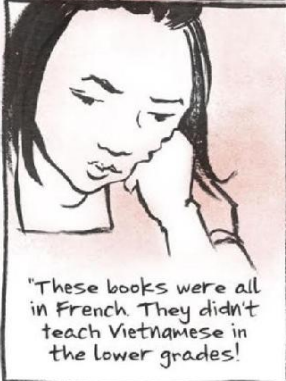
"I remember reading La Comtesse de Ségur. She wrote books for children."



"Her characters were always young girls."

"Girls from poor families who were smart and good..."

"...and girls from rich families who were mean and less talented. The unfairness of it."



"These books were all in French. They didn't teach Vietnamese in the lower grades!"



"Whenever I saw one of my siblings reading in Vietnamese, I'd try to read it too."

What're you reading?

What's it say?

Ha! You're not that smart if you can't read Vietnamese!



I'll show you!

"So I taught myself to read Vietnamese."





"My mother was an extravagant spender, and threw a lot of dinner parties for my father's friends, the social elite."

"Is the DUCK ready?"

"Almost, ma'am!"

"The food was always exceptional."



"Get me all the ingredients for the sauce!"

"She would sweep into the kitchen..."



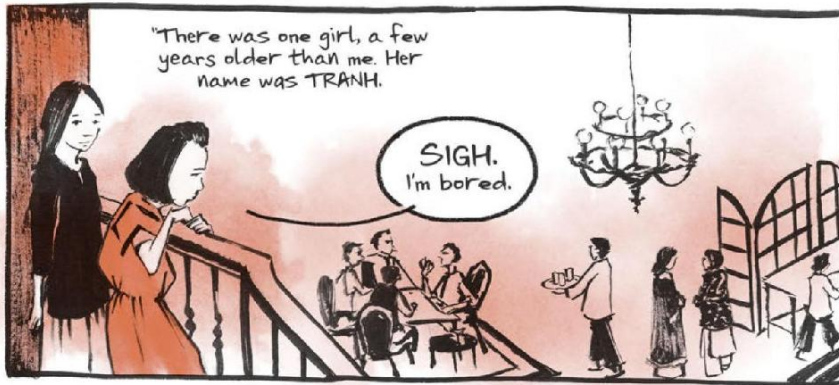
"...do all the final seasoning and tasting..."



"Don't break the skin when you take it out!"

"...and then waltz out again."







"I got to go for two weeks that summer..."

CHARGE!



"...and a whole month the following summer."



"No one made me nap, and her parents let me play outside ALL day."

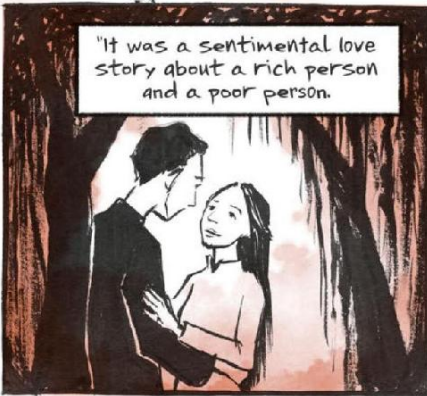


"It built up my appetite and I ate a LOT, even though the food was very simple."

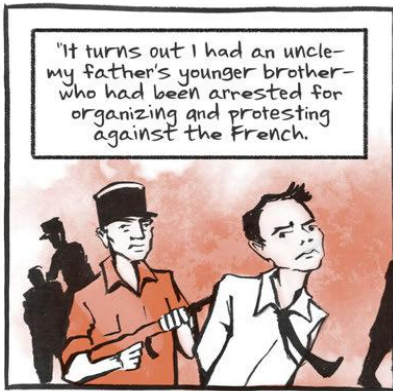


"At night, the moon on the fields was like magic."

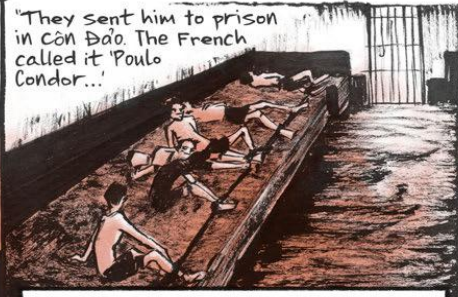








"It turns out I had an uncle—my father's younger brother—who had been arrested for organizing and protesting against the French."



"They sent him to prison in Côn Đảo. The French called it 'Poulo Condor...'"

"He wasn't really a communist when he went in, but on the inside, among the Việt Minh prisoners, he became one."

"As for me, it was by reading history books in Vietnamese that I learned how the French had come and colonized our country."



"I started to feel a sense of nationalism, of pride in my own people."



Jacqueline! Viens voir cette chose magnifique!



No, Vân. We're Vietnamese.

Let's not speak French outside of school anymore.

"The French school in Nha Trang only went up to ninth grade, so I had to go away to continue high school."



"My parents enrolled me in an all-girl Catholic school, one hundred kilometers away in Đà Lạt."



"My classmates spoke French all the time, even outside of school."

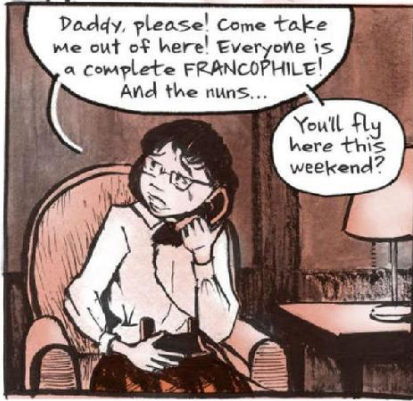


Mon dieu! Did you smell that driver's FEET? I bet he hasn't washed in WEEKS!

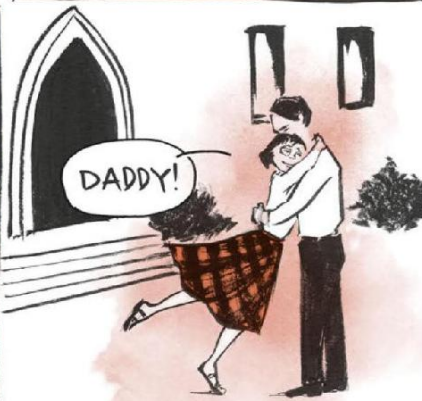


Daddy, please! Come take me out of here! Everyone is a complete FRANCOPHILE! And the nuns...

You'll fly here this weekend?



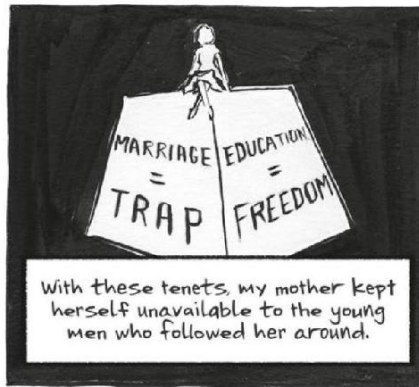
DADDY!

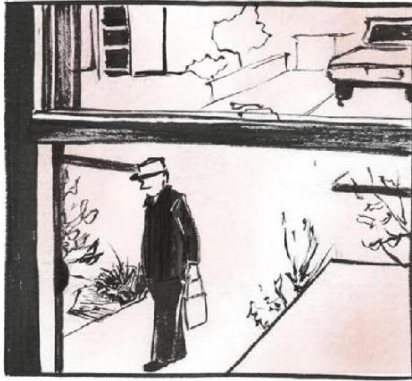














After the raids on Lôi Đông and a period of transition to Hải Phòng during which he was left alone often, Bó's life began to get better.



Bó's grandparents rented a place on Rue du Commerce...

...where his grandmother opened a convenience store in the front and a tailor shop in the back.



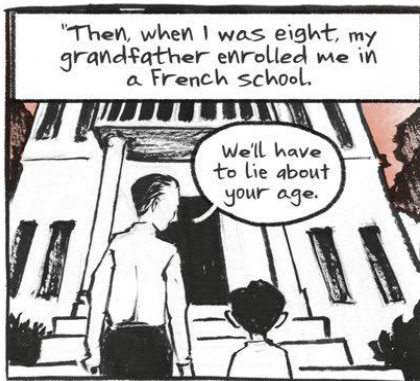
His grandfather mixed and sold traditional Chinese medicine.



And they sent Bó to school.







"Henri Rivière was an elite school, reserved for the French and wealthy Vietnamese.







"I read calls for change and revolution in the newspapers, and was influenced."









Every casualty  
in war is  
someone's  
grandmother,  
grandfather,  
mother, father,  
brother, sister,  
child, lover.

In the decade of the  
First Indochina War,  
while my parents  
were still children  
learning their place  
in the world...

...an estimated  
94,000 French  
soldiers died  
trying to reclaim  
France's colony.

Three to four  
times as many  
Vietnamese died  
fighting them or  
running away  
from them.



This was the human cost of  
ending France's colonial rule in  
Southeast Asia...



...and winning Việt Nam's  
independence.















"On the road, I saw people living in such poverty."



"I remember our cyclo driver."

PANT PANT PANT



"We traveled on till we arrived in Thái Bình, the region that had supplied the Việt Minh with rice during the famine of '45.

"Thái Bình was deep Communist territory. Hà Nội still kept some residue of the West, but places like this had no such thing as a movie theater.



"I remember they put up a screen outdoors in a field to project news propaganda.

"Police surrounded the audience.



"If you didn't CLAP when everyone else did, they would notice you.

"If they NOTICED you they would take you away."







"It was a long ride to his home, thirty kilometers away."



"He told me he had married again. His third wife was the daughter of a farmer who had once saved his life by hiding him from the French."











"But the month I spent in the communist North had a very different effect on me.



"It was true that the Việt Minh had won independence by winning the WAR.



"But the new society I dreamed of didn't EXIST.



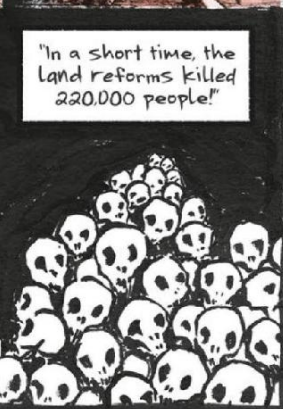
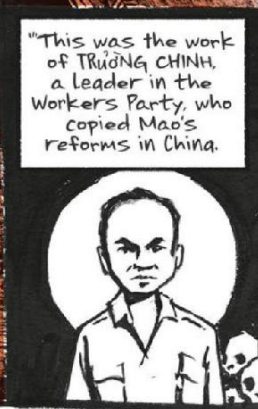
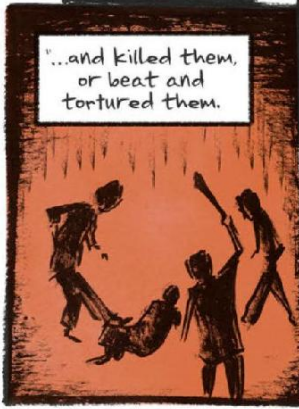
"Here there was no freedom of thought, no allowance for individuality.

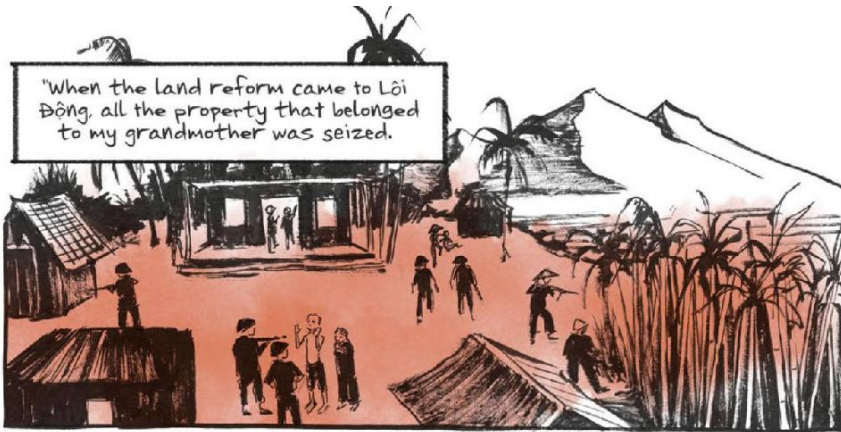


"I was fourteen. Sài Gòn represented a whole new world of possibility to me.



"Who would choose a world that had become so narrow, so poor and gray?"





"When the land reform came to Lôi Đông, all the property that belonged to my grandmother was seized."



"If we had been there, we would have been killed."

"I said good-bye to my father, letting him think I'd join him soon."



"But in my gut, I'd already said good-bye to him forever."

"As soon as I got home, my grandfather and I started packing."



"We went down to the harbor to register as part of the American evacuation of people to the South."

THIS IS YOUR PASSAGE TO FREEDOM  
SANG PHIA TU DO



Did your grandmother go with you?



"No. She and my grandfather had a falling out."



"It was very ugly."



"One night when they were fighting, she fell against a door and cut open her head."



"I had to take her to the hospital on the back of a hired scooter."

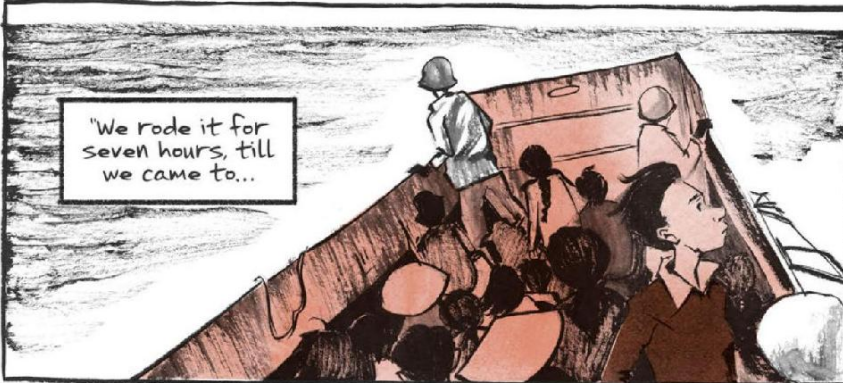


"The next day, she came home and left my grandfather."

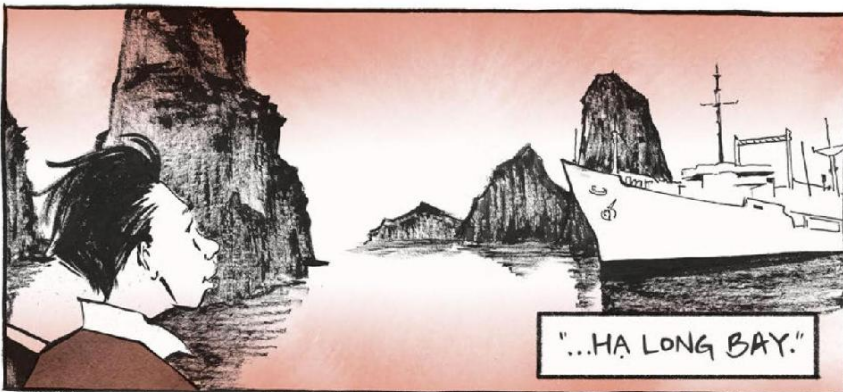
"With the border about to close, my grandfather and I left Hải Phòng in March 1955.

"At the port of Hải Phòng, they put us on a landing craft, like the kind used in Normandy in World War Two.

"People called them 'open mouth boats' because of the way you boarded.

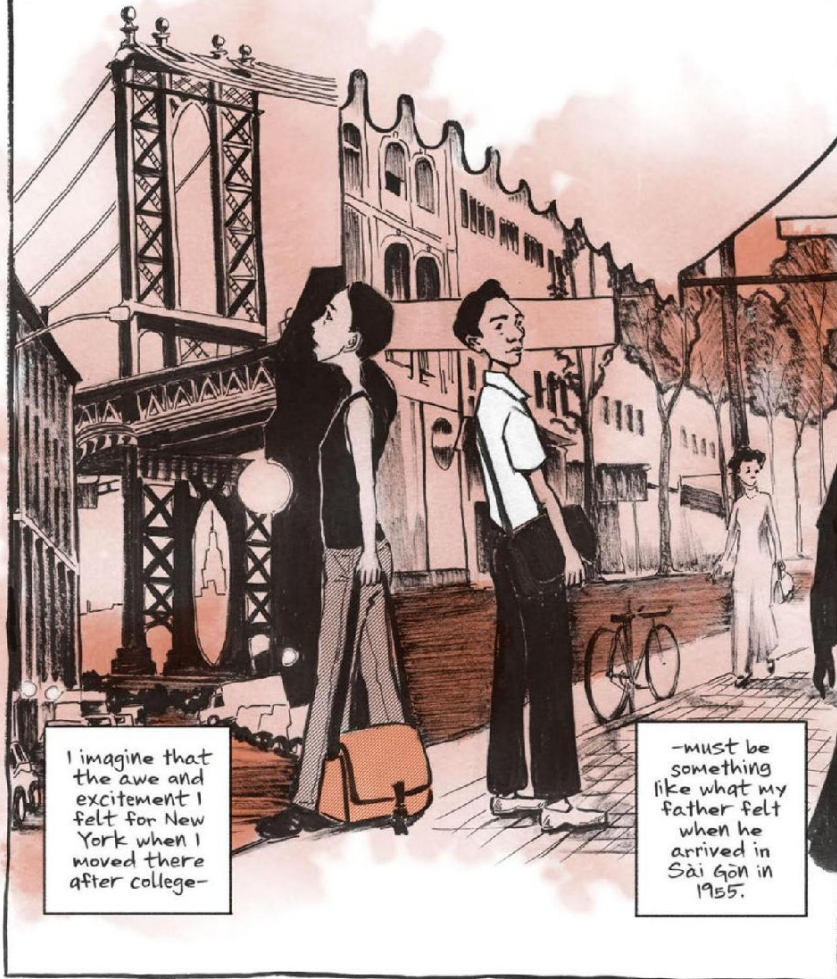


"We rode it for seven hours, till we came to...



"...HA LONG BAY."

CHAPTER 6  
**THE CHESSBOARD**





Bô and his grandfather were two bachelors exploring the big city...



...money in their pockets, freedom on their minds.

They strolled down grand avenues,



ate at restaurants,



and visited friends and relatives.



When his grandfather wanted some time away from him-

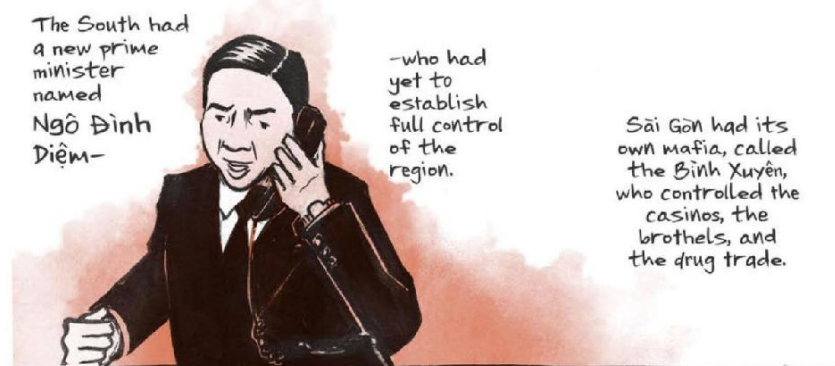


Here's some money. Go see a movie!























We didn't know the people who lived there and didn't go inside.



Even standing right in front of our old home, I had to rely completely on my family's stories to picture how it was when we lived there.



I think this is the same shop where occasionally we would get a cigarette or two for Dad.



This is where we learned to ride our bikes!

From there...



...all the way to the end-

-without hitting any of the vendors!



This is the old coffeehouse where we would go out every day

with our little glass, and bring back some coffee for Dad-

-with the condensed milk-



-laced with opium!

Smelled really GOOD!



CLICK

Lan and Bich remembered the alley where a friend lived,

a lamppost that Lan walked into while reading,

and the sidewalk where Bich beat up a boy for harassing Lan,

Lacking memories of my own, I do research.

CLICK







"George Syvertsen reports..."

"This neighborhood is called BAN CỎ, or the CHESSBOARD..."

"...because of the maze of alleys and passageways."



"Its residents are mostly poor working people..."

"...and its slums are a refuge for Sài Gòn's hoodlums and CRIMINAL ELEMENT."

"A Southeast Asian version of the Lower East Side or the Algerian casbah."

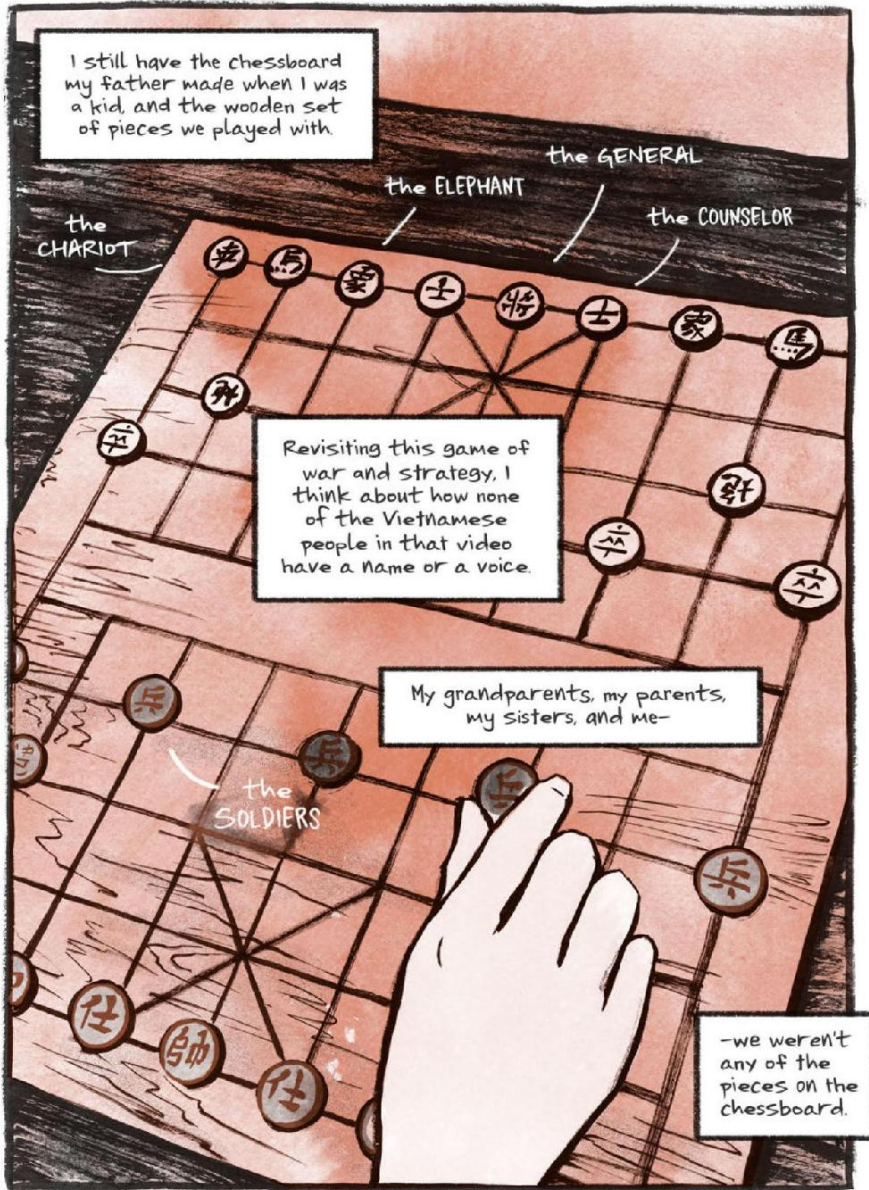


"I know this is caricature..."

"...but lacking memories of my own, I've come to depend on other people's stories."

"The Lower East Side. I'll draw it like that."







We were more like ants, scrambling out of the way of giants, getting just far enough from danger to resume the business of living.



Like this, Bô's grandparents managed to survive...

...while young Bô longed for something that felt more like LIVING.

My reality was uninteresting...



...so I became a dreamer.

"The French consulate gave me a scholarship to go to one of the wealthiest schools in Sài Gòn..."



"...and then I came home to a tiny hovel."



"I'd never been to Paris..."

"...I had no money..."

"But I dressed like a movie star-

"-in my one outfit.

"I'd go to a café with an upstairs, sit and order a beer, and imagine how my life would be if I were in a movie, like James Dean.

"I read Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, all the authors of that era.



"And the music then rebelled, too.

"So I wore shoes with no socks, my shirt with all the buttons undone, my hair long and my pants tight."

It's like the kids now, right? With their baggy pants.

I had my way to show that I wasn't like everybody else.





"My grandmother had been carrying tuberculosis from her first husband all those years. Living in that rat nest, with such poor hygiene, she became sick and passed it to me.

"I received treatment and got better, but she wouldn't finish her treatment...



The medicine makes me so NAUSEOUS!

...and we both got sick again.



"I became so sick my last year of high school, I failed my final exams.

"I studied for the Vietnamese equivalency and was able to graduate high school later that fall...



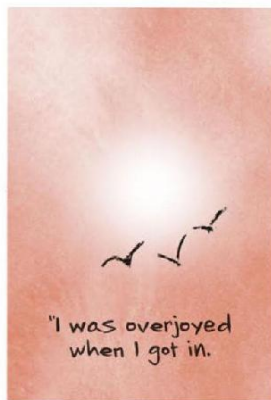
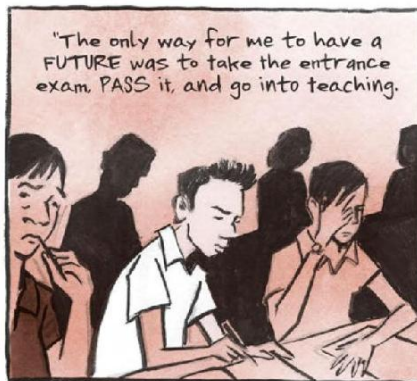
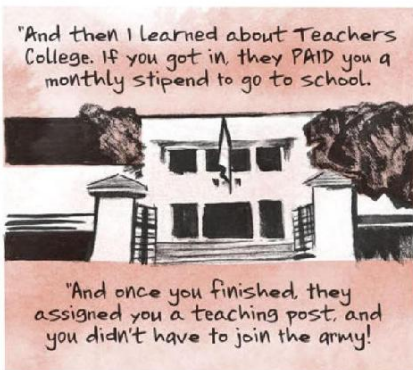
"...but the military draft had begun. We were at WAR with the North. If you were eighteen and male, you had to enlist.



"If you had money, under Diem's administration, you could get out of it.

"I didn't want to fight, but I had no connections and no money."





I'd like to tell this as a happy story, in which a young man, my father, meets a young woman, my mother.

They fall in love and marry, and several years later, have me.

But my mother's version of the story foils it.



When I was a young girl going to school at the Lycée Yersin in Đà Lạt...



...those three years were the best of my life.



Really?



You know all my HAPPIEST moments... always go back to that time.



The friends I have now—they were all very close friends I had in Việt Nam.

They all came from that time.



College was not a good time for me.

There was a lot of political turmoil, and reasons for my parents to worry for me.



So I didn't get to socialize with anyone.

Besides, the very first year, I met Bô... and that was it!

He just monopolized me.

It was like I was married from the very first year of college.



I understand why it was easier for her to not tell me these things directly, and I DID want to know.

But it still wasn't EASY for me to swallow that my mother had been at her happiest without us.







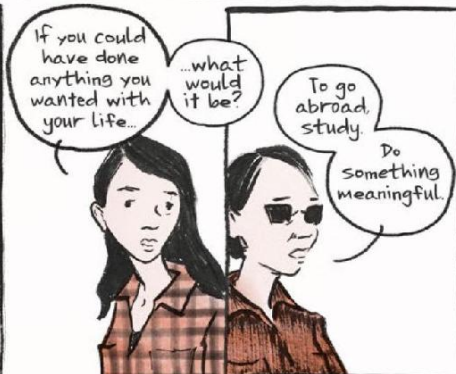
I followed up on the subject years later, when I was ready.

In her youth, Má's goal had been to become a doctor, but she gave up that dream in high school.



Migraines and frequent fainting came with the onset of puberty, and given how much school they caused her to miss,

she didn't think she could handle a rigorous science curriculum.



If you could have done anything you wanted with your life...

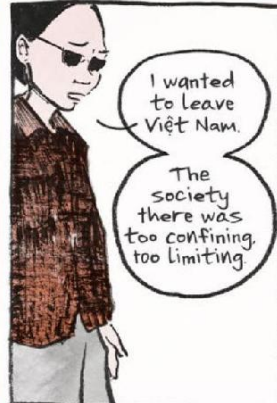
...what would it be?

To go abroad, study.

Do something meaningful.



Why did you want to go abroad?



I wanted to leave Việt Nam.

The society there was too confining, too limiting.



I didn't like having to worry about what people said about me...

...about doing something and ruining my reputation.



I have two photographs from the Christmas party where my parents "met," so to speak.



They knew each other from classes, but according to my father, this was the first time she really paid any attention to him.

I can feel the hormones surging in these pictures of my mother, age nineteen...



...and my father, age twenty-two.



I must not be the only person who noticed...



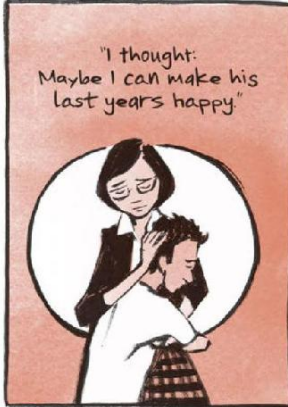
...that their wedding and the birth of their first child were not quite nine months apart.



But this is something Mǎ doesn't feel comfortable talking about.











Perhaps my mother was disappointed by marriage...

...but I think she was excited about the coming of her first baby.



One evening, they went to the movies.



Before the feature...

Excuse me-



...there were newsreels or short featurettes.



That night, there was a documentary about a beautiful small town in the deep southern part of the Mekong Delta.



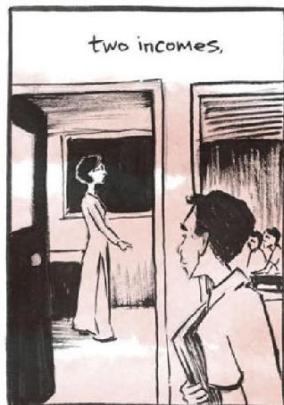
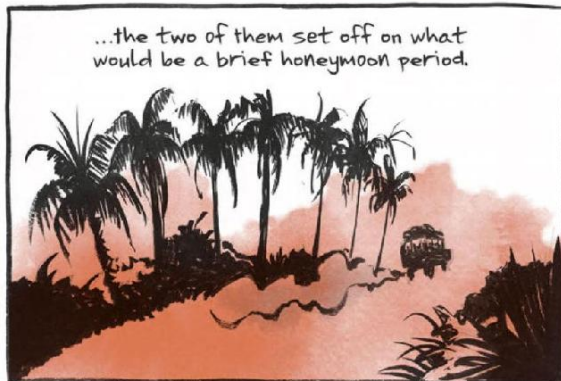
It looks so beautiful!

I'd love to go there.















Money ruined everything else.

The American military post exchange, or PX, provided a gold mine for profiteers.



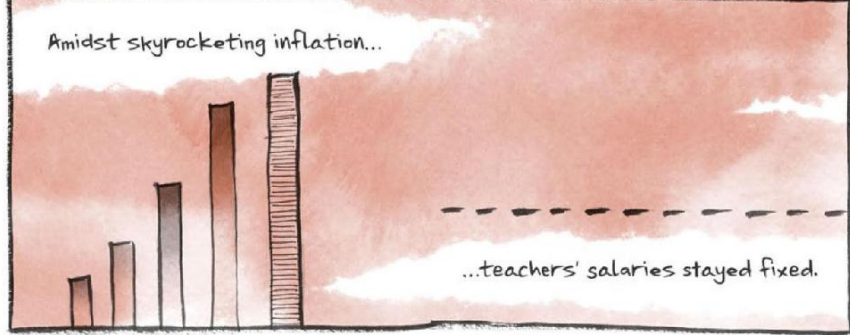
People with access bought goods at a low price...

...then sold them at a profit to relatives and middlemen...



...who in turn sold them at an even higher price.

You paid HOW MUCH for those cigarettes?



Amidst skyrocketing inflation...

...teachers' salaries stayed fixed.









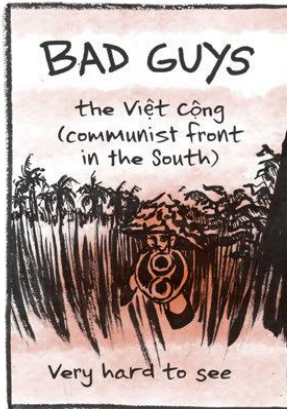
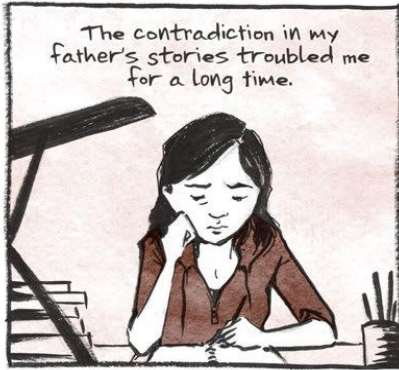


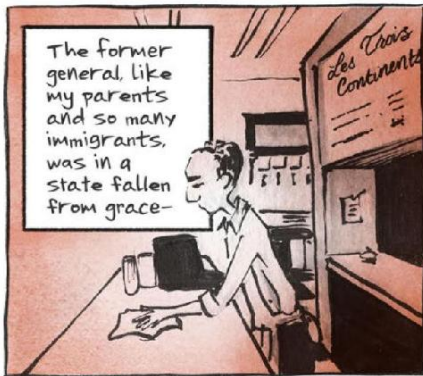
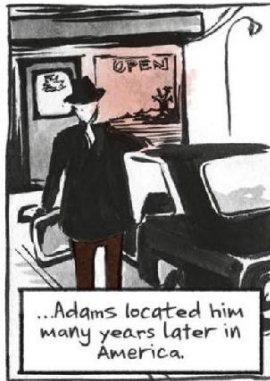
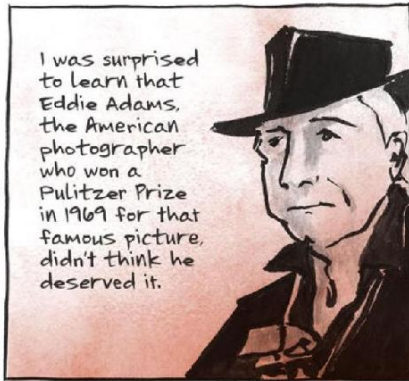


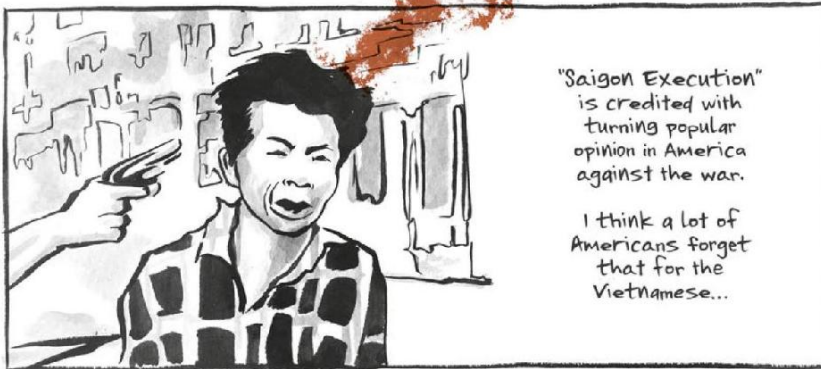






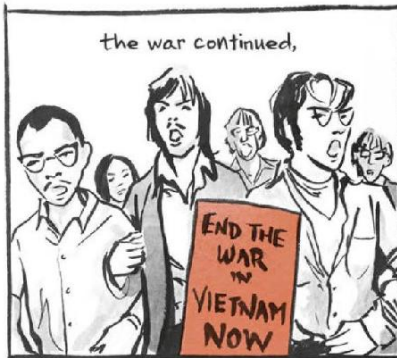




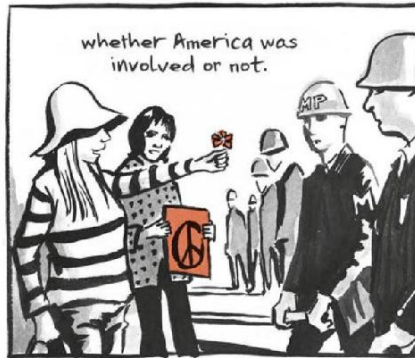


"Saigon Execution" is credited with turning popular opinion in America against the war.

I think a lot of Americans forget that for the Vietnamese...



the war continued,



whether America was involved or not.



For my parents, there was a rocket that barely missed their house...

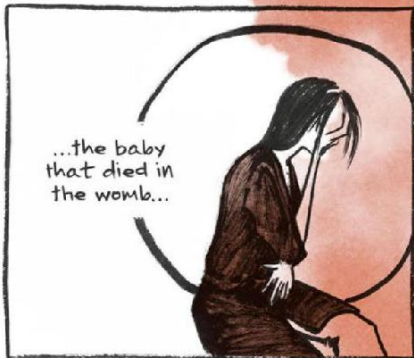


...and killed a neighbor...



...best friends and students killed in combat...





CHAPTER 7  
**HEROES AND LOSERS**

There is no single story of that day, April 30, 1975.



In Việt Nam today, among the victors, it is called **LIBERATION DAY.**



Overseas, among expats like my parents, it is remembered as **THE DAY WE LOST OUR COUNTRY.**



This is the image that most people know of the fall of Sài Gòn.









The 1968 massacre in Huế was still on our minds.

People said Sài Gòn would become a sea of BLOOD.

We can't run with a three-month-old BABY!





My parents packed bags anyway...

...and waited by the radio, holding their breath.

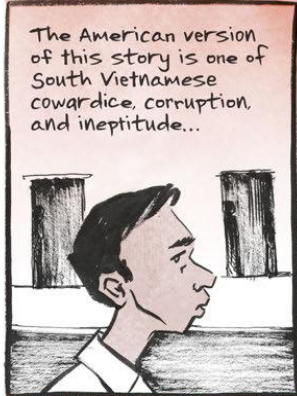
CRACKLE

But at 10 a.m. on April 30, 1975,

President Dương Văn Minh went on the air...

...and announced SOUTH VIET NAM'S SURRENDER.





The American version of this story is one of South Vietnamese cowardice, corruption, and ineptitude...



...South Vietnamese soldiers abandoning their uniforms in the street...

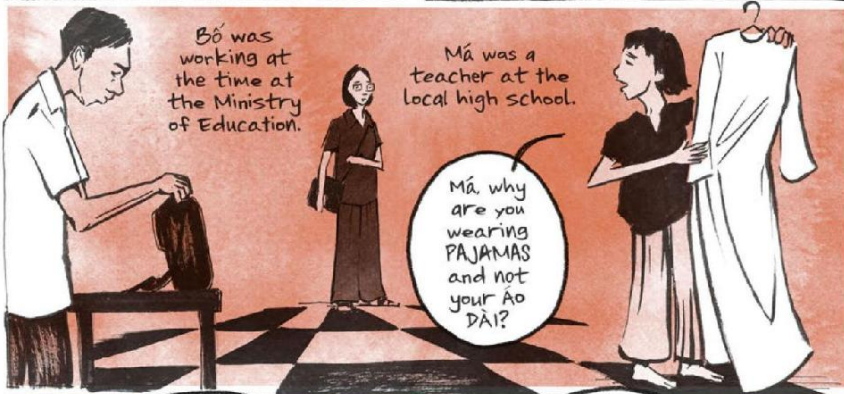
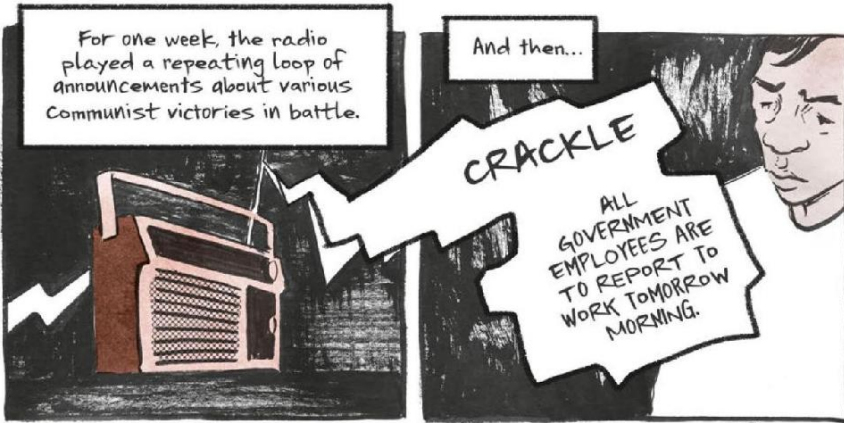


...Americans crying at their wasted efforts to save a country not worth saving.



But Communist forces entered Sài Gòn without a fight, and no blood was shed.

Perhaps Dương Văn Minh's surrender saved my life.





At work-



Bô's grandmother was always worried.

My parents began to talk of escape.

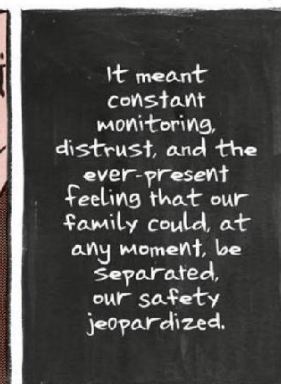
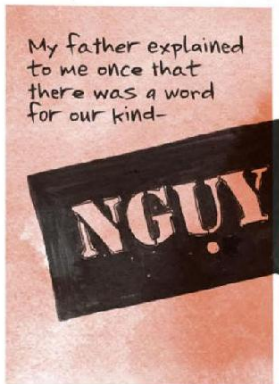






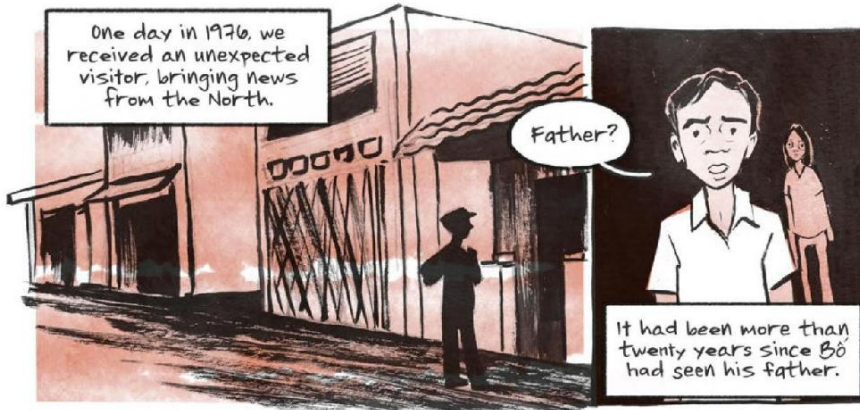






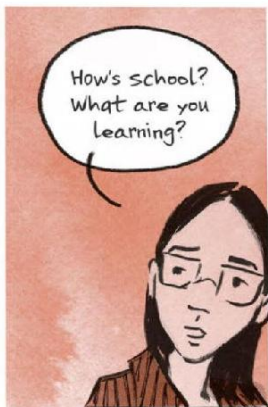
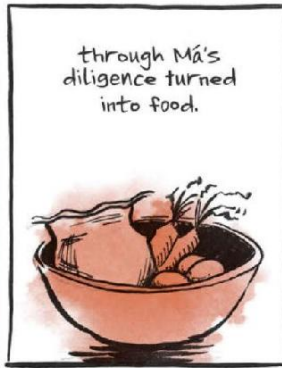
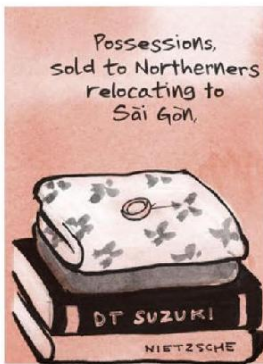






















Gas and food were bought and snuck onto the boat a little at a time.

Spaces on the boat were bought in gold bars or promises of repayment...

...and finally in March of 1978, Mã's brother Hải was released from prison.

Kiêu!

We leave next week! Are you in or out?

By then, Mã was eight months pregnant.

What choice do we have?





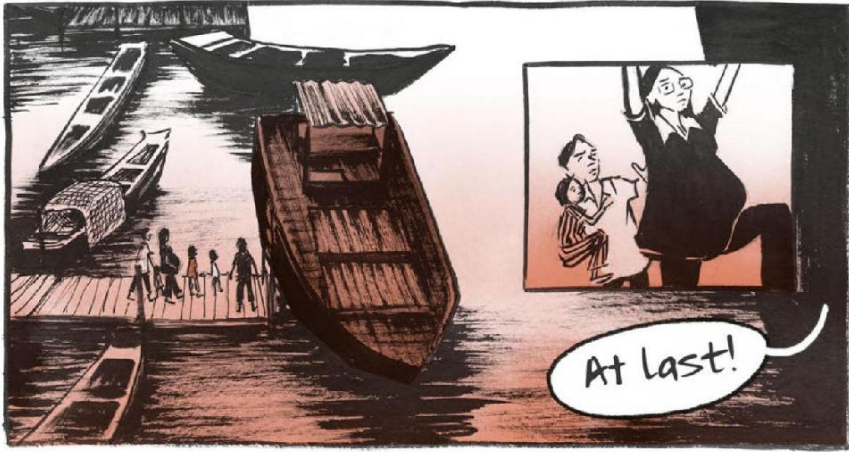
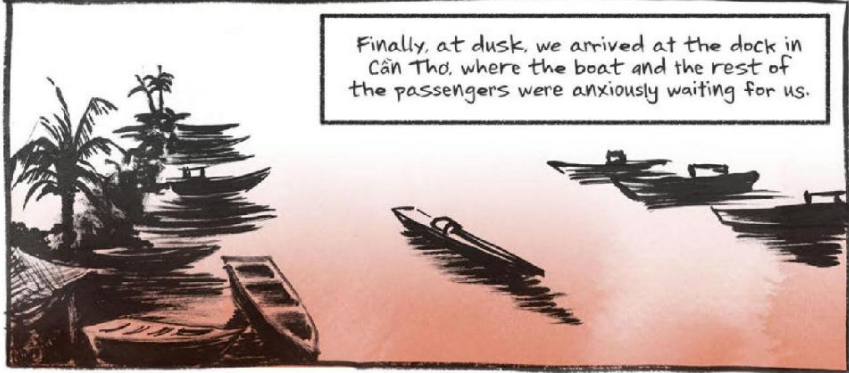




He was very late.



Finally, at dusk, we arrived at the dock in C n Th , where the boat and the rest of the passengers were anxiously waiting for us.

































Got it.

NAM! I had this sail sewn together from old ponchos. Wanna put it up?

You know, you're a real idiot!

"This is a round-bottom boat for hauling cargo down rivers.



"It's got no keel.

"You put a sail up and a strong wind blows us-



"-what do you think will happen?"

"We stick to the route, and we'll get there with no sail..."



...as long as we don't run into pirates.





Look! Bigger ships!

Let's flag them down to rescue us!



Those are Thai fishing boats. Could be pirates.

How do you know?



I DON'T! But we still have gas, food, and water.

We stay the hell away from them!



LOOK! When I turn, they follow.



C'mon, little engine.

CHUG  
CHUG  
CHUG









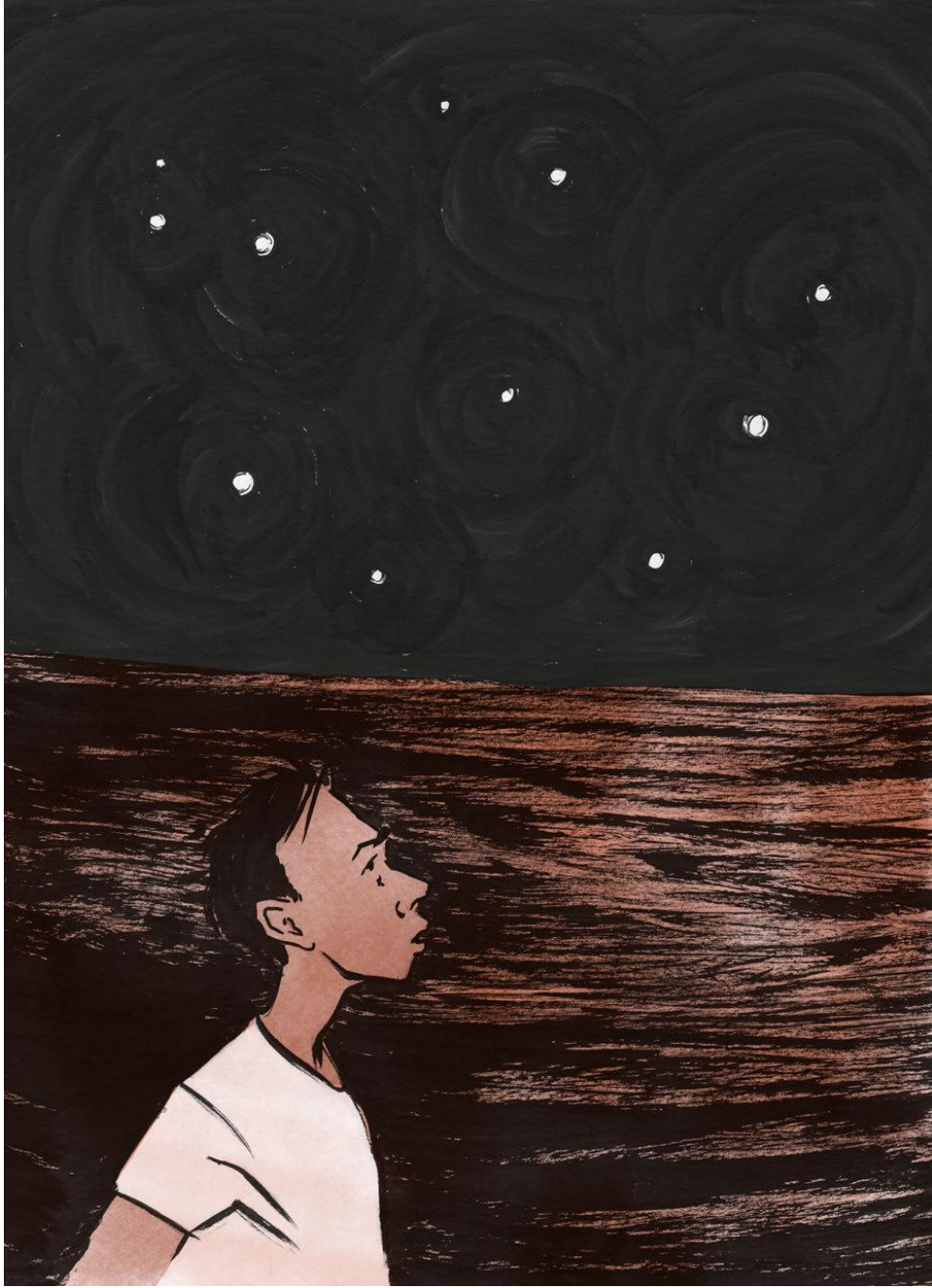




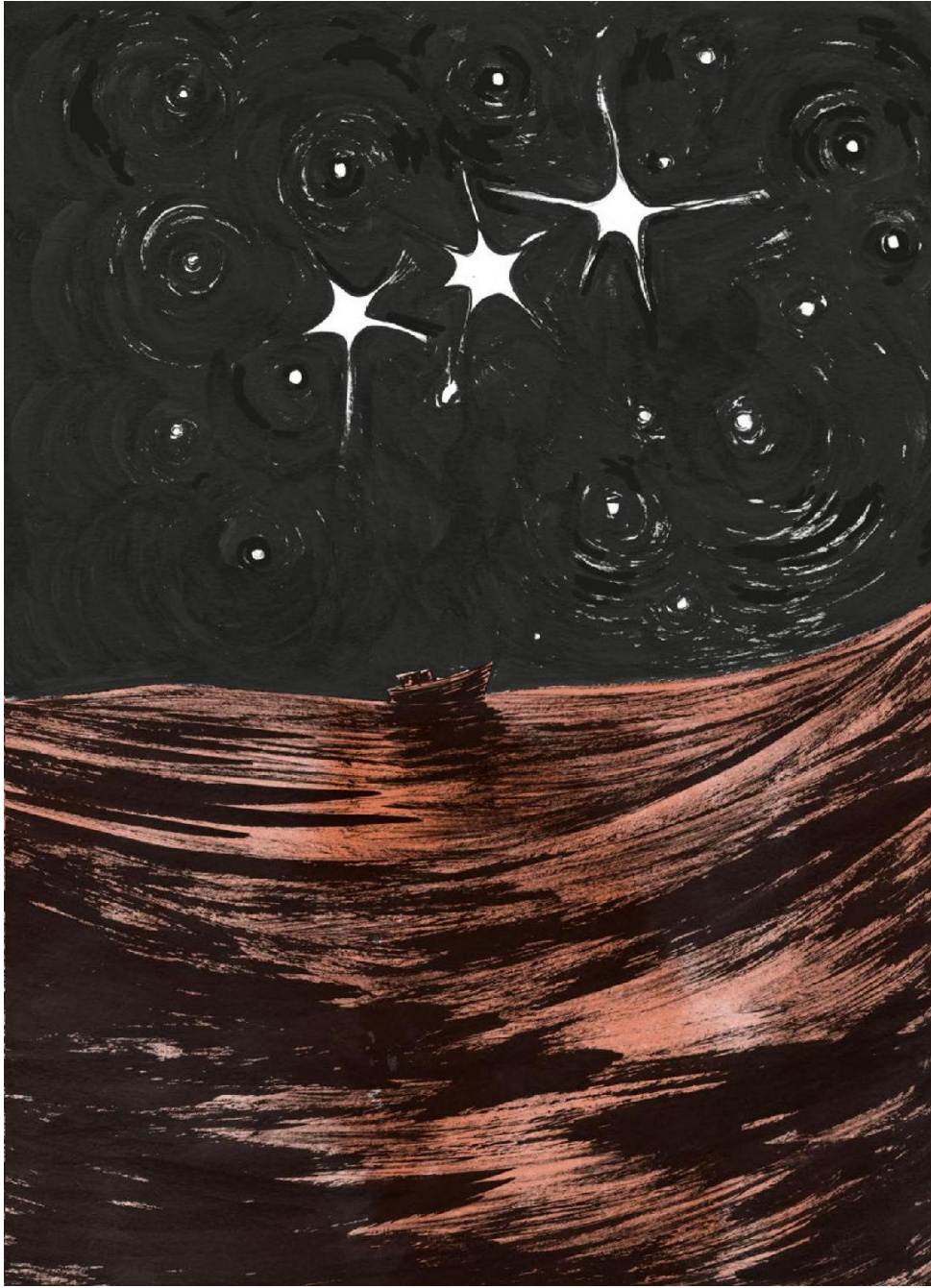
























Fishermen!

























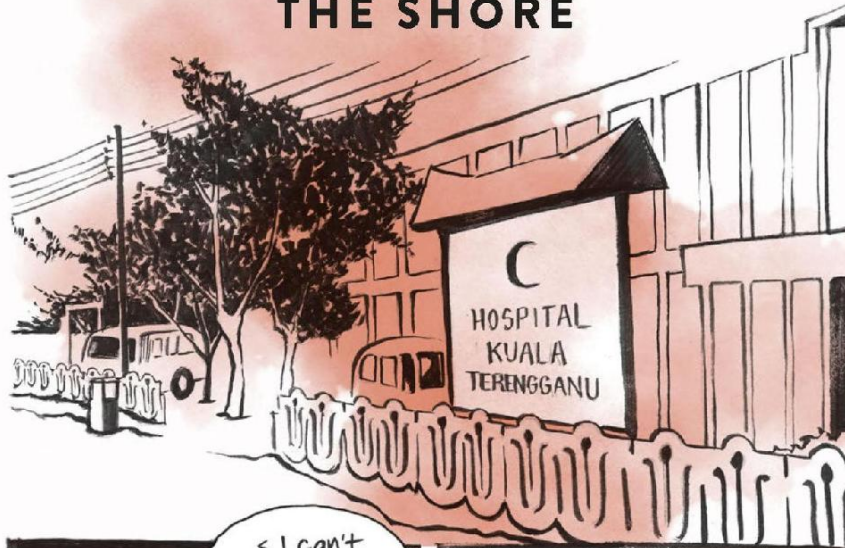








CHAPTER 8  
**THE SHORE**







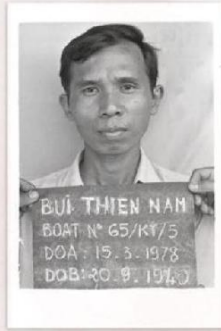






...supplies for cooking our own food...





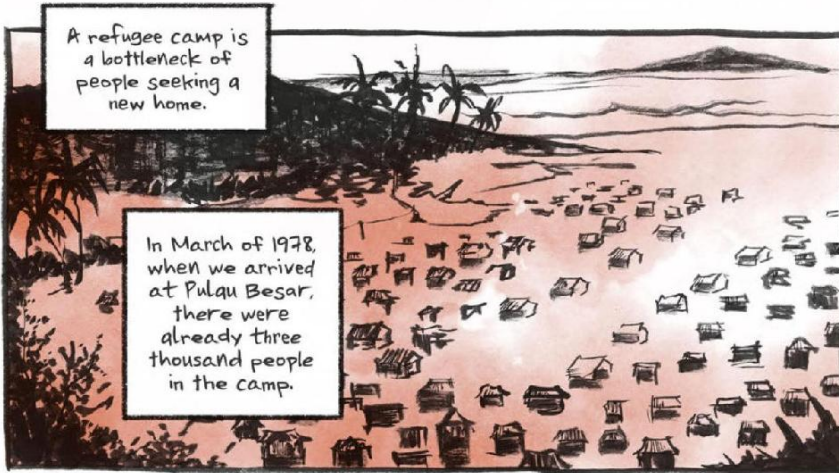
We were now BOAT PEOPLE-



-five among hundreds of thousands of refugees flooding into neighboring countries, seeking asylum.







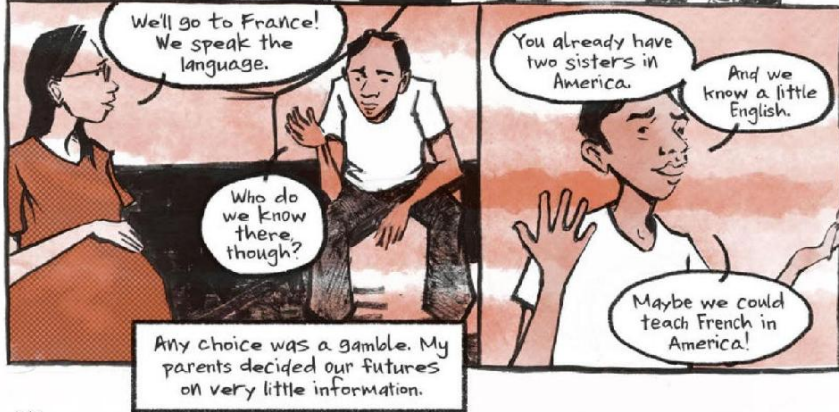
A refugee camp is a bottleneck of people seeking a new home.

In March of 1978, when we arrived at Pulau Besar, there were already three thousand people in the camp.



Every week, a delegation came from a different country—France, Canada, Australia, the U.S.—

—to interview people wanting to resettle there.



We'll go to France! We speak the language.

Who do we know there though?

You already have two sisters in America.

And we know a little English.

Maybe we could teach French in America!

Any choice was a gamble. My parents decided our futures on very little information.

The refugee camp was also a place where many people reinvented themselves.



Some people met each other in camp...



...and listed themselves on paper as married couples.



Some even adopted children traveling alone, so they could be resettled together.



Some changed their names, or their age.

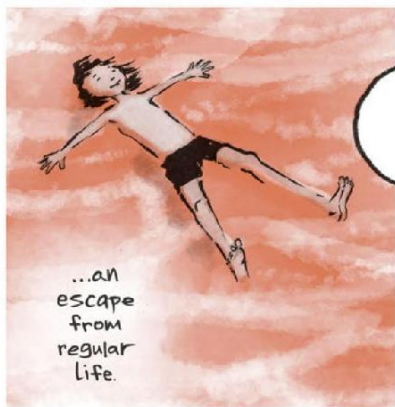


If I'm ten years younger, I'll find a job easier!

If I'm ten years older, I'll retire earlier!



For children, camp was, in many ways, a wonderful vacation.









For Mã, there was the worry of how to have and care for a newborn baby in a refugee camp.



< You speak wonderful French, madame. Surely someone like you has other resources? >



Mã was so humiliated by having to beg, and so upset at having her honesty questioned—

—she went into labor that evening.

And STILL no diapers!



Hold on, sis!

HRRMM!

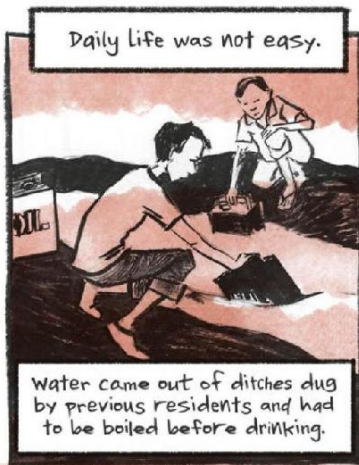


The struggle to bring a life into the world is rewarded by that cry.

It is a single-minded effort, uncluttered and clear in its objective.

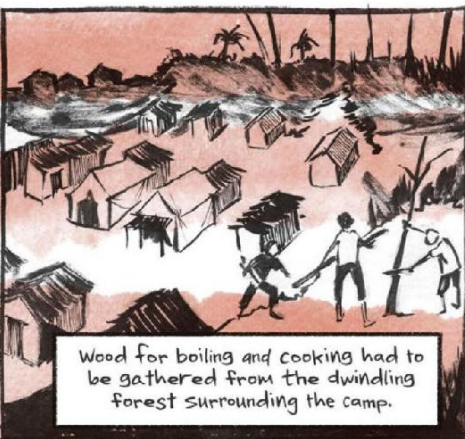
What follows afterward—that is, the rest of the child's life—is another story.





Daily life was not easy.

Water came out of ditches dug by previous residents and had to be boiled before drinking.



Wood for boiling and cooking had to be gathered from the dwindling forest surrounding the camp.

There were no proper toilets.



Bố would take us a little farther out each day to relieve ourselves and bring back firewood.



Yet we were among the lucky ones. Our stay there was only a few months.

That's us!

On the other side of the world, Mâ's older sister Đào and her husband acted as our U.S. sponsors and processed all our paperwork quickly.

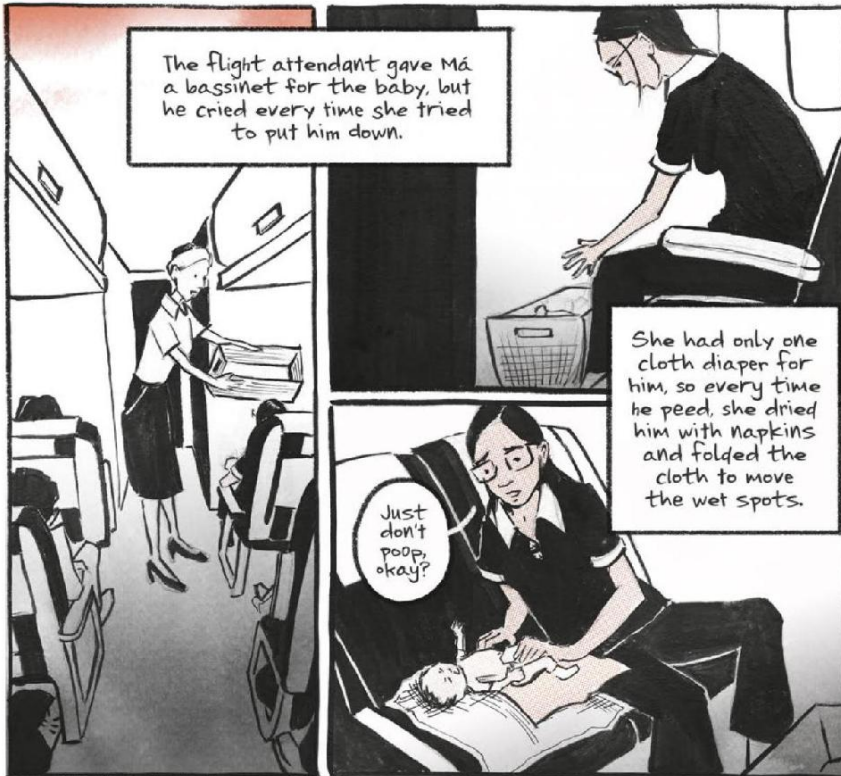












Then the CHAOS of getting in and out of LOS ANGELES.

CUSTOMS!  
BAGGAGE!

CONNECTING  
FLIGHTS!



After helping everyone else, Má realized-







KUALA LUMPUR AIRPORT

Like Má, Bó was called upon to use his limited English to help the other refugees traveling.

Listen, there's been an airline strike! We had to get you all new tickets.



In Los Angeles, distracted by the needs of others, Bó actually did miss his own flight.



Through broken English, a lot of gesturing, and eventually a supervisor who spoke French...



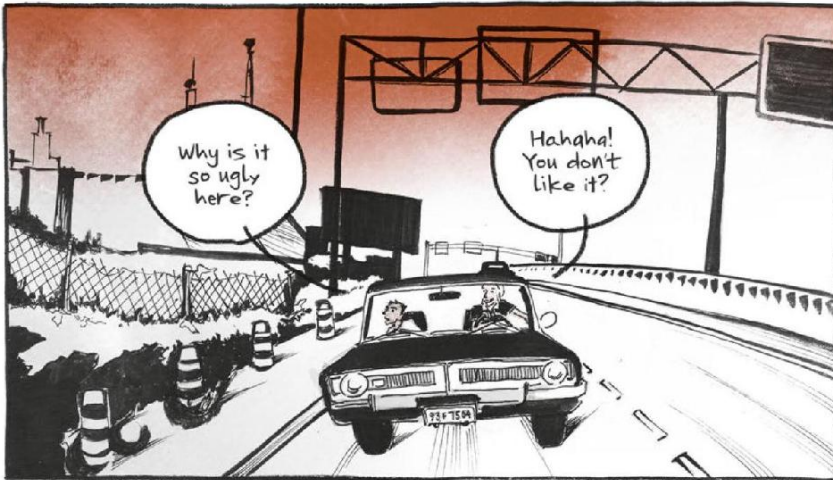
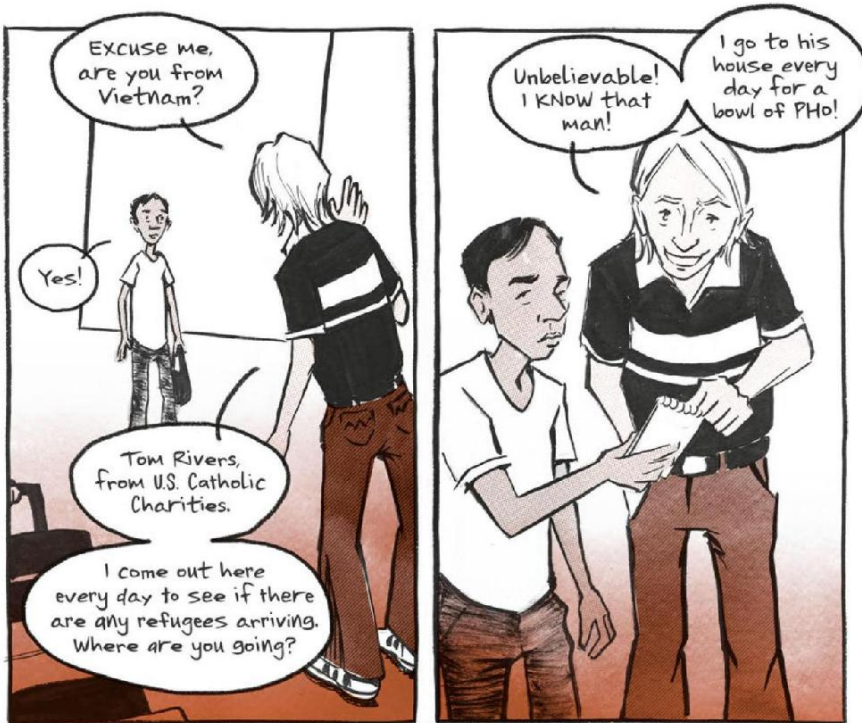
Bó got on a late flight to Anchorage, Alaska.



He spent his first night in America on a bench in the airport.









HAMMOND, INDIANA,  
two hours later

Surprise!

Oh my  
god!

That night, we slept  
reunited under the same  
roof in a new country.

Me, my baby brother,  
Bô and Mã...

...and Lan  
and Bich...

...in a two-bedroom house with  
my aunt, her husband, their  
five children, and one dog.



Our cousins were older and had been in America for three years already.



We probably embarrassed them with our fresh-off-the-boat appearance.

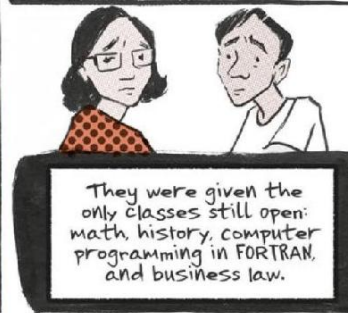
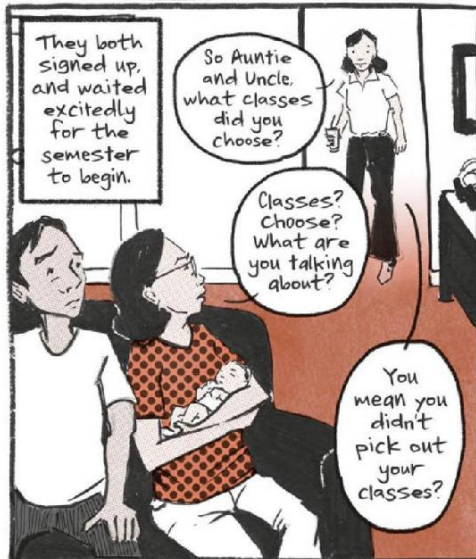


Don't be such a REFUGEE!  
Eat it in a bowl with some MILK!

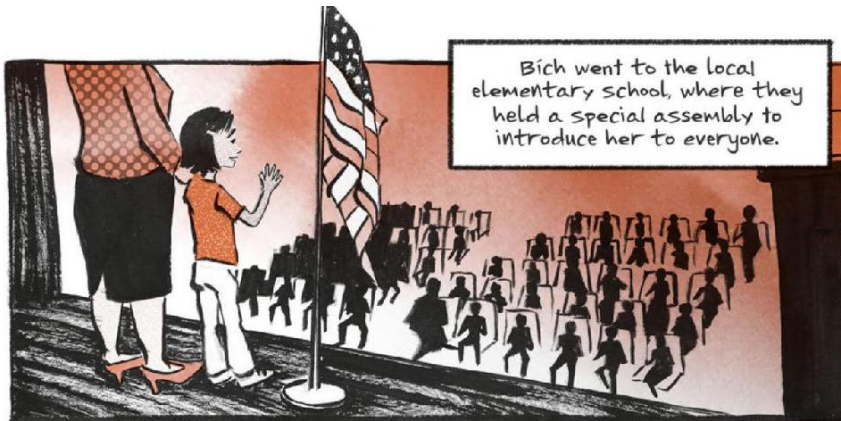
I don't LIKE milk!  
And who DOESN'T eat cereal out of the box?



Well, at least don't eat like that in front of my house where everyone can see you!













Má's younger brother and his family arrived in November.

Welcome to America! Haha!

We were now seventeen people in one house!



Winter came.

I remember being excited about seeing snow for the very first time.









CHAPTER 9  
**FIRE AND ASH**



We left the  
American  
Midwest in  
the winter...



...for a warmer climate  
and the chance to make  
our way in California.



Má found us our own apartment as quickly as possible.

We received food stamps and assistance for families with children at first...



...but we got off welfare as soon as Má could support us with her job.



On \$3.35 an hour and countless sacrifices.



little by little.



my parents built their bubble around us—

our home in America.











Our most important possession was this unassuming brown file folder—

—in which my parents placed the most essential pieces of our identity.



Our birth certificates, translated and notarized,



our green cards,



and our Social Security cards.

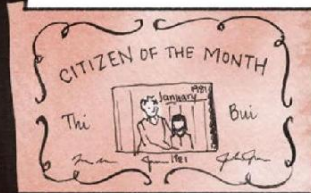
When we began school, we were each given a brown folder of our own.



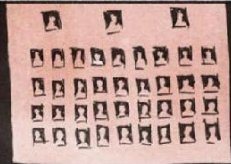
Into this folder went our report cards,



certificates and awards,



and the annual class picture.



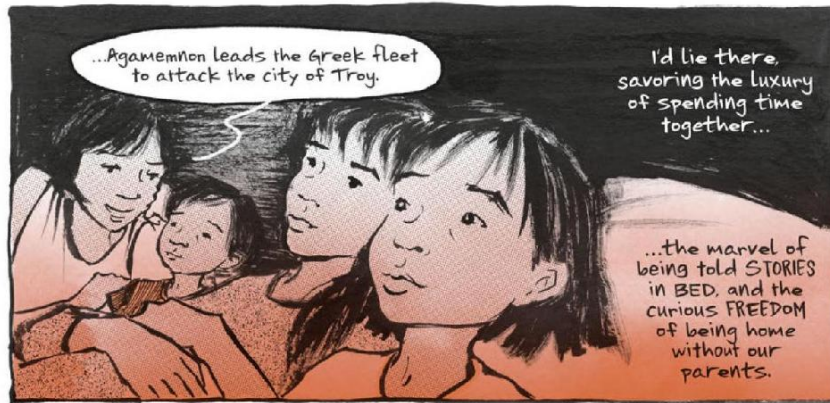
No individual school pictures. Those were too expensive.

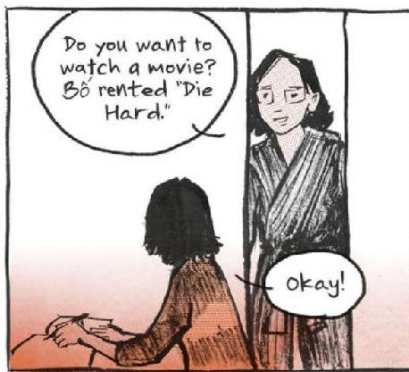


















What would a normal fourteen-year-old's response have been?

Some kind of  
freak-out, maybe?



All I know is a  
switch flipped  
in my brain



and I acted  
purely by reflex.

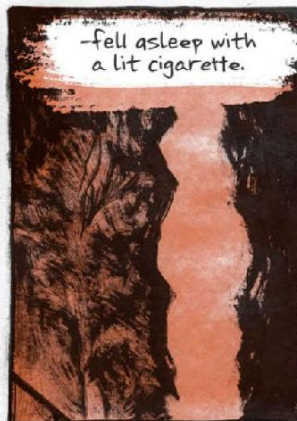




The fire had started downstairs.



The old couple - smokers with emphysema -



-fell asleep with a lit cigarette.



Their oxygen tanks exploded.



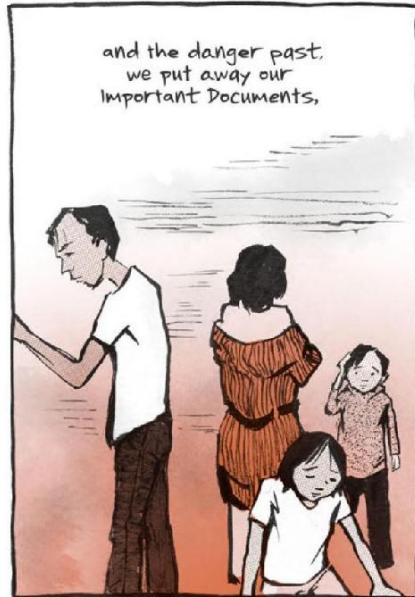
This is the night I learned what my parents had been preparing me for my whole life.



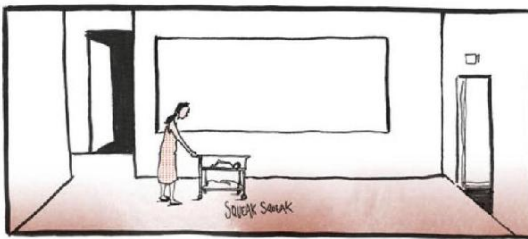








CHAPTER 10  
**EBB AND FLOW**



There were so many things I didn't know about being a parent until I became one.





I didn't know that babies eat every two hours, sometimes more, day and night.



That, no matter how natural it may seem, it is NOT easy to feed a baby from your breast.



That sometimes it takes three people to wrestle your baby into place.



That indifference to my struggle could cause me to feel so helpless and alone.









Travis and I rented a room across the street from the hospital.

He set the alarm clock so we would sleep in ninety-minute intervals...

...rising to slip on our coats and shuffle across the street...

Let's walk faster to warm up.

I can't... my stitches.

Oh right. Sorry.

...feed our baby as best we could in the twenty minutes allowed...

...and return to our room to repeat the process over and over.

That first week  
of parenting was  
the hardest  
week of my life,  
and the only time  
I ever felt called  
upon to be HEROIC.

However much my  
body wanted to rest,  
a force pulled me  
onto my feet with  
the clear and simple  
directive-

KEEP  
HIM  
ALIVE.





When the hospital finally released our son, it still took both of us holding him down to get him to nurse.



In the last moments at the hospital, as I waited for Travis to get the car, the lactation consultant gently asked me:

One last try?



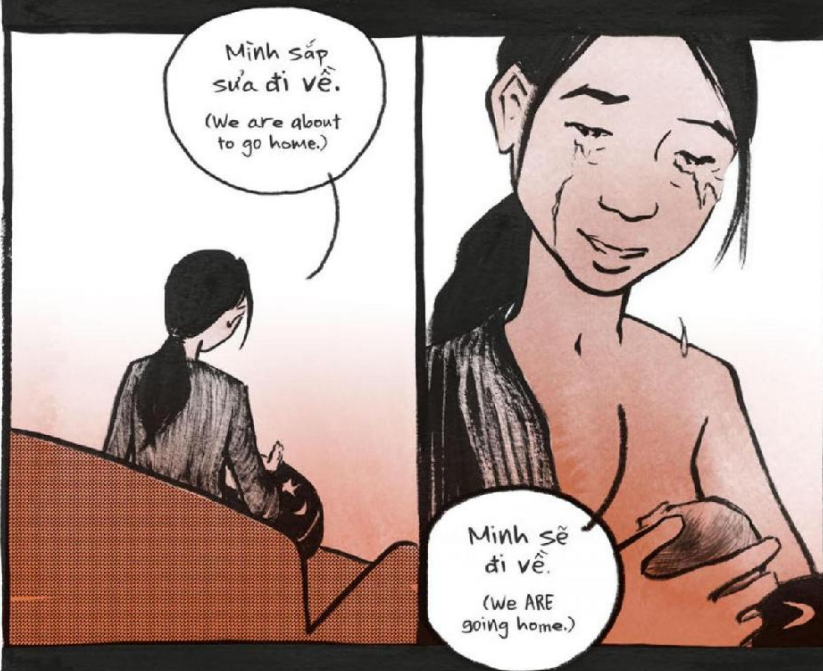
Well... okay.

GREAT! Here's how it works.





As a child, I thought my mother's voice was beautiful. She hated it, but I loved its raspiness.



When my mother spoke to me, she spoke softly, the tones of Vietnamese giving it music - not high and reedy, but scratchy and bluesy. I always wished I had her voice.





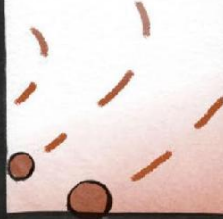
I'm no longer a  
kid...am I?



Having a child  
taught me,  
certainly,



that I am not  
the center of  
the universe.

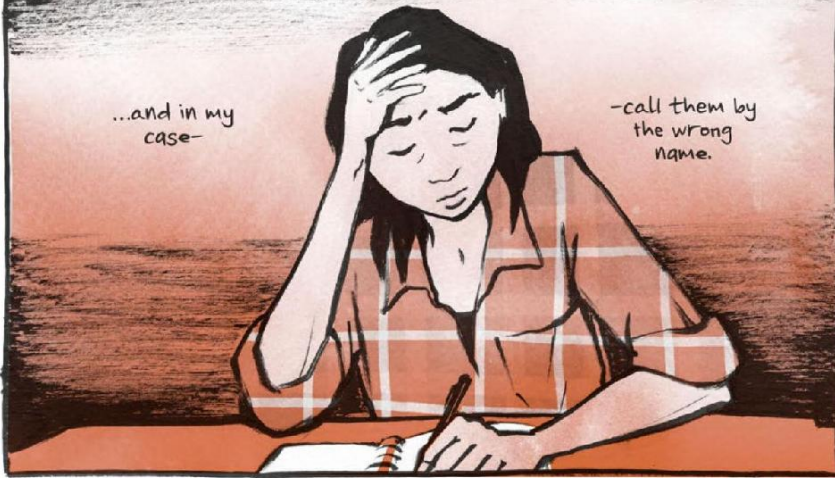


But being a child, even  
a grown-up one, seems to  
me to be a lifetime pass  
for selfishness.

We hang resentment  
onto the things our  
parents did to us, or  
the things they DIDNT  
do for us...

...and in my  
case-

-call them by  
the wrong  
name.



To accidentally  
call myself Me

was to slip  
myself into  
her shoes



just for a  
moment.



To let her be  
not what I want  
her to be.



but someone  
independent,  
self-determining,  
and free.

means letting go  
of that picture of  
her in my head.



You can't always get what you want.

When I was a child, I saved coins to have spending money.

Thank you, Uncle!

CLUNK

CLUNK CLUNK

CLUNK

There was one year I saved up so many coins

that, with my new-year money, I had one hundred dollars-

\$1.75 \$2.80 \$5.00 \$25  
\$7.16 \$8.15 \$8.06 \$19.15  
\$16.50 \$15.60 \$17.25  
\$19.55 \$21.55  
\$23.80 \$27.16  
\$28.85 \$32.60

-which I was going to proudly present to my mother for Mother's Day.

To help you out!

It was going to be amazing.



But when I counted the coins, I found that my math had been all wrong—

—and that I was quite a bit short.



Instead of a triumphant gift, Má got a wet shoulder from my tears.

It's okay. You keep it.

It's enough that you thought of me.







What  
becomes  
of us  
after we  
die?

Do we live on  
in what we  
leave to our  
children?



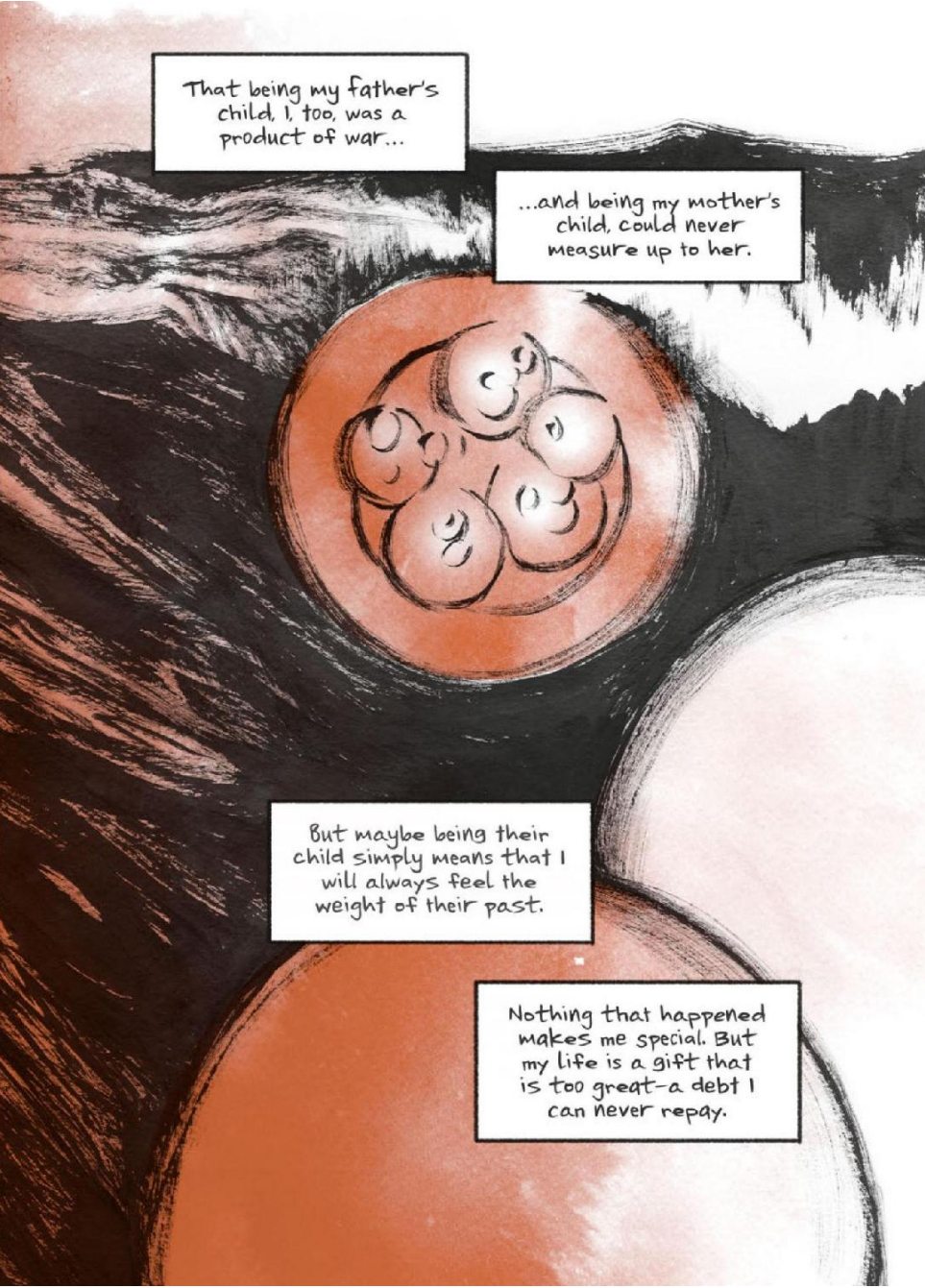


How much of ME is my own, and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined?

I used to imagine that history had infused my parents' lives with the dust of a cataclysmic explosion.

That it had seeped through their skin and become part of their blood.





That being my father's  
child, I, too, was a  
product of war...

...and being my mother's  
child, could never  
measure up to her.

But maybe being their  
child simply means that I  
will always feel the  
weight of their past.

Nothing that happened  
makes me special. But  
my life is a gift that  
is too great—a debt I  
can never repay.





or unintentionally inflict damage I could never undo.





But when I look  
at my son, now  
ten years old,

I don't see  
war and loss



or even Travis  
and me.



I see a new life, bound with  
mine quite by coincidence,

and I think  
maybe he can  
be free.

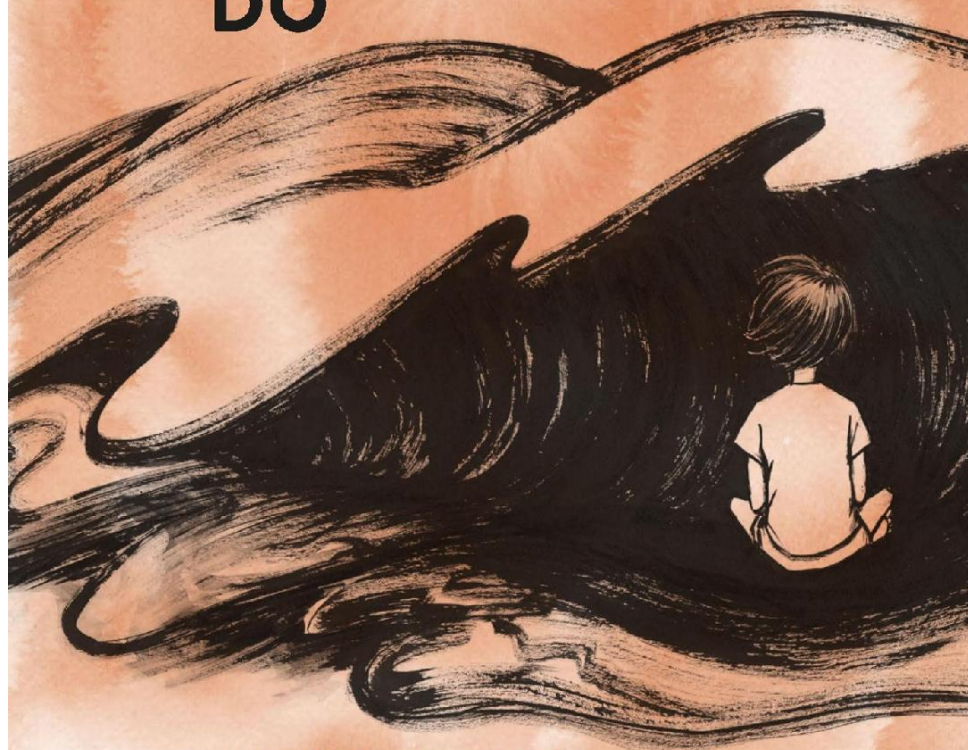


THANK YOU

Clarissa & Charlie & Pam & Jody & Nicole & Michael  
Craig & Jake & my ACA family  
Pat & everyone on the island  
Fae & Dipti & Jane  
My brother & sisters  
Bó and Má  
H & T

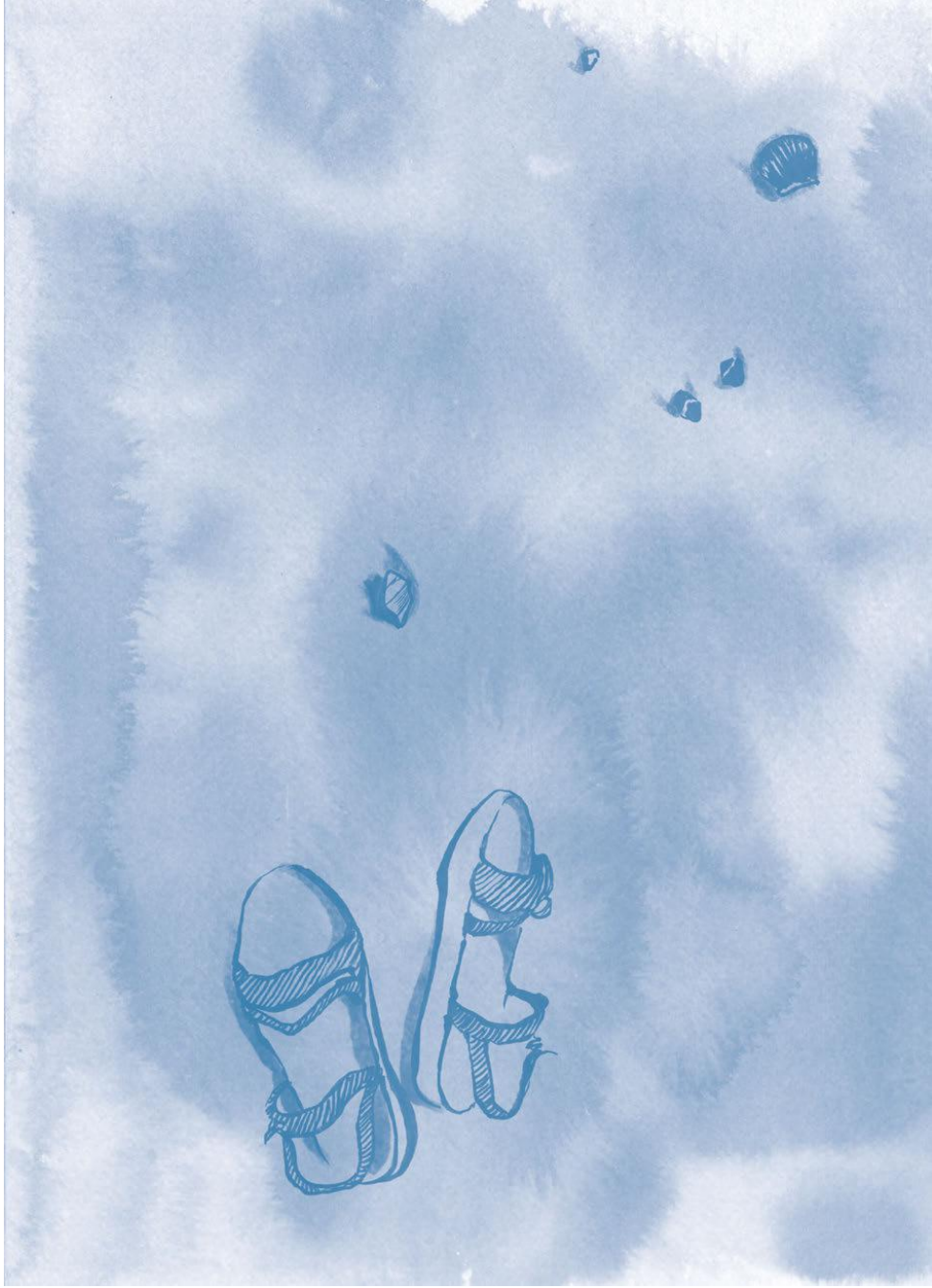


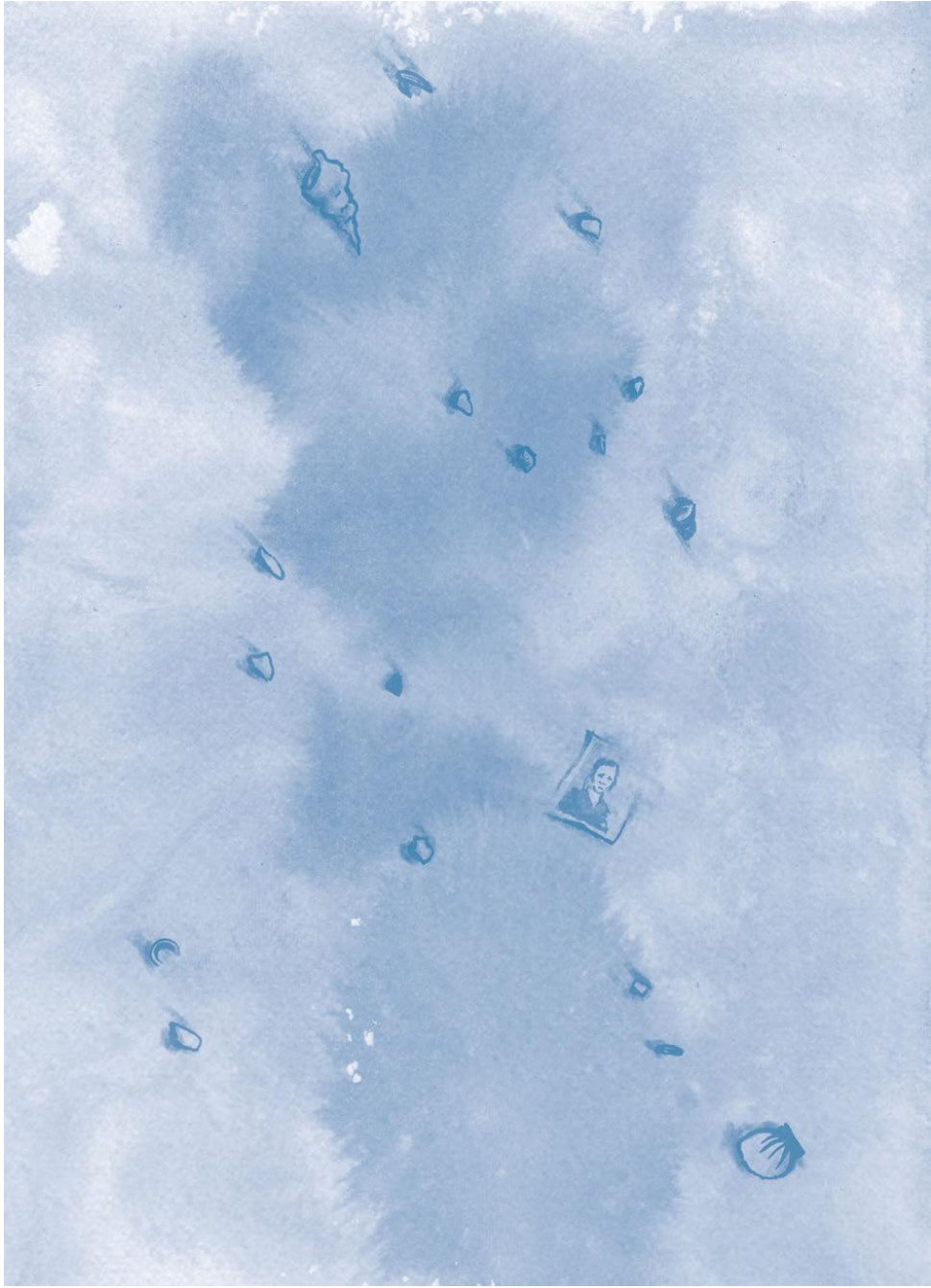
**THE  
BEST  
WE  
COULD  
DO**



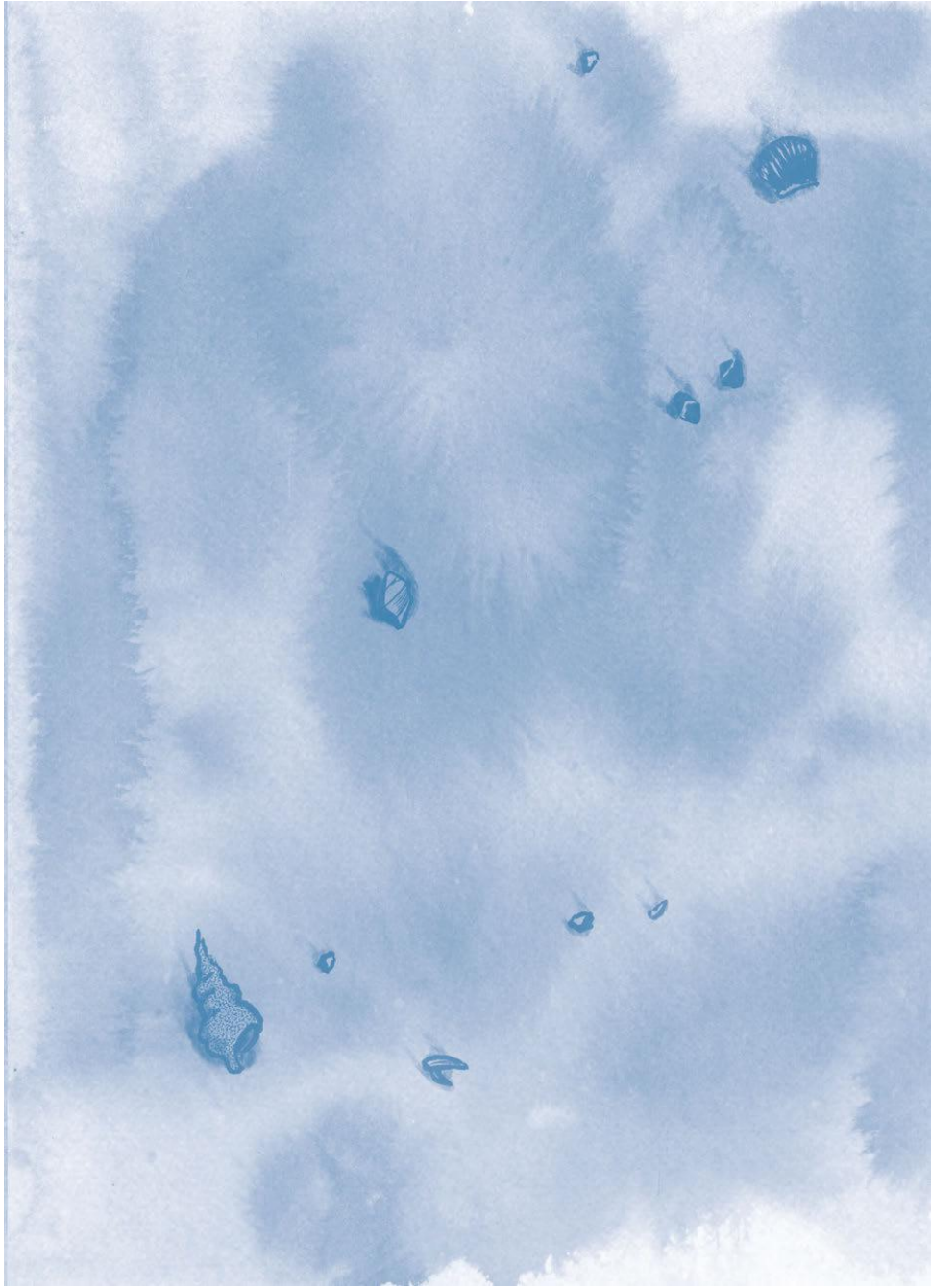
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