

You, Lord. We hated both the dancing and the drinking and were not good at either, so father gave up after a few tries.

Then there was my youngest brother, Fayola. He was a little adorable, handsome and smart boy. Everyone loved him, especially grandmother and mother. Sadly, because our father was not around, he thought he could do anything. You gave him the gifts Lord, but somehow, they were not properly cultivated and formed so he used them the wrong way. As he grew older, he became very spoiled. Grandmother and our mother always took his side, so father did not know how bad he had become. He would get anything he wanted, and also bullied his older sisters. One day, when both grandmother and mother were not home, we, the sisters decided to teach him a lesson. We took a hold of him and confined him as we told him what he had been acting was not right! He was like a little lion. After a while, he managed to run outside as far away from us as he could. That helped change him for he knew that together, his four older sisters could overpower him, and they would do it again.

Trying to leave the country, serving jail time

Grandmother's youngest son, Nghiem became a celebrated mathematician in France. Every few years, he came to Ha Noi, Vietnam for an International Math Conference, and paid grandmother and us a visit. Eventually, he, mom and Aunt Lang started to talk about moving the sisters and their families to France for a better future. A plan was put in place. None of the children knew about it lest they leaked the secret and all could go to jail. Many people had tried to flee the country by boats during those years so this inspiration was not new. I recall it was near the end of the school year in 1978. Only the adults knew of the secret arrangement. One day the two families abruptly said good-bye to grandmother and headed for Saigon city. I did not even have a chance to say farewell to the foster family. Once we were in Saigon, mom met up with the Chinese-Vietnamese ring leader to carry out the plan. She paid him several gold bars prior to our departure. Other families from the city also participated in this trip. According to the scheme, families would split up into groups of four or five. Then each group would take the train toward Northeast of Saigon, to Nha Trang city. Its harbors are the closest to the Philippines. The groups would travel on different dates to avoid suspicion from local people who would very enthusiastically report the "traitors" - those who tried to flee the country to the authorities. Once everyone arrived, on a specific night, the groups would walk to a chosen harbor where a boat would be waiting to take them out to sea. So we followed the plan, and one group after another departed for Nha Trang.

Looking back, I can see that we were so naïve and trusting. The government officers in this part of the country were trained and were good at spotting and arresting people who tried to escape. They had detained and jailed hundreds of people. It was such a high risk to separate family members and entrust them to strangers as we headed to an unfamiliar destination. As the saying has it: the deaf are not afraid of guns. So my thirteen-year-old cousin (now a psychiatrist), my little sister (now a Physician Assistant), and I were in the first group to venture into the unknown, led by a woman who was a total stranger. Once we arrived at Nha Trang train station, we were brought to a house and slept there. The first day, the lady dropped us off at a park to spend the day. She came back in the afternoon to pick us up. I remember well that I got really homesick. I missed grandmother, the foster family, friends and teachers. You know, Lord, I never missed classes. That was the first time ever, except for the one day when I was so sick

because of unbearable stomach cramps. As I am writing this, I can see myself vividly at that moment. I leaned against a giant pole there at the park, wishing that I could stay behind. I did not know You then to pray to You. A wish is just a lonely and hopeful yearning while a prayer to me, is pleading to You for help ceaselessly with a vigilant heart. Somehow, You were there to calm me down even though I had no knowledge of You. I was too innocent to be afraid, and neither did I think much about what would happen next. What if we got caught? What if we escaped and drifted in the sea for days, and the sharks came and ate us for dinner? What if sea pirates came to harm us? and so on. Not knowing was better, and yes, I did not know anything! As it turned out, the lady with us was not one of us. She obviously worked for the ring leader. She was neither our friend nor our comforter. Rather, she would tell us where to go and what to do. Somehow we trusted her completely. We were totally submissive and obedient thinking everything would go as planned. That night we were moved to a different location which was closer to the designated port. It was during the mango season, and I remember how good the fruits were. We passed time enjoying the mangoes. We ate so much that we literally got sick to our stomachs! Again, when the night came, we were relocated. The reason, we were told, was not to let the neighbors get to know us and be suspicious since we were strangers. In this house, the first floor was used as a restaurant. We were put on the second floor where the bedrooms were. A few times, government officers came in either to dine or just to check things out. We would be alarmed and escorted to the roof top to hide. At first, it was nerve wracking, but after that I got used to it and actually enjoyed watching the starry sky as we laid on the roof top waiting to be let down, again!

Finally, the hour had come. It was about dusk. We started walking toward the sea port. It got darker as we came near the sea. Eventually, many others joined in. There were groups of two or three. As it turned out, these were the people who would escape the country with us. It was too obvious. Anyone who saw us could tell what we were up to right away. So, not long after we walked, we heard gun shots and yelling, “Stop”, “Raise your hands!”, etc. Then flash lights came on. We were sighted by the sea patrol officers who gathered us all and escorted us to a government warehouse nearby. It seemed to me the officers knew our moves all along, and were there waiting to arrest us. To our surprise, all our family members were there when we were brought in, except for father and uncle. We were very worried not knowing what happened to them. The hopeful thought was that they had escaped because if they got shot, we would have heard about it. My cousin, my sister and I were the first to travel to this town and the last to be captured. Thank You, Lord, at least all of us were safe and together. And as I wished, I could again see my loved ones at home but first, I had to serve jail time.

Soon we were stripped of our jewelries. All valuable possession and food that were brought for the boat journey were confiscated. We knew we would never see them again. Chocolates, candies and cheese, we were told, were served at an officer’s wedding a few days later. Our next stop: JAIL! I remember how I was so relieved that everything was over; the fear of being caught; the fear of not knowing what came next, and the fear of not knowing where my loved ones were. You were there with us and kept us safe. Only You knew what dangers we would face at sea if everything went as planned, and we got on the boat and ventured into the sea.

Thank You, Lord for rescuing my father and uncle and for bringing them back and safely to Saigon. Only You could arrange things so well. Their stories were so uplifting and miraculous

that my brain made the effort to record them in detail. Father, uncle and my Brother Robert traveled together as a group. Like our group, they walked toward the harbor that night. However, once they heard gun fire and the police yelling, each ran for his life, except Robert who like us, was arrested. Both father and uncle were in the South Vietnamese army so they would be punished heavily if they did get caught. You saved them Lord. Father quickly ran toward the harbor and swam into the sea hoping to find the boat that was supposed to be waiting for us. He swam and swam into the deep sea but saw no boat. He then realized all was a scam, and my mother fell right into the trap! He was in the deep sea and was exhausted. He started praying to You like never before, and all of a sudden, he spotted a fishing boat. He yelled for help and was rescued. The fishermen gave him clean clothes and helped him regain his strength. He paid them who graciously took him to shore. Father found his way to the bus station and went straight to Saigon. Thank You, Lord for saving his life!

Uncle Quan, in the meantime, spotted a culvert pipe nearby. He ran and hid in it. For some miracle, no officer searched in there. I am certain that he prayed to You unconsciously for St. Basil said that we all know You whether we realize it or not. He must have prayed to Buddha, too. Many of us Asians, called ourselves Buddhists, but it was more because of the culture and not because we deliberately sought and made our choice to follow Buddha's example. I once asked my aunt how much she knew about Buddhism. She said not much. Growing up, she did what she saw others did. It was the tradition and culture that she called herself a Buddhist. So uncle spent the night in the culvert pipe. The next morning, how scared he was to have heard people's voices. Poor uncle! His heart raced terribly, and he was in so much distress! Being a former soldier, he had spent time in an education camp. He could not afford to be caught. As the voices got closer, and the conversation became clearer, my uncle realized it was from a father and his young daughter who knew there was a chaotic capture last night. They came in hope to find some valuable things people had tried to discard before their captivity. Uncle came out, gave them money and asked them for help. They happily aided him with clean clothes, then helped get him to the bus station. Like father, he arrived at Saigon safely without being questioned nor caught. How in the world could both my father and uncle survive and escape the hunt of the officers? And what were the chances for them not to be reported by the fishermen and the father and daughter? Nothing is impossible for You, Lord.

Praise to You, O most high and glorious God! You had arranged a greater mission for the fathers to bring their family oversea in the near future with an even more difficult time and greater challenge. Both fathers later escaped and suffered greatly. They then sponsored their families to be united with them in the future. O how deep and mysterious were your plans for us. You allowed things to go so wrong to teach us a lesson and to save us from great danger of the unknown in both body and spirit. Sometimes, we are so immersed in our own plans that we do not realize how much we do not know. Because You give us free will, You allow us to fall, but then You pick us up. Abba taught me that no matter how we respond to You, You are always faithful. You let us try again, and again, in hope that we learn our lesson. Sadly, while some of us learn and grow, others are obstinate and make the same mistake over and over again and suffer in vain. And even then, You would be on our side with utmost patience and love to guide us back to You no matter how long it takes. Now, I am going to take You to jail with me, Lord.

The jail cells were pretty much set up to hold people like us and not dangerous criminals. Mothers and children were confined in one big cell which could hold about 100 people. There was room for sitting only. Next door was another one with the same size for men. My cousin and brother were kept in that cell. During the day, young children were let outside to play. My two sisters, the young cousins and I were in this juvenile group. I was just 11 years old. At night, we slept in offices near the jail cells. We were more or less innocent and would not escape or do anything harmful. The officers were kind and nice to us. I did not think it was a bad prison experience. It was harder for the adults because they were confined most of the time except for going to the bathroom and to bathe once a week if I remember correctly. Sadly, the officers were suspicious of my aunt's being a ring leader even though she traveled with her children and my older sisters. They persisted in condemning her and threatened to punish her more severely. She insisted that she did not know anything, and that this was the truth. To break her spirit and make her confess her role, they put her in a small metal container where the inside temperature could get up to 100F. She broke down but still told the truth that she was not whom they accused her of being. They finally, let her go!!! Thank You, Lord. She was a high school teacher so was very nice, honest and gentle!

Days went by, and we learned how to survive. Actually, except for being homesick, I did not suffer too much as I recall. Like other children, I had daily activities to keep me busy. The food was not that bad, and I even made new friends. Back at home, my poor grandmother was devastated and broken hearted. Her two dear daughters and eleven beloved grandchildren were in jail. What made it worst was the rumor that we all had our head shaved. So grandmother really prayed for us and tried to do acts of charity, including freeing hundreds of birds to exchange for our freedom. Sadly, that was a big money maker for some people. They would go out to catch birds and put them in cages so people who were desperate like grandmother would pay to free them. But not for long, soon those little creatures of Yours Lord, would be caught again. Oh have mercy on us, sinners.

Release from jail, remain in the city

Finally, You granted grandmother her prayer. We were free at last after about one month in jail. Everyone returned home happily except mom and the three youngest children. That included me. Mom was afraid of the local authorities so she remained in Saigon at Uncle Nghiem's in-laws until everything calmed down. Grandmother was brought down to visit us but just for a few hours. She left the same day. I was not happy when she left, and I wanted to see my foster family, friends and teachers too. Not being able to go home meant I had to miss a new school year. That was why I had to repeat fifth grade. Sometimes, mom left the house to do errands for a few hours. A couple of times, she was gone overnight. So I, the big sister of the three, kept an eye on the younger siblings. I was told by one of Uncle Nghiem's sister-in-laws that I really loved my little siblings to care for them so attentively. You, Lord gave me the grace to be a responsible sister while my older siblings were not around. We three tried very hard to pass time because we were bored. Being young and trapped in one place without much to do was like a punishment especially when we really tried to stay disciplined. Well, sooner or later we could not help it and broke Your law, "Thou Shall Not Steal!"

The next door neighbor had a cherry tree which was loaded with fruit. The weighed down branches were on our side of the fence. We needed a stool and a stick to help pull the branches

closer so we could pick the cherries. We seriously labored for the fruits with much satisfaction because it was of our own free will. The fruits tasted the best because we worked for them. But if the adults told us to do it, then it would not be as enjoyable, and the fruits would not be as delightful. Anyhow, we justified that if we did not pick the fruits, they would go to waste. Therefore, we helped ourselves believing that it was not a bad thing. St. Augustine wrote about the fact that our breaking the law (reinforced by adults) was more appealing than eating the fruits themselves. There was a sort of gratification that we experienced. Picking the neighbors' cherries was in our daily schedule. I think the neighbors knew about our mischievous act but did not make a fuss about it. Their little girl got to know us and would ask us to throw some over since she was not tall enough to pick them. So we felt entertained and believed it was worth to invest our time and energy of which we had plenty.

There was also a well in the middle of the enclosed front yard. It was usually filled with water. This house was in the middle of the city, so it did not have much land. Like other houses in the neighborhood, the whole property was fenced in so that the family could have security and privacy. The yard was small but big enough to grow many flower bushes and fruit trees. We were told not to go play near the well. For sinners like us, *Curiositas*, the temptation which St. Benedict wrote in his Rule for monks was a perfect fit for us. Many of us think his rules are not practical. Like the fervent and obedient monks, I truly feel that they really help purify and sanctify us if we take them to heart and follow them. Professor Cook, a Medieval Art historian, once told me that rules are made to be broken! I feel there is a lot of truth to that. But it does not mean we are encouraged to break rules. Rules are to keep people away from getting into trouble. Ironically, most often, only those who are obedient and good follow the rules! Abba told me a funny story concerning this. One time he and a couple of abbots were walking in Rome. They needed to get to a building on the other side of the grass field. There was a sign saying "Do not walk on the grass", and there was a police officer standing by. A young couple with a child took the short cut and walked on the grass. The officer did not say anything to them. So the Abbots humbly approached the officer asking for permission to cross. The man pointed out the sign to the Abbots. The Abbots pointed to the couple saying, "They just walked on the grass, and you did not stop them!" The officer simply replied, "They did not ask!" (Abba and I laughed. Let us get back to my story). So what was first thing that You knew, we, the little sinners did, Lord? We sneaked up to check out the well! I did make sure my siblings behave, and we did not do anything so extreme that we would fall into the well. Would You, Lord, be a tough Father and punish us? I don't think You would, but I knew You made sure we were safe. You knew we acted out to get the grandpa's attention. Uncle Nghiem's father in-law kept an eye on us while the aunts went to work. Our mischievous activities soon became burdensome to the grandpa. Thank You, Lord! Finally, mom realized she should just let us go home to our grandmother, and she did. She drove us home to Di An, and went back down to the city by herself. Not until a couple of weeks later, did she join us, once she was sure no authority would give her any problem.

I pray especially for some parents who try so hard to love and discipline their children that they either treat them too harshly or overprotect them. As a result, the children could be hurt or spoiled. What You allowed me to experience here is very important for my future ministry. I have learned that I was as mischievous and playful as any healthy child would be. It takes one to know one. So I pray for the grace to be helpful to children when I work with them.

Returned to grandmother's home, going back to school

Everything changed when we arrived home. We became second-class citizens. The punishment was more noticeable in school! Marilyn could not apply for college. I could not join certain organizations. I had always been an active and most capable student. Clearly our family was experiencing discrimination. It was time for me to learn how to deal with this cross humbly, dear Lord. Our future did not seem that bright anymore. That prompted mom to be more assertive in planning for another escape. This time, however, was just for dad, Uncle Quan and the two oldest sons. One year later, in 1980, they tried and You sailed them uneventfully into the sea. For days, families waited for the news of their well being and where abouts. We knew it would take time. It was heart wrenching as we heard many stories about dangers at sea. Finally, mom received a telegram saying the men had reached the Philippines. Thank You our merciful Lord! They barely made it as we were later told in detail by father. It was a horrible experience. The boat encountered Thailand pirates who robbed them of valuable things and food. They harmed the women and even took some with them. As they, "the boat people" continued to travel, they experienced hunger and thirst. We had heard so many stories in which people were forced to eat their dead companions to stay alive. Our relatives' situation was not that desperate. Because of Your mercy, Lord, they finally sighted a Philippines Island. However, their boat capsized about ¼ mile from shore. They focused all the little energy they had left and swam to shore. After being rescued, they stayed on the Island with thousands who had gone there before them. All waited for their turn to be interviewed by international refugee rescue persons. Depending on their status, and where they had relatives who were willing to sponsor them, they would have a scheduled date to leave. Some were reunited with their loved ones earlier, while some had to wait for more than a year. All of our relatives lived in France, and that was where my uncle and cousin headed. My dad, however, took the risk and asked to be brought to America where he knew no one. I said "risk" because father and brother might have to wait for a longer time. But for some miraculous reason, they were scheduled to go to the U. S. sooner, not long after uncle and cousin departed for France. Unlike uncle, our father and brother had to start afresh without relying on any relative since there was none in the U. S. While uncle was able to sponsor his family two years after he and his son arrived in France, father had to work hard for the next five years to earn enough money to be able to sponsor us once the government approved.

Back at Di An village, grandmother had to sell the rice-milling factory to get money to help us. Mom put all her eggs in one basket, and they were all lost by the scam. Eventually, mom and aunt formed a business of selling frozen banana ice cream which was very successful. Besides, we raised catfish and birds. We sold the fish and the quail eggs for eating. Quail eggs were a delicacy so we made good money doing it. When Aunt Lang and her family migrated to France, mom got a job working as a pharmacist. Marilyn became a seamstress and Omnie did embroidery which she studied in Saigon city under the nuns. Omnie became very successful as well. I helped out with the house work. My two main jobs were washing laundry daily by hand which I did not like very much and operating the electrical pump which channeled water from the well to the house for daily use. You, Lord, allowed us to go through such dramatic changes to grow up. We, the four girls, were still like princesses but had grown to learn to get ready for what awaited us in America. At home, I was more mature with responsibilities, but at school, I still enjoyed a life of an innocent and carefree child of Yours.

Girlfriends and friendship

We have already discussed in depth my relationships with masculine friends. If You don't mind, dearest Lord, let us talk about the days I spent time with the girlfriends. Because of my down to earth and pleasant personality, I had many friends, but just a handful of them were close to me. That meant we would interact together often and would do daring things. You knew I was very much a tomboy. More often than not, I arrived at school a half an hour early. I put my slippers in my desk drawer and went out to the schoolyard to play different kinds of running games with friends. That was the reason why I grew to be so athletic. I had the widest feet like ducks' which my godfather often found it humorous to point out. That perhaps explains why I was well coordinated. When we had to buy good sandals for me to wear to travel to America, it was impossible to find anything near our home. We had to go to the city and checked out many shops before I could find the shoes that fit.

Every now and then, one of our teachers would be absent. We had about an hour to play until the next class. So my friends and I would race to the woods nearby and climb tall trees to pick edible berries. Since we worked hard to find them, they always tasted the best! You know well, Lord, that it was the art of finding and harvesting without any injury that gave us much joy and not just eating the berries themselves. You are, the Almighty, and since it was You who created us, we can do the impossible with faith. But so often, we let our weaknesses stir up our fear and cowardice. One should not wonder why many never seem to be satisfied with themselves. They have not lived to know their full potential, as Abba taught me. During the fruit season, instead of going to the woods, we would run quickly to grandmother's house since she had many fruit trees. Climbing jackfruit trees was most fun and finding a ripened fruit was the best treat. Depending on where the fruit was on the tree, sometimes, like a monkey, I would hold onto to a branch with one hand to stabilize myself and then reach out to break the fruit stem with the other. And if the distance from the branch to the fruit was further than could be reached by hand, I would use my foot. When we climbed trees, we went bare foot. We did not have shoes but slippers. Since the fruit was usually heavy, I would hit it with my hand or kick it with my foot and let it fall onto the ground. Because I was most capable, I always did the picking. My friends waited on the ground to gather the large fruit. We struggled to cut it open with a knife. Once opened, the fruit was full of gooey white sap which could permanently damage our clothes if we came in contact with it. We had to use burning oil to wash our sticky fingers. The meat inside the giant ugly-looking fruit tasted delicious. Any food we worked hard as a team to get always tasted the best.

Other things we dared to do that were not so smart were rubbing our eyes with a Thai balm oil like Vicks and injuring our stomach with whole-freshly-picked hot peppers. We suffered but not for long. If someone were to force these upon us, we would call it torture, but since we did these to test our endurance, we called it bravery. We did not do these challenges that often. I perhaps experienced them twice or three times the most. You, Lord had to watch us do the cruelest things to ourselves, Your beloved children. If we sinners could understand and live out the highest stage of love, according to St. Bernard, "One loves himself for God's own good" (On Loving God), then perhaps, we would be more loving to ourselves because we are Yours and are the temple of the Holy Spirit. A couple of times, You watched me climb a young coconut tree, and You allowed me to fall. The young tree was about 10 foot tall so not one of my bones was broken. I learned the lesson and never dared to do it again. Prudence is being humble enough to accept one's limits. Of course, I did not know enough to analyze it that way. It was rather my fear, and

fear is not always a bad thing. You let us experience fear at times to keep us from getting hurt. When we are young, we make mistakes because we cannot decide whether we should or should not do something. When we grow older and hopefully wiser, You teach us discernment which I am told, is one of the major virtues in the spiritual life.

Through these friends, You also taught me fidelity. Each class had a teacher who acted as an adviser. The advisers oversaw class activities and affairs while class leaders planned and carried them out. I was a good leader in my class. Once a year, we had a school dance contest. I was the choreographer of my class. Yearly, when we did the two-week military drill, I was one of the top drill sergeants! Twice, our class won first prize in the final competition. I had many reasons to boast dear Lord, but You kept me humble. The one job I could not do well was to be “the teacher’s pet”. Our teacher favored me very much because she thought I was capable and trustworthy. Well, the truth was I could be stern with the boys and correct them but not with the girls who were like my sisters.



“Familiarity breeds contempt”, as Abba taught me. Yes, that was what happened. Because I was always nice to them, my girlfriends would take me for granted. Sometimes, they let me down. There are friends, and there are Friends! Sadly, the former we have plenty but not the latter. For some reasons, I did not like to be singled out or to be treated as special. Therefore, I would make compromises myself to fit in with my friends rather than to criticize them and tell on them. Reinforcing rules was the important role of a class leader. I was not good at it. There was a time when our English teacher asked many questions during class. I knew most of the answers. At first I raised my hands, but once I sensed he was so proud of me and started to question my friends whether they had done their homework, I felt bad and began to stay silent. Since then, I purposely became passive in answering questions in his class. Yes, I am strange that way, my Lord. It seems I always want to be with the underdog. Even when I used to watch football fanatically, I would be so passionate about cheering for a certain team as if it were my favorite. No, I did so because it was the weaker team!

Preparation for America

Time went by fast. It had been more than three years since father and brother escaped. Mom again got discouraged that it took father so long to sponsor us. Our aunt’s family had left for France a year ago. So mom tried to make another attempt for the five children and her to escape. When father received the telegram about mother’s plan, he thought we escaped. He was mortified with grief for he had experienced the dangers at sea. He prayed to You, Lord and shaved his head as he begged You to keep us safe. The consolation came when he received another telegram saying the plan had changed. The trip was canceled. You know Lord, he thanked You wholeheartedly! Yes indeed, You saved us all. If we did travel by sea, it would have been father’s worst nightmare. So patiently, we waited for another two years. During this time, mom hired different English teachers to tutor us at night, twice a week. We never really liked it. We always hoped that the teachers would get busy or get sick so they would cancel the classes! Sorry, Lord! Occasionally they did. I was the most mischievous among the children. I did not want to leave Vietnam, the people and the fifteen years of my childhood. I would make my siblings laugh during the study sessions with one of the teachers. He did not appreciate it very much. He was humble and nice and so did not yell at me harshly. I sure was guilty! And to

punish me, You allowed him to be my English teacher in tenth grade! However, You did not let him be mean to me. On the contrary, he was even nicer and kinder to me in class. So that converted me. I repented and behaved, both in class and during tutoring sessions. I am sorry, Lord!

We grew up during the time when Vietnamese opera was quite popular. Older generations loved it and so did Grandmother. You, Lord, gave Nomi and me a special gift of memorizing, imitating and singing it very well. Once a week, our street did not have electricity. So there was no TV to watch opera. Two of us would sing it for grandmother. We were very charming and good. Grandmother always enjoyed listening and watching us perform. She would laugh and was quite proud of our talent. I loved it so much that I went with some friends to a professional opera master in town to ask to take classes from him. Well, I should have known better. I was about to go to America. I would never be an opera singer unless I stayed behind. I dared to do a certain thing, but refusing to go to America for the love of opera was never a temptation, especially with what my whole family had been through trying to leave Vietnam. What a price we all had to pay, especially grandmother and my parents. So I settled to sing opera just for grandmother and friends in school. Interestingly dearest Lord, the other day I was singing in the Abbey church. Monastic music reminded me so much of Vietnamese opera. I loved to sing in church and it seemed You have trained me since I was a little girl to sing for You. Besides entertaining grandmother with our singing, we also helped clean and moisturize her hair using coconut oil. She also loved to play card games with us. To make life more interesting and fun, we would try to cheat during the games to confuse her and make her smile. She had the most gentle and loving smile. She loved a certain kind of fruit which I gladly picked for her from the foster family's yard. Watching her enjoying the fruits made me happy.

Finally, in America, the legal paper work was done which allowed father to sponsor us. In Vietnam, the family had to go for a couple of interviews with the U. S. immigration and to schedule appointments for immunization. The only sad thing was that grandmother was not be able to go with us. We were very upset. But now, looking back, we understand You allowed it because You knew she would be better off staying where she was, at home in Vietnam even though she missed us very much. There was a big goodbye party. For some reason, I was able to leave everyone behind without too much grief. Grandmother, the foster family and friends were very supportive and happy for us. I never imagined I could separate from them, but I did. It was You, dear Lord. You had a way to grant us the grace to follow You when Your designs were in place.



CHAPTER III IMMIGRATION TO THE US LIVING WITH PARENTS, WORKING ON FARM, GOING TO COLLEGE

Living as a family for the first time

After leaving Ho Chi Minh city, the old Saigon, by airplane, we landed in Thailand for orientation and overall immunization. It was necessary because no one wanted germs to be brought into their country, and the American culture was very much different from ours. I still remember some of what was presented to us. It was quite helpful. We must have stayed there for about a week. Then we departed for a long journey to the U. S. There was one stop in Germany and finally, we arrived to Albany, New York on April 1st 1985. Father and Robert had been living here since coming to the States. Father was very happy to meet us at the airport. He was never more proud to have gone through the hardship to finally bring us here to America. We admired father very much when we heard him speak English to others. I remember wishing that someday, I could speak the language as well as he did. Praise You, Lord and thank You for being with father through these years. Our brother Robert was in college so he was not there to greet us. We came home to father's two-bedroom apartment. Since Robert left for college, father stayed by himself so he was happy to have us with him. It was bittersweet because as much as we were happy to be united and live as a family with our parents, we did not feel very comfortable because we had never really lived with them before. Very soon we the children realized we did not like it at all. Our great expectation of what life in America would be, turned out to be the opposite. We literally were trapped in a small apartment. Father talked nonstop and constantly tried to teach us about everything on all topics as if he knew it all. He was very experienced about life but did not know how to share it effectively. We could not adapt to his way of life. He was very frugal with his money and that explained why he was able to save everything he earned for the last five years to buy plane tickets to bring us here. What we did not know was he planned on us working on the farm to feed ourselves without any government assistance to get started.

The first couple of weeks, father took us to appointments, sightseeing and shopping. We visited malls and department stores but just to tour the good and rich part of America. When we actually needed something, father would take us to second hand stores. It was not that bad, but for new and young refugees with great expectation of a rich life in America, we were in for a big disappointment. Not long after, Father drove us to a farm where he worked on weekends. We were happy to get out of the house and be with nature like in Vietnam. We were teenagers and full of energy. Therefore, we worked very hard and with great care. It was about mid April. There was still snow on the ground. I remember it snowed the second day after we arrived. I thought it was cotton flying from some cotton tree nearby. On the farm, we helped clear branches in an apple orchard. We were hard working and fast. The owner was impressed and most pleased. Congratulations! We just earned ourselves a summer job! Whenever father did not work in the hospital (as First Cook, the highest position in the kitchen. He was very proud for he never went to school for it), he would drive us to the farm usually on weekends and when he had a day off. There were seven of us, and we worked average eleven to twelve hours a day. Eventually, father wanted mother to get her license. That meant we would have to work every day that summer and did not have to wait for father's day off. Like father, we had a lot of pride. He knew that so he would encourage us to work hard to continue to be independent from receiving government assistance. That became the main motivation to keep us going. Besides, being outside with nature was better than being in a small apartment.

After a few months, we asked ourselves whether this was what we wanted to come to America for. Miserably, we could not talk or tell our story to anyone. Father forbade us to associate with people, especially Vietnamese because they gossiped (like all ethnic groups do when they have so much free time on their hands). All of the apartment windows were covered with sheets to prevent people from looking in to see us. We later found out that we lived in the most dangerous neighborhood in Albany, but we never knew it. It was for the better that we were clueless. As much as we cried because we missed grandmother, and were tempted to share our difficult life with her, we all agreed that she should not know and neither should any of our friends back in Vietnam. People would just laugh at us and grandmother would have to live with the embarrassing rumor. Just as in Jesus' time, people are fickle. One day they wanted to make him King. The next, they followed the crowd and wanted to crucify him. It is sad to say that in life, often we do not really know who our friends are until the world closes in on us. Anyhow, if for all that we had gone through to get here, and we were only able to live like this, it would have been better that we stayed in Vietnam. Sadly, many people at home thought that life in America was inevitably glorious and happy. How stupid and naïve for one to believe that. Unless one does illegal things to get money, one should not expect to be given so freely without working for it. If one happens to depend on welfare, it is a blessing. He or she should never take advantage of it because, "By the labor of your hands you shall eat, you shall be happy and prosper."

Working on farms

Finally, mom got her driver's license. We began to work daily on the farm from dawn to dusk. The owner was kind and generous enough to always create jobs for us. Since we worked so fast, soon he ran out of things for us to do. We thought it was nice to have a few days off, but not according to father who was persistent and called the owner asking for jobs. Finally, the owner sent us to his brother who owned a large greenhouse. As bad as it sounds, we enjoyed working with flowers and plants. At least I did. To all the sisters, You gave green thumbs. I myself learned a lot about how to grow and care for plants of different kinds. A couple of months passed. We were happy to go to school to learn English at the Adult Learning Center in downtown Albany. We enjoyed it very much. You, dear Lord, entrusted us to our favorite teacher Michael Wolf whose wife was Japanese so he understood us well. He was like a father to us who did not work us to death (yes, we were that upset at our own father.) While our father constantly treated us as if we were in the military, and put the guilt on us every time we complained, you sent teacher Michael to keep our life balanced and sanely in dealing with our father. It was very hard during that time. All we wanted to do was to learn English and to get a job so we could afford a plane ticket go back to Vietnam. Being able to go to school and learn further about America with a compassionate teacher was the best thing that happened to us since we arrived to America. He would make us laugh because he knew we needed it. Teacher Michael eventually got to know us and our situation, but just in general. Our English was not good enough to have a long and personal conversation with him. Perhaps it was best that he did not know everything. By September, we were ready to attend public school. Everyone was qualified, except Marilyn who was then 23 years old. I felt so bad for her. But that did not stop her. With teacher Michael's help and encouragement, she was determined to study to get her GED so she could pursue her dream to go to college.

Working like slaves gave us much determination and courage. We told ourselves that we must study hard in order to have a brighter future than what we were experiencing. At school, we still

struggled with the language, but since we were intelligent and studious, we managed to do well and passed all our classes with honor. We liked school, but since we were shy and quiet, we did not have many friends. A few bad kids laughed at us and teased us, especially while we rode on the bus to and from school with them. As I mentioned the neighborhood where we lived was the worst, and so were the neighbors. There had been a few killings there, but we never knew about them until much later. Almost everywhere we went, there would always be some unkind and unhappy people who would want to project their misery on us. Some kids here were just mean to us. Our greatest defenses were to stay quiet and to ignore them. It worked. I did feel sorry for them for not having a positive influence and being able to live in a good environment. Thank You, Lord, for protecting us all those years.

We went to high school during the week. Mom and Marilyn continued to take advanced English classes with teacher Michael. Except for father, the family would go to work on the farm on weekends and holidays, including Easter and Christmas break. We were not Christians so those holidays did not mean much to us. When we knew enough to know that people took vacations, enjoyed and celebrated on Christmas and Easter, while we worked in the snow and cold, emotionally we suffered even more. One does well to reflect on this to see how true happiness is rooted in the depth of the heart and soul as Abba often advised me. I can see it clearly that when I was growing up, everything was not that bad because I lived in it and survived like many others. People were poor, but they were happy because life was simple and meaningful. As You are spirit, You always provide enough for us to live and to be happy as long as we also live according to the spirit. If we allow ourselves to be exposed and tempted by the material world, sooner or later, we will not be happy. We will become slaves and lose our freedom to live as Your happy children. We somehow allow our bodily senses dominate our spirit which draws our strength and happiness from You, the source of life and joy of the created universe.

Since father forbade us to go anywhere or to associate with any friends, we were always home together. Sometimes, to entertain ourselves, we would play dress-up and take pictures to send home to grandmother. There were Vietnamese students in school who were asked to help us since we were new and our English was not that great. Some of these students were boys. Soon they started to get friendly. For me, I was not interested. I needed to study hard to get myself out of the life I was living. That was my priority, not a relationship. Besides, father would never allow it anyhow. He just wanted us to study and work on the farm, and nothing else. My sister Omnie found ways to stay in touch with her boyfriend back in Vietnam. She used lunch money to purchase stamps and sent so many letters to Vietnam. It was rather sad because she never got a response from him. Father confiscated all the mails sent to us, hers especially for he did not want us to be distracted. A couple of years went by. Marilyn was ready to take her GED. However, Father discouraged it. He insisted that she should go to work with us and not to spend the day to take the exam. He was very authoritative and aggressive so we always obeyed him. We did not know much so we totally depended on him. I had no idea what he was thinking. My poor sister! It was on a Saturday. Mom drove us to work just like she did any other day, but then she took a detour to drop Marilyn off at school. She wore school clothes underneath work clothes so father would not suspect. Since it was very early, she had to wait for a couple of hours before her test. Then she had to wait for hours until we were done with work to pick her up. Father never found out. You love her, Lord. You somehow allowed us to suffer more compared to others we knew who also came from Vietnam. Mom too suffered with us. The atmosphere in the house was

always tense. Father loved to preach to us. There was a lot of wisdom in some of what he said, but since he kept on talking, he tended to repeat himself. After a while, we learned how to live with it. We heard but did not pay much attention to his words because they were repetitious. Most of the time, we would all go to our room and shut the door.

The great news came! Marilyn passed her GED. That meant she would be free and fly away soon! O how happy she was, and we were, too, for her. She always worked very hard on everything she did, especially on the farm. Yes, it is sad to say, but we got to know and love each other more when we worked on the farm. We spent quality time together. We laughed, threw fruits at each other and talked aloud without anyone hearing us because most of the time, we were by ourselves. Throughout the day, in the hot summer sun, we picked strawberries sitting down on the ground and dragged the trays with us as we advanced. Once in awhile, one of us screamed when she sat on a juicy red strawberry. It felt cold. Since the blueberry bushes were shorter, we bent over and kneeled to pick them. As for the raspberries, we had to stand the whole time. Raspberries had a lot of thorns so our hands often were covered with scratches by the end of the day. We tied a one gallon milk carton with an open top around our waist and emptied it when it got filled with berries. Since there were no trees around to protect us from the chilly wind, our heads too were wrapped up with long-sleeved shirts.

One day, mother dropped off the four girls in the field, and drove our youngest brother to some place. A stranger stopped the car and started to say something provocative which only Marilyn could understand. She whispered and told us to ignore him and not to act as if we were afraid. Thank You, Lord. Eventually, he drove away. I don't know what I would have done to him if he made a move to harm us. You knew I could take him down if I had to! Back to the berries. They often were sprayed with pesticide. The smell was not very pleasant when we were exposed to it all day long. We could not wait to get rid of the smelly work clothes when we got home.

We also harvested cherries and apples. We climbed tall cherry trees but used a step ladder for the apples. In the winter time, when we finished clearing around the tree trunks and trimming unwanted tree shoots, we would go inside to sort and pack apples. In the early spring and summer months, we planted and tended flowers and vegetables at the brother's farm. If nothing else, we sure got the chance to learn the names and consume all kinds of fruits and vegetables for free. Since working in the greenhouse was lighter work, sometimes we worked for 14 hours a day transplanting baby plants. I do appreciate farm workers, especially those who spend hours in the scorching heat and freezing weather as my family and I once did, to provide us the produce we buy in the grocery stores. May You give them the strength to endure and the health to live a decent life, Lord. Amen. As much as mom and the five of us endured the hard and long working days, I am grateful for the quality time we spent together. This made up for our childhood experience of growing up apart from each other. Also, as much as we hated it, we were saved from being worldly and spoiled like many young refugees experienced. With faith, I thank You for using our father to train us to be independent and good at what we were going to do in the future, not to mention opportunities to practice virtues.

Going to college in Geneseo

Robert eventually came home and was very happy to see us after more than five years. Poor brother, he had to listen to our complaints about many things: missing Vietnam, living with

father and working on the farm, etc. He shared his struggles living with father, but also gave us hope that things would get better. He was the living proof of it. When Marilyn was ready to apply for college, Robert suggested the State University of New York (SUNY) at Geneseo where he was attending school. It was a small university in the Beautiful Valley – Geneseo – as the American Indians called it. The college had a good academic standing and the faculty, at least the ones our brother had, were very helpful and personable. Robert was accepted through the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). Mr. Isom Fean (the director) and Mrs. Betty Fean, (one of two counselors) were like the parents of the group of about 200 students (freshmen through senior) per year. All students who resided in New York with average GPA and SAT scores and had parents with low incomes were qualified to apply. Marilyn was also accepted to this program. Thank You, Lord! Besides borrowing loans from the State and receiving some amount of aid from the government, EOP students got free tutoring. This was a big help. However, the best and most memorable part of all was the fact that incoming EOP freshmen got to attend a six-week summer orientation at the college. They had the chance to experience what college life was about: going to classes, living with roommates, making new friends, etc. It was not as overwhelming because the group was small (about 50-60 students instead of 5,000) There were weekly trips scheduled at which students got to travel and visit the surrounding tourist attractions. Robert's girlfriend, Angelika, who studied speech pathology was very helpful to Marilyn. She helped correcting her writing and also her speaking. One year later, my sister Omnie and I also got accepted to the same college through the same program. Praise to You O Lord! Omnie and I had a wonderful experience during the summer program. For me it was the best and the most helpful opportunity to help prepare me for my next five years of college. Together with my sister, I made new friends and was very comfortable with the college environment. When the new school year began, it was overwhelming to see so many students. Looking forward to seeing EOP staff, teachers and friends from the summer program, and reconnecting with them made it much easier to adjust to the new college life.

One year later, my younger sister, Nomi, came to join us. Nomi was accepted through the Transitional Opportunity Program (TOP). TOP did not offer the summer program for their students. Except for free tutoring, they did not get the aid that EOP students received either. After the four older siblings left for college, Nomi and my youngest brother were the only two dependents left at home. Father was promoted to be First Cook at the Albany Medical Center and mother worked as a Pharmacological Technician (it would have been too much for her to study and take the test to qualify as a full-fledged pharmacist in the U. S.). Their combined income was too high for Nomi to be accepted into the EOP program. My poor sister never received any financial help from our parents. She had to borrow more loans than any of us did. Dear Lord, You allowed it to train her to be a good Physician Assistant of Yours who has worked hard all her life. Please help her two sons and husband to appreciate and cherish whom they have for a mother and a wife who loves and cares for them very much. A common problem many hardworking parents often have is to spoil and to be over protective of their children. They would sacrifice their lives to do everything so their children can have a better and easier life than theirs, but that is a mistake, especially when the children are not very considerate and take everything for granted. Instead of being grateful and trying not to be a burden to their parents, they become more demanding and complain more readily about everything.

During freshman year, all students were required to live in dormitories. When Marilyn was a junior and Omnie and I were sophomores, my two older sisters moved off campus. I stayed on campus to be Nomi's roommate. We all lived in an all-female dormitory when there were still two that existed in our college. We made friends and learned to appreciate American food. However, on weekends, Nomi and I spent time at our sisters' apartment to be with them, to study, to go shopping and to cook Vietnamese food. The next year, we moved in with our sisters. Angelika too lived with us for a couple of years when she returned to get her Masters degree in Speech Pathology. She helped us a great deal with our English. We were like five sisters (She and Robert got married before he went off to the navy.) Angelika was brave in trying Vietnamese food, especially fish sauce whose smell is not appreciated by most Americans. We enjoyed her openness to learn to appreciate our culture. Then she graduated and moved to New Jersey where she got a job working with handicapped students. Later, Robert got out of the Navy and they settled there in the city. My sisters and I were good students and friendly so we became our professors' favorites. We got to know some personally and enjoyed their friendship. Dr. Gary Towsley was my math advisor and favorite math professor who asked me one day whether I could help with some Vietnamese translation. He asked me on behalf of his good friend, Wes Kennison. I said "yes". And this is how you composed Your rather entwined story about our future, dearest Lord.

Getting to know the Kennisons'

Br. James of the Abbey of the Genesee has a Vietnamese sister-in-law. He himself is a Vietnam war veteran. When he saw an ad about helping to sponsor a Vietnamese refugee family, he thought the Abbey could do it. So he approached Abbot John Eudes who said "Yes". That very "yes" opened up a new horizon for You to design our future today. The Abbey then looked for a lay person to help out. Ms. Weider . responded to Your invitation and helped the family during their settling down in Geneseo, New York. At the same time, Wes Kennison, the Chaplain of SUNY Geneseo Newman community and an English professor at the college, and his wife, Lynn Kennision also got involved. That was how I got to know them. Since then, my life has been more meaningful. Through translating for this new family, I was able to help people besides studying and being solely with my sisters. Interestingly, when I was a sophomore, our friend Y-San shared with me how she spent her summer helping an American family friend and loved it. I wished I could do the same so life would not be as boring, and I could learn much more about life. You heard me Lord so You gave me the Kennisons. I began to associate with Lynn at her house and played with her cats. In turn, she would come to my housing apartment where my sisters also got to know her. Then one year, during Thanksgiving Break, I decided to make a change for the better. Despite the discouragement and persuasion of my sisters that I should not stay in the apartment alone and that I should go home with them, I was determined to stay in Geneseo to be with Lynn who usually was alone at home when her husband, Wes, took trips to do charity work during the college breaks. I was tired of being futile and watching Kung Fu movies day and night long during vacation. I wanted to do something more meaningful.

Whenever we were on vacation, Marilyn would drive us home and back. She was not very precise when we would leave and when we would come back. I myself did not want to go home. Therefore, I would want to leave Geneseo late and return early. My eldest sister was in total control, so she often took her time and changed her mind on impulse as to what time or what day we would come and go. That annoyed me very much. While many looked forward to doing