

WORLDS APART

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Based on the memoir by Mai Le

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Pilot E1 first draft

EXT. VIETNAM LOCAL JAIL - NIGHT (1976)

In moonlight, several armed VIETCONG SOLDIERS come fast but tired down a dirt street, pushing a lone PRISONER ahead of them. The street is empty, the rural bombed-out village still mostly deserted.

The soldiers take their prisoner into a decrepit building that hasn't been repaired since the Americans suddenly disappeared three years before.

INT. JAIL - CONTINUOUS

The skinny but still-strong prisoner (DUC LE, 27, beat up but highly alert) gets pushed through an empty office and forced down a dark passage into a small filthy jail cell.

The heavy cell door slams shut. Duc stands in the dark room, moonlight coming strong through a barred window. With zero emotion, he checks out the dark corners - definitely alone.

Duc now stands a moment just breathing, observing. Then he relaxes, sighs and walks casually over to sit on a worn wooden bench. He closes his eyes as if meditating, sitting upright. His breathing calms down, he seems almost in trance - but then his eyes pop open and he looks alertly at the window across from him.

A slight smile spreads his parched lips. He mumbles something (*in Vietnamese with no subtitles*) - then leaps up and goes over to the small high window. Reaching up tentatively, he grabs one of the aged hard-wood bars and slowly turns it gently with his fingers - and makes it rotate in place.

Hearing a slight metallic click, he moves the bar up in its slot until it's out of his way. He quickly does the same with the four other bars - then pauses, listens carefully. Hearing nothing, he smiles broadly - ah!

EXT. VIETNAM, MEKONG RIVER - NEXT MORNING

Nestled near green rice paddies and palm plantations, half a dozen sagging huts sit placidly, built partly out over the muddy bank of the river. Near one of the huts, all alone, a skinny three-year-old girl named DAO LE (half-starved but bright and spunky) is quietly playing in the dirt with some twigs and stones.

She seems to feel safe and almost happy despite her abject poverty.

She looks up across the wide river at a few old boats going by - then she smiles as a wide-winged bird soaring overhead.

A young woman, SEN LE (Dao's mother and Duc's wife), also quite skinny, appears in the open doorway of the hut. She says something to the little girl in a kind voice (*Vietnamese, no translation*) and the girl responds happily.

Sen's expression suddenly tightens as a young man (Duc) comes sprinting down a trail as if being chased. He runs to little Dao and takes her passionately in his arms for a tender moment of reunion.

Duc meets Sen's eyes - his expression is dire. He says something urgent in Vietnamese to her, glances back up the trail - then hurries with Dao in his arms into the hut.

INT. FAMILY HUT - CONTINUOUS

The hut is just three tiny rooms plus even-smaller bedrooms on top. In the front room facing the road and paddies, Dao's GRANDMOTHER (56, a barely-surviving tough local peasant) is shelling peas. The GRANDFATHER (in his sixties) is meditating with eyes closed in a corner.

Duc storms in with Dao, and Sen follows. Duc shouts something in Vietnamese. The grandfather stands up, moves to block the door so Duc can't leave.

Little Dao wiggles out of Duc's arms and runs over to her grandmother. Sen grabs Dao from the grandmother's arms and turns to leave - but the grandfather isn't budging - so in desperation Duc roughly shoves him aside. There is almost a fight - but the grandfather chooses not to.

Sen grabs a big prepared bag and hurries with Dao in her arms out of the hut. Duc looks sadly to his father - says something apologetic in Vietnamese - then abruptly leaves.

The grandmother is silently weeping.

EXT. OUTSIDE THE HUT - CONTINUOUS

Duc, Sen and little Dao run and disappear into the jungle.

Following just one peaceful pastoral moment with boats going by on the river, birds singing in the trees - suddenly three armed Vietcong soldiers/policemen come hurrying into view.

Out of breath, they forcefully enter the hut.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. VIETNAM, DELTA BOAT DOCK - THAT NIGHT

In moonlit darkness Duc, Sen and Dao arrive exhausted at a rickety dock on the Mekong river. They run down the dock past a dozen shuttered boathouses and fishing boats, and leap onto an old fishing boat just as it's preparing to slip away into the misty night.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. GULF OF THAILAND - NEXT AFTERNOON

Out on the vast open sea, the fishing boat putts along steadily - Duc looks hopeful. Dao is playing almost happily on the deck with several other little kids.

But then the boat's engine sputters and runs out of fuel. As the boat slowly comes to a standstill. Duc gets upset and confronts the drunk skipper (*in Vietnamese with Subtitles*).

DUC

We gave you enough money for gas all the way.

SKIPPER

Oh - not enough money - very far.

DUC

So what now - we just sit here?

SKIPPER

A boat will come and rescue us.

DUC

You idiot - we could die out here!

Finally Duc gives up hope, sits passively with Sen and Dao. Everyone looks utterly dejected. Tempers flare among the refugees - but they're feeling weak, and silence prevails. Night is falling, light fading. All seems lost.

Duc speaks quietly to Sen (*in Vietnamese with Subtitles*)

DUC (cont'd)

We will make it. We must stay strong. You pray to your Jesus, I pray to Buddha. A ship will come.

SEN

We must not die out here - God will hear our prayers.

With a touch of remaining brightness, Dao speaks up.

DAO
Mommy, who shall I pray to?

The parents look to each other a bit hopelessly.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BOAT ON THE GIANT BAY - NEXT DAY

A thick morning mist is lifting. Except for a couple of crying babies, everyone is silent.

Then they begin to HEAR the slight roar of a boat engine far off. They jump up, shouting loudly into the fog, hoping they're going to be saved.

The mist lifts and they see a boat roaring toward them - but their eagerness to be saved begins to shift into abject horror - they realize it's a Thai pirate boat.

The pirate boat bangs against the fishing boat. A dozen tough men with guns and knives come aboard. Duc and several other refugee men try to fend off the attack. Duc is heroic, he's a great fighter - but he's overpowered and knocked out.

Witnessing all this, little Dao goes half-crazy and attacks the pirates who're clubbing her father - but the pirates just laugh at her and knock her violently aside.

A pirate sees a glimmer of gold on Dao's ears and begins to lift his knife to chop off her earlobes. Dao defiantly looks the pirate in the eye - then suddenly punches him hard in the eye, and escapes his grip.

In the ensuing rape-and-pillage chaos, Dao can't find her parents. Bleeding from a head wound, from her hiding place she sees the pirates jump back onto their boat and roar off.

Dao collapses into horrified hopeless sobbing.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. LOS ANGELES - DAY

(three years later)

As the sun sets, the great Los Angeles basin can be seen far below, a vast buzz of humanity - most of them fairly-new immigrants to California from all over the world.

EXT. 'LITTLE SAIGON' SLUM NEIGHBORHOOD - DUSK

Night is falling. On a bustling side street, Duc emerges from a run-down dry cleaners. Looking exhausted, he walks down the street to a cheap cafe.

Sen comes out, also tired but hurrying, taking off a serving apron as she meets up with Duc. They say nothing, they just start walking fast down the street.

INT. TINY APARTMENT - NIGHT

Inside a run-down two-room slum apartment, Dao (who is now six years old) is taking care of her two YOUNGER SIBLINGS. She stays continually busy, cleaning and cooking. She opens a pack of instant ramen noodles, tears up some lettuce, and serves her siblings.

She crushes a bag of noodles, sprinkles the small packages of spices into the bag, shakes it up, and eats the crushed dry noodles like chips.

On an old TV, news about the Cold War is playing in the background, showing a Russian boy standing with his dad in line to enter a grocery store with mostly empty shelves. Dao turned to a Carey Grant romance that makes her perk up.

INT. APARTMENT - NIGHT

The front door opens as Duc and Sen arrive home from their hard menial jobs. Dao speaks up in her rough English:

DAO
 (supportive)
 Bà ngoại, how was work at the cafe?
 Bo, is all okay at the laundry?

The parents are tired, they don't answer. Sen is looking in a cupboard.

SEN
 (to Duc)
 We have no rice.

DUC
 (beat) Okay, I go.

He checks his wallet - he has very little money.

DAO
 (eager)
 Can I come with you?

DUC
No, it's dark.

DAO
You always say no. Please Ba (dad),
just this once?

EXT. SLUM STREET - CONTINUOUS

Out on the lively but dangerous night-time street, father and daughter walk uncertainly hand in hand through a tough punk scene to a corner store.

INT. TINY STORE - CONTINUOUS

Duc grabs a small bag of rice and takes it to the counter. He stares at the cigarettes and ask how much for a pack. He looks at his wallet - just enough for rice and cigarettes.

Dao is looking at all the items on the shelf. Her bright mood contrasts with her father's impatience and depression.

STORE OWNER
Duc, how is life?

DUC
(dejected)
Same same. Work. Eat. Sleep. America.

EXT. STREET - CONTINUOUS

Duc and Dao leave the store. Duc lights a cigarette - ah! With their bag of rice they continue down the street. Punk music is playing loud from someplace. Almost enjoying the evening scene, Dao is inquisitive, looking around - almost everyone is speaking Vietnamese.

They take a side street toward their apartment. Suddenly they're accosted by three drunk PUNKS blocking their way.

A knife flashes. Duc pushes Dao behind him, shifts into a martial arts stance.

PUNK 1
(laughing - menacing)
Hey look, we got Bruce Lee with a bag
of goodies - and a little girl for us
to play with.

DUC
 (low growl)
 You go, leave us alone.

The punks just laugh at him.

PUNK 2
 Hey gook, give us your bag, your
 cigarettes, your money. Now!

DUC
 No. Move!

One of the punks grabs Dao hard by her arm. She screams and tries to pull away. Another punk grabs the bag of rice from Duc while the third punk jabs Duc slightly with his knife.

Duc suddenly explodes. Acting like he's back at war in the jungle, he makes a karate move and knocks the knife away - then attacks all three with quick hard blows of his feet.

Hurt and afraid, the punks push Dao hard onto the sidewalk and run off with the rice. Duc is out of control now - he chases after them around the corner - and is gone.

Dao is left alone on the street. As she stands up, a couple of local kids laugh at her and push her down again.

Freaking out, she runs away -

EXT. ANOTHER STREET - CONTINUOUS

Dao is still running in panic. When she finally stops she's in a dark street - and totally lost ...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BOSTON INNER-CITY MIDDLE SCHOOL - DAY

(seven years later)

Snow is falling, a harsh wind blowing. A slight but strong girl (*Dao, who is 13 now, dressed in the local '90s teen style*) comes walking across the school quad with two girl friends. They're chatting, goofing off, greeting other kids - Dao seems in her element here, doing fine.

A couple of tough Latino guys pass by and nod in silent recognition to Dao. She just eyes them, shows no emotion - and confidently walks on past them.

INT. CLASSROOM - CONTINUOUS

Dao enters a mostly-empty classroom. The TEACHER (a kind elderly woman) is sitting at her desk grading papers.

TEACHER

Ah Dao, there you are. I need to tell you something.

DAO

(defensive)

I only have a minute or two. Did I do something wrong again?

The teacher smiles.

TEACHER

Dao, please, stop expecting bad things to happen. I just want to tell you that the poem you wrote was very good. Not many people write like you, especially those learning English as a second language.

DAO

Oh, I just memorize from books like the one you loaned me, and then I try to put my own life into words.

The teacher picks up a hand-written paper:

TEACHER

Listen to what you yourself wrote:
 "My life started on the banks of a river - so beautiful, I remember it forever - my grandmother's voice calling to me, and deep green jungle and the rice growing - the big blue sky and the soft low roar of boats going by."

The teacher pauses, looks up with glistening eyes.

TEACHER (cont'd)

That's so beautiful, I can almost be there with you. And this part too:
 "Does everything look better from far away? I was born on the banks of a muddy river but that is all just a dream today - snow and cold and strange people are all around me now - and the wind does actually bite somehow!

(MORE)

TEACHER (cont'd)

All I want is to breathe my own lost country's warm sweet air - to sit in my grandmother's lap, just be there - and listen to the boats going by on that river that was my home - "

DAO

But I don't get rhyming yet so it's not really a poem. Memorizing is easy, but writing and speaking in front of everyone, that's hard. Anyway I have to go, I think I'm in trouble, the Principle has called me in again.

TEACHER

Well don't take anything here too seriously. Great heroes of literature are always courageous, they stay with their passion, they're not afraid to express themselves. Just strive toward the light, Dao. Choose what feels good in your heart. You're strong inside because of, not in spite of, where you have come from. Now off you go!

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Dao hurries along a crowded corridor. Someone bumps into her - pulls her aside. They mock punch each other, laughing. It's her good school friend JUANITO.

DAO

(playfully)

Hey, I'm late, let me go!

JUANITO

It's recess, you're not late. Let's go get a candy bar, si pues?

DAO

No puedo, I gotta go to the Principle's office.

JUANITO

Again? Who'd you punch this time?

DAO

Lorenzo - he's such a pendejo!

JUANITO

Pues, don't take no shit.

INT. SCHOOL OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Dao walks into the outer office and sits - takes out a science text and starts reading. An inner door opens.

PRINCIPAL

Dao Le?

INT. PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Dao walks in - and looks surprised to find HER PARENTS sitting with the PRINCIPAL (a middle-aged white man, gruff but sincere). Dao tenses, takes a seat. Duc and Sen remain mute and so does Dao.

PRINCIPAL

Dao, thanks for coming. You know why you're here, right?

FLASHBACK: to short school-recess scene of Dao defending herself adroitly with martial arts kicks that knock down a bigger boy.

DAO (V.O.)

(neutral)

Yes Sir.

END FLASHBACK:

PRINCIPAL

(stern voice)

We've talked about this before, it's the third incident since you started school here. And yes, I do understand that those boys are much bigger than you and that they provoke you, call you names - but in each incident you have injured someone.

DAO

(impulsive)

But I was just protecting me and my friends!

Duc speaks up uncomfortably to the Principal.

DUC

Please. I sorry. This my fault. I teach her what I know from war, how to protect herself. A small girl like Dao is, she must defend herself.

The Principal looks at Duc a moment.

PRINCIPAL

Yes, I understand - but this is not Vietnam, we're not living in a war zone - well, at least not quite.

A rumble on the playground is heard and seen happening behind the Principal's office window. Dao glances at her parents, then back to the Principal.

DAO

Well I'm sort of sorry I pushed him too hard. I guess I should just let punks like him beat the shit out of me - but hey, why am I in trouble and not those fucking guys?

PRINCIPAL

Watch your language young lady. They didn't injure you, you injured them. Such behavior is forbidden at this school. If this happens again you'll be expelled - do you understand me?

DAO

(blocking her temper)

Sure, okay. I hear you.

PRINCIPAL

Good. And actually that's not the only reason I called your parents in today. There's something else that's much more important.

DUC

(reacting)

No, what else did she do?

The Principal leans back in his chair, his expression softening as he speaks to both parents.

PRINCIPAL

Are you two aware of how your daughter has been doing in school since she arrived here?

Dao's parents scowl at their daughter.

SEN

Dao, are you not studying?

PRINCIPAL

No, it's not that - it's in fact just the opposite. Dao is at the top of her class in both math and science.

(MORE)

PRINCIPAL (cont'd)
 Your daughter has potential. (beat)
 Dao, you can go now. I want to talk
 with your parents about this.

Looking confused but hopeful, Dao gets up and leaves.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. POOR BOSTON SUBURB - DAY

(five years later)

On a sunny mid-September day, a hyped-up Honda sedan comes cruising along the low-income Lawrence back street with loud upbeat Latino music blasting from the open car windows.

The music mixes with lively street sounds of kids playing, people chatting here and there, backyard roosters crowing, noisy cars cruising by.

The Honda pulls over to the curb. A laid-back local Latino couple (around 25, enjoying life) are in the front seat. In back is Juanito, now 18. He's holding a styrofoam container of local Dominican fried chicken.

Juanito shouts out the window.

JUANITO
 (light, friendly)
 Yo Dao, waz up girl - we brought you
 a going-away present.

He's shouting toward a beat-up minivan in a driveway where Dao (now 18) is loading several plastic bins. Her father Duc and mother Sen are helping.

Dao smiles over to Juanito, walks briskly to the Honda.

JUANITO (cont'd)
 So - you escaping this hell hole?

DAO
 (joking)
 Hell yeah, I'm gonna hang with some
 rich white folks.

JUANITO
 You'll last five minutes with the
 gringos - better you chill here.

DAO
 Definitely going to be chilly up in
 those frozen Maine boonies.