

Away

I feel the turbulence of the plane as it descends through the clouds. Gazing wide-eyed through the small window, I see tall buildings in the near distance, shimmering in the morning light. I quickly retrieve my suitcase from the overhead locker and join the throng of people bobbing up and down to get their luggage. The terminal is filled with English signs, announcements and conversations, but it is the nasal accent that catches my ear. As I exit customs, I see a text on my phone from bác Duc (Uncle Duc) that says he is here and a feeling of energy rushes through my body.

As we drive away from the city, tall glass buildings make way for smaller brick houses. I feel quite anxious being away from home. My parents aren't here and neither is my sister. What if I get sick? What if I feel sad? Who will I talk to? I remember my sister and my mum crying at the departure gate. To be honest, I'm scared, fearful of what high school is like 5,000 miles from Ba Chẽ (District of Quảng Ninh Province).

My stomach rumbles. I haven't eaten anything all day besides the disgusting sausage and watery mashed potatoes mid-flight. The vulgar beefy aftertaste lingers on the roof of my mouth. I hope there will be delicious food awaiting me at my uncle's home. "Are you excited to go to high school here?" my uncle asks as he turns down the volume of his radio until *The Bolero* is barely discernible. I tiredly nod my head, feeling the sudden weight of my family's hopes and expectations.

"We're here," my uncle eventually says. The music ends abruptly as my uncle takes the key from the ignition. The home's lawn is perfectly trimmed; there is not a weed in sight. The flowers grow close to each other and shoes are neatly arranged in the rack by the front door. The front door swings open revealing a smiling young woman in white pyjamas decorated with pink tulips.

She holds out her arms and we warmly embrace despite only meeting once when I was a toddler and she was on vacation in Vietnam. The house reminds me of home. There are plastic pink and purple Lego blocks scattered on the floor while wedding photos with my uncle and auntie dressed up in traditional attire line the hallway. "Here's your room," my auntie says as she opens the door to a rather small bedroom.

It doesn't feel like my room. It's dark and empty and the only sign of real colour is on the bedsheets. I can smell the delicious aroma of the stir fry, though. My mouth drools and I quickly head to the dinner table.

An array of steaming dishes of Thịt bò xào (fried beef), cá rán (fried fish), rau xào (fried vegetables) and more are haphazardly arranged on the table. I take my bowl and fill it with rice and Thịt bò xào. I notice that my cousins are oddly quiet, and there are silent pauses when my uncle cheerfully asks a question. The awkwardness is just too much. I finish the stir-fried vegetables and devour the small piece of crackled pork I have saved for last. "Do you want me to clean the dishes?" I ask tiredly. "Phuong, take a rest; we can clean them," my auntie says.

I run to my room as my phone rings. I hope it's my parents. I hop onto my bed and take the call. It is them. I lie on the bed and we chat. I start to cry. I miss home already. Why do I have to be so far

away? We continue talking until I fall asleep. I wake up overwhelmed by my thoughts. I don't want to go to school. I want to go back home. I miss the whine of motorcycles and the busy sounds of the streets. I even miss the annoying crow of our rooster.

This house is too quiet. I shiver with the cold. I take a shower, brush my teeth and put on my new uniform. I look at myself in the mirror, forcing a smile in an attempt to bolster my confidence. Butterflies rage in my stomach as I contemplate lessons and words in a completely different language.

My uncle drops me off at the school office. I see a lady and a girl about my age waving at me. I gulp. This is real. The woman seems pleasant. We head to the class and I see people pointing at me. I hear almost imperceptible whispers "Weirdo", "Chinese...". I look around anxiously as the girl continues to talk about class. I see a group of boys jeering at me. One of them brazenly stretches his own eyes laterally, mouthing menacingly, "Ching Chong." Embarrassed, I look down. Maybe they were talking about someone else. I hope so, but all I can see are the same pointing fingers.

Instead of waiting for me when the bell rings at the end of our second class, my buddy dashes off laughing with her friends. I feel lost. The school is big and at every corner I am confused. I find my way to the bathroom, hoping to hide away from the chaos of the schoolyard, but the room is filled with a minty smoke and teenage girls vaping. The rest of the day is a blur. Teasing whispers and undisguised disdain fall freely from the sneering mouths of my newfound peers. I yearn to be back home. Finally, the bell rings to mark the end of the day. Relief washes over me as I imagine face timing my mum. I practise my 'happy face' as I walk to my uncle's car. I remember my mum's words and know I must not burden her with my woes; this is the nước ngoài of cơ hội. (foreign country of opportunities)