

Letter to a Young Refugee

April 1999

On the news last night I saw you amidst a sea of desperate Albanian refugees and afterward I couldn't get the image out of my mind. You with your wide eyes and shy smile, your hand gripping your mother's as if it were a lifesaver, you are repeating my story of a few decades ago.

Listen, even if I know so little about your country's tumultuous history, even if I don't know your name, I think I know what you are going through. When I was eleven, about your age, I too fled from my homeland with my mother and sister and two grandmothers when the communist tanks came rolling into Saigon, Vietnam. We ended up in a refugee camp while our father was left behind.

Back then I couldn't make any sense out of what had happened to me or my family. History, after all, is always baffling to the young. One day I am reading my favorite comic book in my mother's garden, my two dogs sleeping lazily at my feet, and the next day I am running for my life with a small backpack in which I only managed to save my stamp collection. Everything else was burnt—photographs, mementos, books, toys, letters, identifications.

For the first few days in the refugee camp I walked about as if in a kind of trance. I kept thinking I would return home. I kept thinking this was just camping and soon my father would rescue us, would take us home to what I knew and loved. I had no words, no references to what I was experiencing. But now I know: I was dispossessed, an exile.

My young friend, there are so many things I want to tell you, so many experiences I want to share with you, but most of all I want to warn you that the road ahead is a very difficult and treacherous one and you must be brave, strong, and cunning. There are crucial

things you should learn and learn quickly and then there are things you must mull over for the rest of your life.

The immediate thing is to learn to rise as early as possible. The food line is always long, and no matter how early you are, there will always be a line. You must have a hat or a scarf to protect your head from the cold and then from the sun.

When you get to the end of the line, try to act as helpless and as sad as possible. Tell the person in charge of food that your frail grandmother is bedridden and could not wait in line, that you are feeding her. Cry if you can. Try not to feel ashamed. That you never begged before in your life means nothing. Swallow your pride. Another plate will save you or your mother or sister many hours of waiting for the next meal. It will give them time to stand in line for medicine or clothes, if there are any.

Listen carefully, a new reality is upon you and you must rise to it as best you can. It entails a drastic change in your nature, in your thinking. It requires new flexibility and courage. Be aggressive even when you are naturally shy. Be brave even though until recently you still hugged your teddy bear in your own bed going to sleep.

Be fierce. Do not let others take advantage of you. Do not show that you are weak. In the worst circumstances, the weak get left out or beaten and robbed. Arm yourself if you can—a knife, a stone—and guard your family and what possessions you have left like a mad dog its bone. People can sense that you are willing to fight for what you have and most will back away.

Be alert. Listen to gossips and news. Find out what is coming down the line: food, donated clothes, blankets, tents, medicines. Always get more than you need if you can manage it because what you have extra can be traded with others for something you don't have or can be given away to the elderly and feeble who are not as quick as you. An extra blanket is so helpful on a cold spring night, as you, I'm sure, have already found out.

Be hopeful. Maybe your father has made it somewhere else, to another camp possibly. The same can be said of your aunts and cousins, friends and neighbors. Never give up hope. Soon enough the camp will organize and there'll be a newsletter with information regarding lost relatives looking for each other or there'll be a

bulletin board with names and agencies that will track displaced loved ones. Go every day to check to see whether your father has sent word. Console your inconsolable mother and sister. Hug them as often as you can.

My young friend, I close my eyes now and cast my mind back to that time spent in the refugee camp and all I hear are the sounds of weeping. I imagine it is not that different from what you are hearing now each morning, each afternoon, each night. Throughout the green tent city that flapped incessantly in the wind was the music of sorrow and grief. A woman who saw her husband shot in front of her wailed until she was hoarse and breathless. A man who left his feeble father behind cried quietly into his blanket. A woman whose teenage son was lost in the escape stared out into the dark as if she had lost her mind. For a while, the sound of weeping was my refugee camp lullaby.

Life in limbo is difficult and humiliating, but you must remember that being robbed of what you loved does not speak to your weakness or frailty. It only speaks of the inhumanity and fear and hatred of those who caused you to flee and endure in this new dispossessed reality.

I implore you, do not give in to their hatred. I know it is very hard, if not impossible, for someone who has just been forced out of his homeland, but you must try. Those who killed and robbed and caused so much pain and suffering to you, your family, and your people are, in fact, trying to make you into their own image, even if they don't realize it yet. They want you to hate just like them. They want you to be consumed with the fire of their hatred.

But don't hate. It will take great strength not to hate. And it will take even greater resilience to not teach hatred to those who come after you. Hatred consumes oppressed and oppressors alike and its terrible expressions—revenge is chief among them—always result in blood and tears and injustice and unspeakable suffering, an endless cycle of grief.

Learn to love what you have instead, learn to love those who suffered along with you, for their suffering and yours are now part of your inheritance.

Above all, don't forget. Commit everything—each blade of grass, each teary-eyed child, each unmarked grave—to memory. Then when you survive and are older, tell your story. Tell it on your bruised knees if you must, tell it at the risk of madness, scream it from the top of your lungs.

For though the story of how you suffered, how you lost your home, your loved ones, and how you triumphed is not new, it must always be told. And it must, by all means, be heard. It is the only light we ever have against the overwhelming darkness.