

# AT SEA

The long and astonishing road of Peter Chu '91.

By Julie H. Case

Peter Chu is eleven years old. He is careening across the South China Sea. Somewhere below him, in the bowels of a handmade wooden boat, his brother huddles in the hold, surrounded by women and other children. Peter has escaped the sounds and smells of people crammed side-by-side in the dim light, has fled the reek of their seasickness, and has climbed up to the deck, where he watches the sea roll by.

The boat tears the waves like wet cloth. Peter and his brother and father are headed for nowhere, for anywhere, for wherever this boat will take them. Ahead of them, they hope, is freedom. Behind them, somewhere near the Vietnamese shore, Chu's mother and sisters and baby brother remain.

Communists have overrun Peter's country. The invaders are grabbing men and boys to replace their wounded soldiers as they battle the Khmer Rouge in the borderlands. No matter that Peter is hardly big enough to carry a gun, that his father is still thin from the two years he spend in a "reeducation camp" in the malarial jungles along the Cambodia border. If they might be dragged into war, then they must get away.

For three days and three nights Peter and more than a hundred fellow Vietnamese refugees are at sea. Birds circle overhead. Sickness fills the hull below. Peter takes in the air and the ocean and the stars at night from the deck, eavesdropping on adult conversations. During the day, with no shore in sight, mirages fill the horizon in front of him. When the boat plows deep into a trough of water, the walls of the sea rise so high above him it seems that the boat will disappear, will be swallowed whole.



Born in 1967, just months before the Tet Offensive, Peter Chu grew up in Saigon. To the north, war raged, marching slowly southward. Throughout late 1974 and early 1975 the Communists made their way into South Vietnam. On April 30, 1975, Saigon fell. Peter's parents tried to keep him indoors, but he escaped and stood with the other kids in the neighborhood, watching the soldiers of the North run through his streets. To save themselves, the leaders of Peter's neighborhood congratulated the new regime, welcomed them as best they could. And then came the flyers, littering the streets, warning the people that anyone who had worked for the old regime should turn themselves in for "reeducation." Which is what happened to Peter's father, taken away to a prison camp in the Tay Ninh province for two years.

Back in Saigon the Communists took over the Chu family business. Peter's mother was forced to shelter the enemy, to quarter the soldiers. So,

while her husband grew thin laboring in the malarial jungles along the border, his captors slept in the family's beds, sat on their chairs, roamed their rooms as boarders. And the family grew poorer and poorer.

Peter's job was to secret things away. Slightly built, innocent-looking, he slipped past the soldiers carrying squares of silk his mother had cut and given to him to sell on the black market. The money he earned fed the family and kept them alive. Three years later, Peter's father returns, thin and fearful of the Communists, a fear he was being watched that would last the rest of his life.

Meanwhile, the Khmer Rouge and the victorious Communist forces are at war, and boys like Peter and his brother are being forced into the army, and so, in whispers, at night, when no one else was around, the family plans to escape. The father and two oldest boys will board a ship, any ship, bound anywhere. Soon, the family flees south, to a port town where they would lose most of their savings bribing officials and on failed attempts to leave the country.

Until the day Peter's father secures a place for them on a handmade wooden boat.

The boat sails south through the South China Sea, past the Gulf of Thailand. Other ships pass, but none molest them. They are lucky; no pirates board the boat, as happens to other vessels. There are many stories of Thai pirates robbing and raping refugees.

But then one day the boat is fired upon. Peter watches the adults' faces wrinkle with fear and worry. Near the Malaysian shore, at night, the captain



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PHOTO: COURTESY PETER CHU



A small boat with 168 Vietnamese refugees arriving at Malaysia in 1978; this boat sank a few meters from shore, and “most” of the refugees were rescued, as the news reports noted.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE UNITED NATIONS COMMISSION FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR)

scuttles the boat. It rolls and pitches uncontrollably in the roiling waves. Peter cannot tell up from down. The boat splinters. Peter's father and other men grab passengers and haul them to shore. Peter remembers being in the water but he does not remember swimming or climbing the slanting beach. He remembers being simply suddenly on shore, on solid ground, alone, with no father or brother. He sat huddled and alone for hours, perhaps a day; he cannot remember.

Eventually his father and brother reappeared and they sat on the shore for days without water or food or clothing. Many other people sat with them. Eventually men in uniforms arrived and led them away. Peter followed the soldiers to a bus that shuttled the refugees to a forlorn warehouse where they lived for weeks, several hundred people with one faucet among them. Finally Peter and his father and brother were “processed,” their photograph taken with a board on which their names and numbers were scrawled. Then they boarded a bus again, and then a boat, a steel seaworthy vessel, to Pulau Bidong, a one-square-mile island off Malaysia, an official refugee camp.

Tens of thousands of refugees were there already.

Peter and his father and brother spend their first several days on the beach, hungry. The boys are left alone sometimes. One day their father returns without the ivory necklace on a gold chain Peter's mother had given him. He is bearing food. They do not ask questions. Nor do they ask questions later when a family they are living with lifts the mirror Peter's mother had given him as a present from the sacks that contain all their worldly belongings. They know better than to worry the adults with such trivial matters.

Shelter comes in a bold stroke of luck. Peter and his father and brother are walking the beach one day when, out of the blue, Peter's father runs into an old army buddy. The man offers them a place to stay, if only for a while, and they accept. The two families live together in a shack made of bamboo poles and a thatch roof while Peter's father constructs a place for them to call their own.

While his father labors to build shelter, first for them, then for other families, Peter works too, cooking for the family, standing in line for water and food, digging wells. He learns to swim. Soon he's a strong swimmer, brave enough to venture far from shore. He learns to drift above the coral reefs and stare down to where tropical

fish shoot through in brilliant colors.

And still more refugees come, overwhelming the island, taking down the forest to build shelter, to build boats to catch fish to feed the swelling population. Soon the refugees clear the forest entirely. Soon another family is also living in Peter's shack. Then a third family. At night, Peter's father and his two sons lay awake, wind whispering through the bamboo thatch overhead, and talk about strawberries. The most delicious thing they



can imagine. They are sweet beyond words. They are the color of roses. In America, Peter thinks, they will eat *strawberries*.

In June, the population of the tiny island swells to 40,000. It is said to be the most thickly populated place on earth. There is no sewer system. Fresh water wells grow tainted. Illness spreads across the island. Drought forces the United Nations to ferry water in for the refugees, water for which Peter stands in line.

Peter and his father and brother live in the most heavily populated polluted drought-stricken land on earth for months.

In November of 1979, eight months after they landed on the island, Peter and his father and brother are allowed to board a United Nations plane. Soon the boy who has never tasted a straw-

berry or flown in an airplane is soaring over the very ocean he once floated on in a handmade wooden boat.

This is a *miracle*, he thinks.

From Malaysia they fly to Hong Kong, where small television sets grace the spaces between airport chairs. For hours Peter and his brother watch cartoons. Then they are in the air again, bound for the United States. During the flight the ragtag band of refugees elect a leader, the only English-speaking man among them: Peter's father. When they touch down on a runway in Oregon the father and sons, dressed in tropical shirts, are the last to leave the plane. Outside, the air is cool, and yet the sun shines bright. Another amazement: such a sun would have burnt them in Vietnam. In the cool American air Peter Chu turns to face the sun.

Peter and his father and brother are placed with professors from George Fox University, members of a Quaker church. On the family's farm they help raise pigs, and in the summers, pick and eat strawberries. Peter, who was born Dinh Cao Chu, becomes Peter Chu. Snow falls, the first snow he has ever seen. Mount Saint Helens explodes, the ash drifting silently all around them. Eventually Peter's father gets a job at Tektronix, and Peter's mother and sister and other brother join them in Oregon, and Peter enrolls at the University of Portland to study engineering — an education made possible only by the scholarships and grants the University gives his financially strapped family; a detail Peter never forgets.

Today, Peter Chu is a patent attorney in Seattle. His father died in 2008, a loss both he and his brother, who lives across the country now, still grieve. Peter has returned to Vietnam twice — in 2007, with the Washington Secretary of State on a trade mission, and again in 2009, to teach with the Fulbright program. During that second trip he explored his father's hometown, Hanoi, wondering what his father would think. In the capital of a government that had imprisoned his father, a government that probably would have sent little Dinh Cao Chu to war against the murderous Khmer Rouge, a government that caused Peter and his family to flee across the ocean to a new world, Peter Chu wandered alone, thinking of boats and beaches, strawberries and airplanes, snow and ash. ■

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