

Truc's story from Vietnam

Part Two

In April 1981, Truc and his family left Thailand on a Qantas plane. Australia had accepted them as refugees.

Truc was very excited. He had never been on a plane before, none of his family had. On the plane, they ate apples and grapes for the first time. For the first time, Truc watched a movie in colour. The movie was about a superhero named Flash Gordon who had landed in a strange new world. Even though Truc did not know any English, he saw that Flash Gordon had to fight many bad guys. Flash Gordon never gave up, and in the end he beat the bad guys. Truc loved it.

When Truc's family arrived in Adelaide, they lived at first in a small house at the Pennington Migrant Hostel. Many Vietnamese refugees were living at the hostel. The hostel was not one single building. Instead, it was made up of many small houses and a few bigger buildings. People lived in the small houses but washed their clothes at a shared laundry.

Truc's family were given blankets and cutlery. They ate meals with many other people at a common dining hall. The food served had a lot of milk, butter and cheese in it. Truc and his family found this hard to get used to. In Vietnam, they had eaten rice and vegetables every day. The Australian diet was much richer than the Vietnamese diet.

Perhaps because of this, Truc and his siblings were much smaller than Australian children of the same age. So, when Truc's parents filled in official forms, they wrote that their children were two or three years younger than their actual age. That is how Truc started in Year 2 at Pennington Primary even though he was already nine years old.

Pennington Primary was near the Migrant Hostel. From Monday to Friday, Truc and his siblings walked to school. His Year 2 teacher was a very nice lady. Every day, the Vietnamese refugee children had a special lesson with an Australian teacher and a Vietnamese teacher. This was a big help.

Truc and his siblings were so eager to learn English that they practised all the time, even when they were at home. Even when their parents spoke to them in Vietnamese, they replied in English.

The children knew it was important to learn English quickly. In the playground, other local children yelled insults at them, 'Speak English' or 'Go back where you came from'. Sometimes, Truc fought back with his fists, because he didn't have enough English words to use. At school, even though there were small fights, Truc knew that teachers were around to keep him safe.

What Truc was most afraid of was the walk home from school. Once, a much bigger kid attacked him. He yelled racist insults and threw Truc onto the ground. Truc picked himself up and ran home, terrified. Later, Truc found a steel bar and put it in his school bag. He had to try to protect himself.

Autumn passed into winter. Truc had never felt so cold. At night, he wore all his clothes to sleep, with his school uniform on top. He didn't want to have to change in the morning. It was too cold.

One day, his teacher told Truc that his class was going on an excursion. She said that he could not wear socks and slippers to the excursion. Sadly, Truc's parents did not have the money to buy a new pair of shoes for him. After school one day, Truc's teacher brought him to a second-hand shop. She bought him a pair of sneakers. Such kindness helped Truc through that difficult first year.

By this time, Truc and his family had moved from the Migrant Hostel to a rented house nearby. It was an old bungalow with a big yard. Even though both Truc's parents were working as farm hands, money was a big struggle. Things were very expensive in Australia but the Huynh family found ways to manage.

When Brussels sprouts were in season on the farm, the family ate Brussels sprouts every night for dinner. After dinner, the whole family sat around a pile of onions. They peeled onions by the sack for a pickling company. Everybody worked with tears running down their face. Those were funny, happy times.

To be continued.