

## Tag

Hà's sandals thumped on the wooden deck as she chased her sister, Táo, and her two cousins to the front of the boat. The four pushed through clusters of former businessmen, heartbroken musicians, heirs who no longer had an estate to inherit, freshly unemployed tradesmen, mothers of all ages, and their oblivious children. The warship bellowed like a mechanical whale as it pierced through the Philippine Sea.

Hà swiped at the back of Táo's t-shirt. The two boys running alongside Táo quickened their pace and howled. Táo stumbled over her oversized hand-me-down sandals, nearly falling, but she continued to run. The quartet of kids dashed by a wooden outhouse, which was suspended by ropes over the side of the boat.

The floating outhouse creaked as it rocked back and forth with the wind. It was attached over the side of the rail with fickle ropes; there was nothing beneath it but hundreds of feet of air that finally met with calloused waves rippling below. A queue of 40 people waited in line for their turn to relieve themselves. Those at the front of the line flinched every time the boat rocked as they watched the outhouse bounce up and down. The soldiers reassured them that the ropes were secure, but the whipping of the outhouse gave a different testimony. It was the only place that resembled a bathroom for the refugees. There hadn't been any other options to relieve themselves for 117 hours.

Finally, Hà smacked Táo square in the back, "Mày thua rô `i!"

The kids erupted in laughter and slowed to a halt as they reached the bow of the ship. The four of them gulped and panted as they grabbed onto the rail. Hà stood on her tiptoes to see over the side. She squinted through rays of orange light as the sun sunk into the ocean over the horizon. Maybe she could see Guam from here.

Hà's cousin, Quốc, slumped down on the ground and picked at his chewed fingernails. His brother, Huy, followed suit and hugged his knees to his chest. His empty belly groaned. Though it felt like his stomach was digesting itself, he had slowly grown numb to it after a couple of days without any food. Huy instinctively chewed on the collars of his shirt, sucking the salt out of the sweat-stained fabric.

"Mày thấy gì không?" Táo strained to catch a glimpse over the rail.

Hà shook her head. She lowered herself back down to her heels. Táo held her arms up and bounced up and down. Hà huffed, wrapped her hands around Táo's belly, and lifted her as high as she could, though only a few inches. Táo smiled at the woosh of

wind hitting her face. With the sun in her spreading across her eyes and the mist blowing on her cheeks, she could barely pry open her eyelids to see. She let out a joyful giggle.

“HEY!” a burly American voice yelled from behind them. Hà flinched and dropped Táo back to the ground. Quốc and Huy jumped to their feet. An American soldier with bug bites on his swollen face emerged from the crowd, “No running!” The kids looked at each other, terrified. They couldn’t understand him. Everyone stared at them, from those in line for the outhouse to the flocks of families sitting nearby. “No kids on the rail!” the soldier screamed and puffed his chest. The four blinked at him, clueless. The soldier waved for them to come near. Hà grabbed Táo’s hand. They stood as still as fawns. He rolled his eyes and stomped up to them, grabbing Quốc by the arm and ushering them away from the rail. He pushed Quốc and Huy forward and with a huff, he disappeared into the crowd, leaving the front of the boat in uncomfortable silence.

Everyone continued to stare when the four sat down underneath a turret. They sprawled out together in silence. Hà felt a pang of guilt fill her empty stomach as she ran her fingers across the weathered wood flooring. Táo sat between her legs. She fidgeted and tightened the worn leather straps on her sandals as snug as she could. Quốc and Huy laid on their backs next to them. They stared above at the pinky-orange sky. The sun was kinder at this hour, sparing everyone from its blistering heat though still shining a gentle light across the deck of the ship.

The line to the outhouse began to dwindle with only 12 people waiting. A man with smile lines stood next in the queue. He scowled at the ground with his legs crossed, anxiously watching the wooden stall creak back and forth. He tried not to look at the nothingness below it.

Huy yawned, stretching his bloody cracked lips so wide that the corners of his mouth stung. He stretched his body and whipped his arms up to rub his face, accidentally bumping his elbow on Quốc’s cheek in the process. “Ahhh!” Quốc groaned, holding his face. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. With a devious look, he dug two of his fingers into Huy’s abdomen. Huy groaned and shoved him. They wrestled with smiles spreading across their cheeks. Táo snickered. She reached out and landed a heavy slap on Quốc’s back. Huy’s eyes widened and he scrambled off of the ground.

The game had resumed; Quốc chased Huy back across the front of the boat, swinging his arms to strike him. Táo bounced to her feet and chased after them, but Hà stayed sitting on the ground. She nervously scanned the area for any more soldiers as she rose to her feet and trailed behind them.

The man with smile lines climbed into the outhouse, urgently shutting the door behind him. A woman standing after him in line turned away and held her nose. The stall bounced up and down with the waves. The rope loosened its grip.

“Đứng lại...” Hà called behind them, but they didn’t listen as they chased each other with waving arms. Quốc shoved Táo’s back and darted away. She chased after him but the strap of her sandal snapped, leaving the sole of her shoe unattached to the balls of her feet.

The rope suspending the outhouse snapped. The man with the smile lines opened the door. He tried to jump back onto the deck but descended with the wooden shaft off the side of the ship. It cracked open like an egg when it made contact with the water. The man with the smile lines disappeared below the broken wood in the waves.

Táo stumbled and yelped as she flopped onto her belly. Quốc and Huy scrambled to help her to her feet. She cried as blood trickled down from the fresh scrapes on her knees. Hà froze, watching dozens of adults rush over to the side of the boat screaming, “CÚU! CÚU!!”

The woman next in line cried out, “Ai đó cứu vói!” The soldiers were nowhere in sight.

The kids stopped running.