

TAN LE MY IMMIGRATION STORY

How can I speak in 10 minutes about the bonds of women over three generations, about how the astonishing strength of those bonds took hold in the life of a four-year-old girl **huddled** with her young sister, her mother and her grandmother for five days and nights in a small boat in the China Sea more than 30 years ago. Bonds that took hold in the life of that small girl and never let go -- that small girl now living in San Francisco and speaking to you today. This is not a finished story. It is a jigsaw puzzle still being put together. Let me tell you about some of the pieces.

Imagine the first piece: a man burning his life's work. He is a poet, a playwright, a man whose whole life had been balanced on the single hope of his country's unity and freedom. **Imagine** him as the communists enter Saigon -- confronting the fact that his life had been a complete waste. Words, for so long his friends, now mocked him. He retreated into silence. He died broken by history. He is my grandfather. I never knew him in real life. But our lives are much more than our memories. My grandmother never let me forget his life. My duty was not to allow it to have been in vain, and my lesson was to learn that, yes, **history tried to crush us, but we endured.**

The next piece of the jigsaw is of a boat in the early dawn slipping silently out to sea. My mother, Mai, was 18 when her father died -- already in an arranged marriage, already with two small girls. For her, **life had distilled itself into one task**: the escape of her family and a new life in Australia. It was inconceivable to her that she would not succeed. So after a four-year saga that defies fiction, a boat slipped out to sea disguised as a fishing vessel. All the adults knew the risks. The greatest fear was of pirates, rape and death. Like most adults on the boat, my mother carried a small bottle of poison. If we were captured, first my sister and I, then she and my grandmother would drink.

My first memories are from the boat -- the steady beat of the engine, the bow dipping into each wave, the vast and empty horizon. I don't remember the pirates who came many times, but were **bluffed** by the bravado of the men on our boat, or the engine dying and failing to start for six hours. But I do remember the lights on the oil rig off the Malaysian coast and the young man who collapsed and died, the journey's end too much for him, and the first apple I tasted, given to me by the men on the rig. No apple has ever tasted the same.

After three months in a refugee camp, we landed in Melbourne. And the next piece of the jigsaw is about four women across three generations shaping a new life together. We settled in Footscray, a working-class suburb whose demographic is layers of immigrants. Unlike the settled middle-class suburbs, whose existence I was oblivious of, there was **no sense of entitlement** in Footscray. The smells from shop doors were from the rest of the world. And **the snippets of halting English** were exchanged between people who had one thing in common: They were starting again.

My mother worked on farms, then on a car assembly line, working six days, **double shifts**. Somehow, she found time to study English and gain IT qualifications. We were poor. All the dollars were allocated and extra tuition in English and mathematics was budgeted for regardless of what missed out, which was usually new clothes; they were always secondhand. Two pairs of stockings for school, each to hide the holes in the other. A school uniform down to the ankles, because it had to last for six years. And there were rare but **searing** chants of "slit-eye" and the occasional graffiti: "Asian, go home." Go home to where? Something stiffened inside me. There was a gathering of resolve and a quiet voice saying, "**I will bypass you.**"

My mother, my sister and I slept in the same bed. My mother was exhausted each night, but we told one another about our day and listened to the movements of my grandmother around the house. My mother suffered from nightmares, all about the boat. And my job was to stay awake until her nightmares came so I could wake her. She opened a computer store, then studied to be a beautician and opened another business. And the women came with their stories about men who could not make the transition, angry and inflexible, and troubled children caught between two worlds.

Grants and sponsors were sought. Centers were established. I lived in parallel worlds. In one, I was the classic Asian student, **relentless** in the demands that I made on myself. In the other, I was **enmeshed** in lives that were precarious, tragically scarred by violence, drug abuse and isolation. But so many over the years were helped. And for that work, when I was a final-year law student, I was chosen as the Young Australian of the Year. And I was catapulted from one piece of the jigsaw to another, and their edges didn't fit.

Tan Le, anonymous Footscray resident, was now Tan Le, refugee and social activist, invited to speak in venues she had never heard of and into homes whose existence she could never have imagined. **I didn't know the protocols.** I didn't know how to use the cutlery. I didn't know how to talk about wine. I didn't know how to talk about anything. I wanted to retreat to the routines and comfort of life in an unsung suburb -- a grandmother, a mother and two daughters ending each day as they had for almost 20 years, telling one another the story of their day and falling asleep, the three of us still in the same bed. I told my mother I couldn't do it. She reminded me that I was now the same age she had been when we boarded the boat. "No" had never been an option. "Just do it," she said, "and don't be what you're not."

So I spoke out on youth unemployment and education and **the neglect** of the marginalized and **disenfranchised**. And the more **candidly** I spoke, the more I was asked to speak. I met people from all walks of life, so many of them doing the thing they loved, living on the frontiers of possibility. And even though I finished my degree, I realized I could not settle into a career in law. There had to be another piece of the jigsaw. And I realized, at the same time, that **it is OK to be an outsider**, a recent arrival, new on the scene -- and not just OK, but something to be thankful for, perhaps a gift from the boat. **Because being an insider can so easily mean collapsing the horizons, can so easily mean accepting the presumptions of your province.** I have stepped outside my comfort zone enough now to know that, yes, the world does fall apart, but not in the way that you fear.

Possibilities that would not have been allowed were outrageously encouraged. There was an energy there, an implacable optimism, a strange mixture of humility and daring. So I followed my **hunches**. I gathered around me a small team of people for whom the label "It can't be done" was an irresistible challenge. For a year, we were penniless. At the end of each day, I made a huge pot of soup which we all shared. We worked well into each night. Most of our ideas were crazy, but a few were brilliant, and we broke through. I made the decision to move to the US after only one trip. My hunches again. Three months later, I had relocated, and the adventure has continued.

Before I close, though, let me tell you about my grandmother. She grew up at a time when Confucianism was the social norm and the local mandarin was the person who mattered. Life hadn't changed for centuries. Her father died soon after she was born. Her mother raised her alone. At 17, she became the second wife of a mandarin whose mother beat her. With no support from her

husband, she caused a sensation by taking him to court and prosecuting her own case, and a far greater sensation when she won. "It can't be done" was shown to be wrong.

I was taking a shower in a hotel room in Sydney the moment she died, 600 miles away, in Melbourne. I looked through the shower screen and saw her standing on the other side. I knew she had come to say goodbye. My mother phoned minutes later. A few days later, we went to a Buddhist temple in Footscray and sat around her casket. We told her stories and assured her that we were still with her. At midnight, the monk came and told us he had to close the casket. My mother asked us to feel her hand. She asked the monk, "Why is it that her hand is so warm and the rest of her is so cold?" "Because you have been holding it since this morning," he said. "You have not let it go."

If there is a sinew in our family, it runs through the women. Given who we were and how life had shaped us, we can now see that the men that might have come into our lives would have **thwarted** us. Defeat would have come too easily. Now I would like to have my own children, and I wonder about the boat. Who could ever wish it on their own? Yet I am afraid of privilege, of ease, of entitlement. Can I give them a bow in their lives, dipping bravely into each wave, the unperturbed and steady beat of the engine, the vast horizon that guarantees nothing? I don't know. But if I could give it and still see them safely through, I would.