

ANGEL CHILD, DRAGON CHILD

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My sisters skipped through the stone gate two by two. Mother was not there to skip with me.

Mother was far away in Vietnam she could not say. “Ut, my little one, be an Angel Child. Be happy in you new American School.”

I hugged the wall and peeked around the corner.

A boy with fire-colored hair pointed his finger.

“Pajamas!” he shouted. “They wore white pajamas to school!” The American children tilted back their long nose, laughing.

I turned away. “I want to go home to Father and Little Quang,” I said.

Chi Hai’s hands curved over my shoulders.

“Children stay where parents place them, Ut. We stay.”

Somewhere, a loud bell jangled. I lost my sisters in a swirl of rushing children. “Pa-jaa-mas!” they teased.

Inside, the children did not sit together and chant as I was taught. Instead, they waved their hands and said their lessons one by one. I hid my hands, but the teacher called my name, “Nguyen Hoa.”

Hoa is my true name, but I am Ut. Ut is my at-home name---a tender name for smallest daughter.

“Hoa,” the teacher said slowly. “Write your name, please.” She pressed a chalk-piece to my hand and wrote in the air.

"I not understand," I whispered. The round-eyed children twittered. The red-haired boy poled my back.

"Stand up, Pajamas!"

I stood and bowed. "*Chao buoi sang,*" I said like an Angel Child. The children screeched like bluejays.

I sat down and flipped up my desk top, hiding my angry Dragon face. Deep in my pocket, I felt Mother's gif—a small wooden matchbox with silvery edges. I took it out and traced the *hao-phuong* on the lid. When I tapped the tiny drawer, Mother's eyes peeked over the edge. "I will keep you safe in here, Mother," I told her.

"See? You will just fit beside the crayons"

Her listening face smiled. In my heart, I heard the music of her voice. "Do not be angry, my

smallest daughter," she said. "Be my brave little Dragon."

So all day I was brave, even when the children whispered behind their hands and the clock's needles ticked slowly. Finally the bell trilled. Time for home!

As soon as he saw me, Little Quang crowed, "Ut! Ut! Ut!" His laughing eyes gleamed like watermelon seeds. I dropped my books and slung him on my hip.

There he rode, tugging my hair as I sorted mint leaves and chives. Little Quang strung rice noodles from the cup hooks. Father and I laughed at this happy play.

At night, small brother curled tight beside me. I showed him Mother's lonely face inside the matchbox. Together we prayed, "Keep Mother

safe. Send her to us soon." With Mother's picture near, we slept like Angel Children.

In this way, many days passed.

One day at school, small feathers floated past the frosty windows. "Mother," I whispered, "this is snow. It makes everything soft, even the angry trees with no leaves to make them pretty."

Outside, snowflakes left wet kisses on my cheeks, "Chi Hai!" I called. "Catch some!" "It disappears!" she cried.

Just as Chi Hai spoke, a snowrock stung her chin.

That red-haired boy darted behind the dumpster.

He was laughing hard.

I tried but I could not be a noble Dragon. Before

I knew it, I was scooping up snow. My hands

burned and my fingers turned red. I threw my

snowrock and the laughing stopped.

Suddenly, the boy tackled me! We rolled in the snow, kicking and yelling, until the principal's large hand pinched my shoulder.

"Inside!" he thundered, and he marched us to our classroom.

We can't have this fighting. You two have to help each other." Ordered the principal. He pointed at me. "Hoa, you need to speak to Raymond. Use our words. Tell him about Vietnam." Raymond glared. "And you, Raymond, you must learn to listen. You will write Hoa's story."

"But I can't understand her funny words,"

Raymond whined. "Anyway, I don't have a pencil."

"Use this one, then," said the principal. He slapped down a pencil, turned and slammed the door. His shoes squeaked down the hall

Pajamas!" Raymond hissed. He crinkled his paper and snapped the pencil in two. He hid his head in his arms. How could I tell my story to *him*?

The clock needles blurred before my eyes. No! I *would not* be an Angel Child for this cruel-hearted boy.

But later across the room, I heard a sniffle.

Raymond's shoulders juggled like Little Quang's when he cried for Mother.

I crept over. Gently, I tugged the sad boy's sleeve. He didn't move. "Raymond," I pleaded, "Not cry. I give you cookie.

Suddenly, his head bounced up. "Hoa!" he shouted. "You said my name. You didn't use funny words." He broke off a piece of the cookie.

"I say English," I answered proudly. "And you call me Ut. Ut is my at-home name, from Vietnam."

“Okay, Ut” he mumbled. “But only if you tell me what’s in your matchbox.”

“My mother,” I told him. We giggled and ate the cookie crumbs.

Then Raymond asked, “Why do you need your mother’s picture?”

“Mother is far away,” I said softly.

“She didn’t come with you?:”

“So many children in my family,” I sighed.

“No money for Mother to come.”

“Wait,” said Raymond. He grabbed part of the broken pencil. I handed him a new sheet of paper.

“Now tell me about Vietnam,” he said.

Raymond scrawled my words in black squiggles. I crayoned pictures in the margins.

When we were ready, Raymond leaned out the door. "Done!" he beamed. He waved the story like a flag.

The principal squeegeed up the hall. "You may go," said the big man.

We dashed through the stone gate together.

The next day, the principal read our story to the whole school. "These girls sailed many oceans to be here. They left behind their home, their friends, and most important of all, their mother. So now....."

"Ut's mother needs money for the long boat ride to America!" shouted a familiar voice. Raymond stood on his chair. "And we could have a fair and *earn* the money."

"Young man!" warned the principal.

Raymond slid down in his seat. "We could," he insisted. I hid my eyes. I held my breath. Chi Hai squeezed my hand.

A special fair! A Vietnamese fair!" my teacher exclaimed. My eyes opened wide. The principal's eyebrow wiggles like caterpillars. "But who will help with a Vietnamese fair?"

"Me!" cried Raymond.

"We will!" squealed the children.

"Well, what are we waiting for!" said the principal.

And we all clapped for the fair.

On the special day. I wore my white *áo dài* and welcomed everyone to our Vietnamese fair.

"*Chào buổi sáng,*" I said, bowing like an Angle Child.

"*Chào buổi sáng,*" they answered, smiling.

High above our heads, our rainbow dragon floated freely. Below, Chi Hai and her friends sold rice cakes, imperial rolls and sesame cookies. Raymond popped balloons and won three goldfish. He gave one to Little Quang, "Don't eat it," he warned. By the end of the day, we had just enough money to send to Mother. "When will she come?" I wondered.

Every day, we walked home wondering. "When will Mother come?"

We sled through icy winter.....

We splish-splashed through spring rain.....

We tiptoed barefoot through the grass still hoping she would come.

On the last day of school, when I knew the *hoa-phuong* were blossoming in Vietnam, Raymond and I raced home faster than all my sisters. We were

the first to see Father and Little Quang at the
picture window and beside them.....

Mother!