

# Letter to a Young Refugee from Another

Andrew Lam



Play Audio

On the news last night I saw you amidst a sea of desperate Albanian refugees, and afterward I couldn't get the image out of my mind. You with your wide eyes and shy smile, your hand gripping your mother's as if it were a life saver, you are repeating my story of 24 years ago.

Listen, even if I know so little about your country's tumultuous history, even if I don't know your name, I think I know what you are going through. When I was eleven, about your age, I too fled from my homeland with my mother and sister and grandmother when the communist tanks came rolling into Saigon, Vietnam. We ended up in a refugee camp<sup>1</sup> in Guam<sup>2</sup> while our father  
10 was left behind. **A**

Back then I couldn't make any sense out of what had happened to me or my family. History, after all, is always baffling to the young. One day I was reading my favorite book in my mother's rose garden, my dogs sleeping lazily at my feet, and the next day I was running for my life with a small backpack in which I only managed to save my stamp collection. Everything else was burnt: photographs, mementos, books, toys, letters, and clothes.

For the first few days in the refugee camp, I walked about as if in a kind of somnambulist<sup>3</sup> trance. Something had slipped loose within me, a familiar  
20 to the scene in my mind, did it slowly dawn on me what I had experienced: terror—a natural reaction to the fact that I was dispossessed, an exile.

## Analyze Visuals ▶

Which details in the photograph suggest that the woman and child are experiencing hardships?

## **A** AUTHOR'S MESSAGE

Whom is the author addressing in the essay? Why?

- 
1. **refugee camp**: a shelter for people displaced by war, political oppression, religious persecution, or famine.
  2. **Guam** (gwām): a Pacific island that is an unincorporated territory of the United States.
  3. **somnambulist** (sōm-nām'bye-līst): a person who sleepwalks.

My young friend, there are so many things I want to tell you, so many experiences I want to share with you, but, most of all, I want to warn you that the road ahead is a very difficult and treacherous one, and you must be brave and strong and cunning. There are crucial things you should learn and learn quickly, and then there are things you must mull over for the rest of your life. **B**

The immediate thing is to learn to rise as early as possible. The food line is always long and no matter how early you are there, there will always be a line. You must have a hat or a scarf to protect your head from the cold and then  
30 from the rising sun, since it can take half a day for food.

When you get to the end of the line, try to act as helpless and as sad as possible. Tell the server that your frail grandmother is bedridden and cannot wait in line, that you are, in fact, feeding her. Cry if you can. Try not to feel ashamed. That you never begged before in your life means nothing. Swallow your pride. Another plate will save you or your mother or sister many hours of waiting for the next meal and will give them time to stand in line for medicine or clothes, depending on your immediate needs.

Listen carefully, a new reality is upon you, and you must rise to it as best you can. It entails a drastic change in your nature and in your thinking. It  
40 requires new flexibility and cunning. Be aggressive even when you are naturally shy. Be brave even when only days earlier you still hugged your teddy bear going to sleep.

Be fierce. Do not let others take advantage of you. Do not show that you are weak. In the worst circumstances, the weak get left out or beaten and robbed. Arm yourself, if you can, with a knife or a stone, and guard your family and possessions like a mad dog its bone. People can sense that you are willing to fight for what you have left, and most will back away.

Be alert. Listen to gossips and news. Find out what is coming down the line: food, donated clothes, blankets, tents, and medicines. Always get more than  
50 you need, if you can manage it, because extra can be traded with others for something you don't have or can be given away to the elderly and feeble who are not as quick as you. An extra blanket is so helpful on a cold spring night, as you, I'm sure, have already found out.

Be hopeful. No, more than that. Don't give up hope. Maybe your father has made it somewhere else, to another camp possibly. The same can be said of your aunts and cousins, friends, and neighbors. Never give up hope. Soon enough the camp will organize, and there'll be a newsletter with information regarding lost relatives looking for each other, or a bulletin board with names and agencies that will track displaced loved ones. Go every day to check and  
60 see whether your father has sent word. Console your inconsolable mother and sister. Hug them as often as you can. **C**

I close my eyes now and cast my mind back to that time spent in the refugee camp, and all I hear are the sounds of weeping. I imagine it is not

**B AUTHOR'S MESSAGE**

Reread lines 22–26.

On the basis of this passage, what appears to be the message of the essay?

**C AUTHOR'S MESSAGE**

In lines 27–61 the author offers a **list**, or catalog, of do's and don'ts for the young Albanian refugee. **Summarize** the main points of the list.

that different than what you are hearing now each morning, each afternoon, and each night. Throughout the green tent city that flapped incessantly in the wind was the music of sorrow and grief. A woman who saw her husband shot in front of her wailed until she was hoarse and breathless. A man who left his feeble father behind cried quietly into his blanket. A woman whose teenage son was kept behind stared out into the dark as if she had lost her mind. For  
70 a while, the sound of weeping was my refugee camp lullaby.

Indeed, life in limbo<sup>4</sup> is difficult and humiliating, but you must remember that being robbed of what you loved does not speak to your weakness or frailty. It only speaks of the inhumanity and fear and hatred of those who caused you to flee and endure in this new dispossessed reality.

By the same token, I implore you, do not give in to their hatred. I know it is very hard, if not impossible, for someone who has just been forced out of his homeland, but you must try. Those who killed and robbed and caused so much pain and suffering to you, your family, and your people are, in fact, trying to make you into their own image, even if they don't realize it yet. They  
80 want you to hate just like them, and they want you to be consumed with the fire of their hatred. Don't hate. Hatred consumes oppressed and oppressors alike and its terrible expressions—revenge is chief among them—always result in blood and tears and injustice and unspeakable suffering, especially for the innocent.

Don't hate. Love instead. Love what you lost, love what you still have, and love those who suffered along with you, for their suffering and yours are part of your inheritance.

And don't forget. Commit everything—each blade of grass, each teary-eyed child, each unmarked grave—to memory. Then when you are older, tell your  
90 story. Tell it on your bruised knees, if you must. Tell it at the risk of madness. Scream it from the top of your lungs, the way a wounded bird would sing its last song. For though the story of how you suffered, how you lost your home, your loved ones, and how you triumphed is not new, it must always be told. And it must be heard. It is the only light we ever have against the overwhelming darkness. 🐦 D

### Language Coach

**Affixes** Many words are created by adding a prefix or a suffix to a common base or root. The word *possess* means “to have or own.” By adding the suffix *-ion*, the word changes from a verb to a noun. A *possession* is something owned, property. What other word based on *possess* occurs in line 74? What does it mean? Use a dictionary if you need help finding the definition of affixes.

- D AUTHOR'S MESSAGE**  
What important piece of advice does the author end with?

---

4. **limbo**: a state of being disregarded or forgotten.