



Changing life stories

Boat People

A National Literacy Trust membership resource

Five stories for Refugee Week 2023 by the children's author, Tom Palmer

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Please exercise sensitivity and discretion when accessing this content as it could be upsetting to some pupils.

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Squatting low in the doorway of the warehouse, Henny watched the two German soldiers closely, as if her life depended on it.

Because it did.

The soldiers walked the length of the quay. One towards the town, the other heading out to the end of the harbour wall. Patrolling to make sure no boats departed without their knowing.

Nazis. They disgusted Henny.

As she watched them, she was trying hard to suppress her increasing panic. Short breaths were no good. She needed deep breaths. Control the fear. For what she was about to do.

Henny dodged back into the warehouse as the soldiers turned to come back down the quay, both glancing warily at the crew of three Danish sailors sat, pale-faced, on the deck of *Gerda III*.

The boat was bobbing up and down on the water, five or six metres across a cobbled track from where Henny was hiding. After the two soldiers had met in front of the boat and turned to patrol the quay again, it would be time.

Time to act.

It was a cold and dark night on the Danish coast, the waters of the *Öresund* – the narrow channel between Denmark and Sweden – were choppy. But there was enough light for the two enemy soldiers to see Henny and the crew of the boat. And – if a mistake was made – there was enough light for them to see the mother, father and daughter that Henny and the crew were trying to smuggle onto *Gerda III*.

Henny's heart was hammering so hard now she felt like she would be sick. Her breaths were rasping. That had to stop. The soldiers would hear her above the rhythms of the cold waves

beating against the harbour wall. And, if they heard her too soon and saw her, they might find the family too.

Then beat them, arrest them, deport them, murder them.

That was the Nazi plan. That was what they wanted to do to the Jews. And why this family needed to get onto a boat and leave their homeland. The Nazis intended to arrest all of Denmark's 7500 Jews tonight.

Through a gap between the door of the warehouse and the wall, Henny saw that the German soldiers had come towards each other until they were almost face to face, then turned to patrol the quayside again, automatically, as if they were cogs in some terrible machine.

Henny took a deep breath in. Her chest trembling. Her legs too. She caught a glint of the steel of one of the soldiers' rifles in the moonlight and her mind flooded with questions. Could they really do this? Could they save this family from the Nazi concentration camps that everyone knew existed? Or would they all be executed on the quayside before sunrise?

Henny knew she had to stop doubting, to begin believing. They had a good plan. There were just five metres to cross, then the family would be on the boat. Henny had already guided them through the town despite the curfew, evading Nazis everywhere. She'd hidden them and fed them and handed the mother a sedative to make her child sleep. This was just the last bit.

Henny took a final breath and listened carefully as the sound of the sentries' boots faded. She looked across the cobbles to see crew hanging over the side of *Gerda III*, glancing at the two soldiers, then nodding at Henny.

Now. It was now. They had timed this. They had twenty seconds.

One... two... three...

Henny wanted to throw up. She stepped back and gestured the mother and father to go, then scooped up their sleeping child.

Four... five... six...

She could hear the girl's father's soft voice comforting his wife as she gazed back.

Seven... eight...

'Quiet now,' she whispered, 'Go.'

Nine... ten...

The mother and father ran across the wet cobbles, the mother slipping, but not faltering, recovering quickly.

Eleven... twelve...

The two adults were hauled onto the boat. Soundlessly. Then – glancing at the backs of the two soldiers, one to her left, the other to her right – Henny handed the unconscious child to one of the crew.

Thirteen... fourteen... fifteen...

Now she watched as the family were bundled down through a hatch and the hatch was covered and rapidly piled with provisions to conceal it.

Sixteen... seventeen... eighteen... nineteen... twenty.

Knowing the German soldiers would see her now in the half light, Henny pushed her hair up and just stood there as if she was talking, nonchalant, to the crew. About nothing. She hoped the soldiers would be looking at her, not the boat.

A crack. A rumble. She heard *Gerda III's* engine fire. The crew were doing their bit to get away from the quay as soon as they could. Before their occupiers could search their boat.

But the steady rhythm of the soldiers pacing up and down had been replaced by the thunder of boots. They were running now. Fast. Towards *Gerda III*. Rifles in front of them.

'Halt! Der papierkrieg!'

Stop! We need to see your paperwork!

As the soldiers came fast, Henny heard the father hidden below the hatch cry out, his fear too much for him.

Hearing this man's terror for his wife and daughter, Henny smiled at the soldiers. It was hard to smile naturally, to hide her hatred of these two men for causing such fear. But she managed it.

Now she heard a clink. One of the crew handed the boat's paperwork to the first soldier, then three bottles of beer to Henny.

Henny smiled at the enemy again and handed each of them a beer.

'Bier?', she asked, and took a long cool drink from the third bottle, her nerves steadying.

As they drank, Henny scuffed her feet on the harbour cobbles, one crewman coughing loudly, to mask any sounds the Danish family hiding might make.

The engine of the *Gerda III* revved again, the smell of its smoke sharp in the fresh sea air, and Henny handed her beer casually to one of the Nazis so that she could release the rope and allow the boat to ease away from the quay.

The Nazis took it and smiled back at her.

Retrieving her beer, Henny raised the bottle to toast *Gerda III* and its crew as it eased out into the dark and across the *Öresund*. To Sweden, where this family would not be persecuted, hunted, arrested and murdered because they were Jews.



Henny Sinding

To find out more about Henny and to hear her speaking about the extraordinary events in 1943, the testimony that informed and inspired Tom Palmer, please watch: [The 22-Year-Old Woman Behind the Rescue of Over 300 Danish Jews \(mjhnyc.org\)](https://www.mjhnyc.org) (5'50 to 11'35).

Belgium to England

1914



Earlier this year, I was with my grandad in his flat. I sometimes go round and spend half of Sunday with him. We watch the football. He's got Sky. We haven't. Man City were playing and that's who I support.

Before the game, we were eating our lunch: these Belgian sausages with chips that we always have. Grandad likes to watch the news before the football and I just stare out of the window when that's on. He lives in Folkestone and has a view of the sea. His grandma and grandad bought the house over a hundred years ago.

On the news, there'd been some sort of election and the Prime Minister was going on about how he wanted to stop the boats. Grandad sighed after listening to the Prime Minister, like he might when a footballer does something stupid, lets a goal in, or misses a sitter.

Still bored with the news, I watched two ferries. One going across to Europe, the other coming back, great big white ships. I'd been on them a couple of times.

'Why does the Prime Minister want to stop the boats?', I asked, wondering why Grandad was so upset, 'Does he want to stop people going on holiday or something?'

Grandad laughed and leaned forward, glancing out at the cross channel ferries. 'He's not talking about those boats, Tom. He means the little ones with refugees and asylum seekers in.'

I knew about that, too.

'Freddie at school...', I said, 'Well, his dad says the best thing is to sink the boats. Then that'll put them off coming.'

Grandad turned the TV off. Then he stared at me.

'But you know that's not right?', he asked.

I stopped chewing. Something was wrong. And I wasn't sure what to say. I never know what to say when people get all serious with me.

'Have you finished?', he asked.

I shook my head. I still had chips on my plate. A big dollop of mayonnaise. I loved chips with mayo.

'You've finished for now,' he told me, 'You can have it when we get back.'

I stood up then, putting my plate on the low table in front of us. I was confused. I knew I'd said something he didn't like. Just not what. I decided not to argue. Grandad was usually chilled. He didn't get like this often. Like Mum can. So I did what he said.

'Where are we going?', I asked.

'The museum in town,' he said. Then he walked to the door and took his coat off the hook. 'We're giving the football a miss today.'

'But it's City.' I couldn't stop myself.

'This is more important than Manchester City.'

'de Bruyne...' My voice trailed off and I followed him out of the house.

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Grandad stopped in front of a large oil painting. 'I need you to see this,' he said.

We were in the Folkestone Museum. A set of large rooms with people being very quiet, standing still, staring at pictures of ships, mostly. And a few other paintings of old people in very dark clothes.

I looked at the painting Grandad was pointing at. It was a big scene where lots of people are standing on a harbour, the sea and the sky in the background. The sea behind was full of boats that were full of people. At the front, the people on the right were wearing posh clothes. Then – in the middle – some others were coming up the harbour steps. From boats they'd been on, presumably. They were hunched over, tired looking, carrying things. At the back there was a girl. You could only see the top of her as she climbed the steps.

On their left – on the harbour – there was a nurse and two girls. The main girl was in a yellow dress and wore a hat with a black ribbon round it. She seemed to be holding a tray, maybe with food to offer the people coming off the boats.

I knew this was the lesson. I knew I had said something about boats and the Prime Minister and Freddie's dad to upset Grandad. He was going to tell me something. Not tell me off.

'You see the girl there?', Grandad pointed.

I nodded.

‘That was my grandmother.’

‘What?’

‘This picture is called *Landing of the Belgian Refugees*,’ Grandad went on, ‘It was painted by an artist called Fredo Franzoni and he presented it to Folkestone. Fanzoni was one of 16,000 people who arrived on boats in Folkestone in one day.’

‘All on one day? Sixteen thousand. Why? On holiday?’

Grandad laughed. ‘No. It was September 1914. You know what happened then?’

I did. ‘The First World War had started,’ I said.

‘Good. Well done. So, the people on these boats are coming from Belgium. I think 250,000 came in the end. To escape when the German army invaded their country.’

I nodded. I knew what this was about. I knew I was meant to think that it was good that we helped when the Belgian people came in 1914. I looked at the girl again. The one Grandad said was his grandma.

‘And your gran gave them something to eat?’, I said, hoping to make him feel happy, so he’d smile again.

Grandad looked confused. ‘What?’, he said. And then he grinned, but his face still looked sad. ‘No, Tom. No. That girl... the one with the tray. She’s not my grandmother. The other girl. See?’, he pointed.

‘The one coming up the steps?’

‘Yes. She was called Lucie. Your great great grandma.’

‘Really?’

I stared at the girl. She looked nervous or tired. I hoped that when she got to the top of the stairs, the other girl would give her some food or water.

‘Did she get something to eat and drink? Where did she stay? What did she do?’

‘She was with her mother and a local English family took them in,’ Grandad said, ‘Like people took Ukrainian refugees in last year. Do you remember? They were terrified of what the Germans would do to them. But my grandmother’s mother went home after the war. As soon as it ended. Most of the refugees went home when it was over.’

‘In 1918?’

‘Yes. That’s right. Very good. But my grandmother met a young man from England while she was here. George. He was your great great grandad. And they decided to get married. And they settled in Folkestone.’

‘And that’s why we’re here?’

‘That’s right,’ Grandad said, ‘That’s why we’re here.’



For more details about the Belgian refugees who came to Folkestone in 1914, please visit:

<https://www.kentonline.co.uk/kent/news/the-day-16-000-refugees-arrived-in-kent-234609/>

Vietnam to Malaysia

1975



As the camera man steadies himself to film her, the young woman stares back at the boat behind him. It is on its side now, the pounding waves of the South China Sea breaking it into pieces, water overwhelming its hull. She can hear its wooden deck cracking and snapping. The boat she and dozens of others left Vietnam in six days ago will never go to sea again.

Mercifully, there is no-one remaining on board.

The young woman is safe, she reminds herself. The boat could have broken apart and gone down when they were out at sea, not here. She shudders. Even though she is on dry land, on this beach in Malaysia, she still feels the ground move beneath her and fears she is about to drown. Those last moments as the boat began to sink, men falling off the deck, trying to cling onto ropes, as they came closer and closer to the beach. They were terrifying. She wonders whether she will ever recover. Perhaps she won't.

This interview she is about to do was meant to be with a man. But, as he prepared to speak, he seemed to break in front of them all, turning in circles, his hands together as if in prayer, saying thank you over and over, unable to meet anyone's eyes, let alone give a TV interview.

It was decided that the young woman would do it. She agreed. Someone had to. And she feels strangely calm. In fact, she feels that she doesn't have any emotions at all.

Over the last week – as well as the fear of the boat sinking and her drowning – they have fought off pirates and she has seen men jump into the water only to drown before her eyes, seen people die of thirst or wounds too. Then she faced what she had to face at home in Vietnam before she escaped onto the boat that is now sinking. But she should not even think about that. About the past.

She will not forget the late nights when she quietly tiptoed to the sandy beach at home in Vietnam. They had to choose the darkest nights without any moonlight so that they could merge themselves into the blackness and sit still next to coconut trees.

They were living ghosts, she remembers. Sat motionless, waiting and waiting for the canoes to arrive so that they could rush to those small boats.

No. She must not look back. She must look forward. Hundreds of thousands of people from her country have left by boat and need help. How will they find a future if they do not ask for it?

‘Ready?’, the interviewer asks.

She nods.

She likes this TV man. She trusts him. When their ship was breaking up on the beach, not enough of the hundreds of local people who had come actually helped. Most just watched. A few fishermen came to their rescue. And this TV guy. She remembers seeing the TV man wading through the water to carry children and weak people safely out of the waves as they cried, fainted, laughed in his arms.

He has shown he is a good man. She will speak to him.

He begins the interview, the camera is rolling.

‘Do you think the people of the United States will accept Vietnamese refugees?’, he asks.

Her first thought is no. Even here – so close to Vietnam – the Malaysian locals look more like they want to stone her and the other refugees to death than offer them sanctuary. What will the Americans – thousands of miles away – think of this beach of shipwrecked refugees?

But she must be positive. She must remind the Americans that they have connections with the people of Vietnam.

‘Erm...’, she stumbles, ‘In certain cases I think that they will accept.’

‘In certain cases?’, the interviewer smiles at her. Maybe he likes her answer. Maybe it was what he was looking for. ‘Which cases?’

She thinks of her best friend who has an uncle in the United States. Her own father who helped the Americans at the beginning of the war in Vietnam. Her job is to remind the American people about this. Those connections.

Not think about what she saw happen to the people who did not make it out of Vietnam. How, even when they made it to the beach and it was dark, there was danger. How they were forever looking around keeping an eye on any possible sign of the police in dark yellow uniforms.

‘Er... those who have families there and those who have worked for the Americans,’ she says. Then she remembers her cousin who fought alongside the Americans too. ‘And those that have been in the army,’ she adds.

She glances over at the locals, standing in lines. They are moving forward on the beach. Slowly. Like the tide is moving towards them too. She feels trapped. The sea. The lines of people.

And now the image of those lines of people at home – the ones who did not get away – tied up in big dark brown strings made from coconut tree barks, captured after failing to get onto the boat to escape their hometown. The person right at the front had to carry a blackboard of A4 size around their neck with the words in white chalk: ‘We are traitors of Vietnam’.

What would happen to them?

Some people were going to be tortured. Others would be forced to undergo what was called re-education. More would have all their freedoms and all they had worked for taken away from them. Vietnam was dangerous now.

‘What about the others who have never worked for the Americans who don’t have families there?’, the interviewer asks, ‘What happens to them?’

The young woman’s instinct is that the Americans will not accept just anyone who is fleeing war and persecution. Refugees cost money. Refugees make trouble. That’s what some people think. They don’t know what has happened to make people leave everything and everyone you know and get on a boat that could sink or be attacked by pirates.

Back home this young woman worked in sales. It was her job to sell things. Now she must do that again. She must sell the idea to Americans that they – the “great” Americans – are good people, that they can be relied on to do the right thing, to help refugees.

She hesitates, overwhelmed by emotion, trying to remain calm and clear and to communicate, then she speaks, aware there are dozens of people from her country trapped on this beach, hoping for a future.

‘I think that the Americans will make a choice and receive them all,’ she says, ‘Those who haven’t been accepted by other countries.’

The interviewer is so surprised he steps back.

‘The United States will take all?’, he asks.

‘Yes.’

‘You really believe that?’

The young woman feels the ground move beneath her feet like the boat moved beneath her feet when it was sinking and other people were falling into the water and drowning. And she realises that she is not calm, not empty of emotions, but, so traumatised, her emotions have dried up.

Had dried up.

But now they come, her emotions, like waves.

'I hope,' she smiles.

And then, when the camera is off and the microphone is away, she drops to the floor.



To see the news report this story is based on, please visit: [June 24 1979 Vietnamese Boat People – The Price of Freedom](#).

Also, the original words of a friend of mine, who escaped from Vietnam by boat, will help you understand:

"I remember the late nights I quietly tiptoed to the beach. We had to choose the darkest nights without any moonlight so that we could merge ourselves into the black darkness and sat still next to coconut trees, using our little hands to dig up holes to bury in the sands our very little plastic bags with only some pyjamas in them. We, as living ghosts, sat motionlessly and waited and waited for the canoes to arrive so that we could rush to these small boats. They did not come, and we quietly left the sandy beach, looking around, keeping an eye on any possible sign of the police in dark yellow uniforms. The times (and too many times) I saw lines of people tied up in big dark brown strings made from coconut tree barks. They were the people, young and old, captured from failed attempts to get onto the boat to escape their hometowns. The person right at the front had to carry a backboard of A4 size around the neck with the words in white chalk: 'We are traitors of Vietnam'. They walked and walked, simply like ghosts, and we had to stand by the side of the footpath and watch. There was no other option but to hide yourself away from the scene."



You are cycling to school with your brother when you see a group of people standing on the cliffs. You can hear them shouting. They seem to be looking down at something in the water. You can't tell what. It could be a whale, a shark, a boat that's come loose from its moorings. You want to know, so you and your brother cycle close to the edge, dump your bikes and go to look down.

There's a medium-sized wooden boat in the water. Fifteen metres long. It's close to the cliffs, breakers tossing it up close to the rocks. Now you can hear that the shouting is not coming from the people on cliffs, but from the boat. And you understand. The boat is full of people.

There must be a hundred men, women and children being tossed up and down in the boat on the waves. The waves surge towards the cliffs, then crash back off them and the water swirls and froths impossibly. Passengers are holding on to the edge of the boat like they're on a rollercoaster or some ride. And they're screaming, too. But it's not rollercoaster screaming.

The boat is pathetic. It's just planks of wood with a tarpaulin over the top to keep the sun off. The tarpaulin is torn. You hear more shouts, but the words' meanings are lost between and beneath the waves.

'Asylum seekers,' your brother says.

'They're mad,' you say, 'I mean... it's dangerous.'

'Their funeral,' he says, half laughing.

You both know – and don't need to be told – that the people on the boat have motored south from Indonesia with the idea of coming to your island and claiming asylum. Christmas Island – your home – is Australian territory. These asylum seekers think Australia is safe and rich. They want a better life. They're probably from Iraq or Iran or Afghanistan. You learned about them in school. That they might be escaping war or danger. They've made the

decision to try to live somewhere else. And that's fine by you. As long as they don't stay on your island, you don't care where they're from or where they're going.

More shouts. Clearer voices. Australian voices.

Local voices from below? You're missing something.

So you move closer to the edge and you can see more people down there at the foot of the cliffs. A dozen of them. They're locals. From your village. They're throwing life jackets. But the life jackets – luminous yellow and orange – spin from the rocks towards the boat until the wind catches them and they drop into the water, short of the boat.

More screams as the boat is lifted and turned half on its side.

You see it before you hear it. An undertow drags the boat too close to the cliffs and the boat hits the rocks. The boat shudders, two or three people losing their grip, falling off and into the sea. Those people just vanish. And you hear the noise of wood on rock a second later.

It doesn't sound good. A boat like that. Some badly-made foreign thing. It won't take many more hits like that.

You hear more shouts and see more life jackets spin towards the stricken boat. An urgency from the locals trying to help. But the booms of the waves and cracks of the boat mean you cannot hear any shouting now.

Then the boat strikes rocks again. And more people fall in. But the boat remains intact. There is a sharp smell of diesel. And more screams.

Another surge of white water bounces back off the cliffs just as a huge wave lifts the boat and twists it. Inevitably, the boat hits the rocks again.

This time, it disintegrates. The boat's slim dark shape is gone. Your mind can't take it in; the shape of the brown wooden fifteen-footer is now spreading, with plastic bags and clothes and things you can't identify floating in the space where the boat once was. And people. You see people in the water, too.

Is it people? Is it really people? Smaller people. Children? Are they really children in the water? Few of them have life jackets. They can't see the ropes being flung at them from the base of the cliff now. Not as they try to stay above water, waves breaking over them, their eyes and ears and mouths flooded by the cold sea.

Your brother has squatted to watch. He has said nothing since the first rock strike.

Weirdly, you see that part of the boat is actually still intact and that a young man or a boy is sitting there, unmoving, a lifejacket on. He is not shouting or screaming. He looks like he is waiting for a pleasure cruise or a fishing trip to end and he can just climb onto dry land. But he can't and he won't as the boat is tossed up by waves, then dragged down by what looks like a whirlpool.

That part of the boat reappears, water washing across what is left of its empty deck.

You turn and run to your bike, then cycle home, sprinting up the stairs to your bedroom and your bed.

*

You don't go to the cliffs anymore. Even though you live half a mile from the sea. You don't even go to the harbour. You never walk or cycle past the petrol station either; the smell of diesel makes your heart beat so hard that you can't seem to move your legs. And, when you hear someone shout in the distance, or hear someone scream, you shudder and have to reach out to hold on to something to steady yourself.

Of the 92 people on board the ship, 42 survived. They were picked up by rescue boats that arrived soon after theirs broke on the rocks and you left. But 50 died. 15 were children. Some were your age. One was a week younger than you, in fact. A boy like you. You tried to find out about him online, in the newspapers.

He was called Ahmed. He was from Afghanistan. You wanted to know why he was on the boat. You found out that he was travelling with his father. They had to get out of his home country because they were in danger. His dad was a journalist. They could afford to pay to be on the boat, travel across Asia then buy passage on a ship. You wanted to understand why it was safer for them to get on a boat like that and come to Australia than stay in Afghanistan.

You found out more things about Ahmed, but then you stopped. Like you stopped trying at school. You stopped seeing most of your friends. And you don't always sleep. Some nights, when you close your eyes, you see the water moving and relive the moment that last part of the boat disappeared. With the boy still visible.



To watch the short documentary about the Christmas Island boat disaster, please visit this webpage. But do watch it first before showing it to children, as it is very distressing and not suitable for younger or more sensitive children.

WATCH: ['Everyone who was there was changed for life' – Christmas Islanders on the 2010 boat sinking disaster | Australia news | The Guardian](#)

Story number five, to be read on Friday 23 June 2023, will be published during Refugee Week. Thank you for reading.