

Excerpt from *The Committed*

Viet Thanh Nguyen

PROLOGUE

We

We were the unwanted, the unneeded, and the unseen, invisible to all but ourselves. Less than nothing, we also saw nothing as we crouched blindly in the unlit belly of our ark, 150 of us sweating in a space not meant for us mammals but for the fish of the sea. With the waves driving us from side to side, we spoke in our native tongues. For some, this meant prayer; for others, curses. When a change in the motion of the waves shuttled our vessel more forcefully, one of the few sailors among us whispered, *We're on the ocean now*. After hours winding through river, estuary, and canal, we had departed our motherland.

The navigator opened the hatch and called us onto the deck of our ark, which the uncaring world denigrated as merely a boat. By the lopsided smile of the crescent moon, we saw ourselves alone on the surface of this watery world. For a moment we were giddy with delight, until the rippling ocean made us giddy in another way. All over the deck, and all over one another, we turned ourselves inside out, and even after nothing remained we continued to heave and gasp, wretched in our retching. In this manner we passed our first night on the sea, shivering with the ocean breezes.

Dawn broke, and in every direction we saw only the infinitely receding horizon. The day was hot, with no shade and no respite, with nothing to eat but a mouthful and nothing to drink but a spoonful, the length of our journey unknown and our rations limited. But even eating so little, we still left our human traces all over the deck and in the hold, and were by evening awash in our own filth. When we spotted a ship near the horizon at twilight, we screamed ourselves hoarse. But the ship kept its distance.

On the third day, we came across a freighter breaking through the vast desert of the sea, a dromedary with its bridge rising over its stern, sailors on deck. We screamed, waved, jumped up and down. But the freighter sailed on, touching us only with its wake. On the fourth and fifth days, two more cargo ships appeared, each closer than the one before, each under a different flag. The sailors pointed

at us, but no matter how much we begged, pleaded, and held up our children, the ships neither swerved nor slowed.

On the fifth day, the first of the children died, and before we offered her body to the sea, the priest said a prayer. On the sixth day, a boy died. Some prayed even more fervently to God; some began doubting His existence; some who did not believe in Him began to; and some who did not believe disbelieved all the more strongly. The father of one of the dead children cried, My God, why are You doing this to us?

And it struck us all then, the answer to humanity's eternal question of *Why?*

It was, and is, simply this: *Why not?*

Strangers to one another before we clambered aboard our ark, we were now more intimate than lovers, wallowing in our own waste, our faces green, our skin blistered by salt and baked into the same shade by the sun. Most of us had fled our motherland because the communists in charge had labeled us puppets, or pseudo-pacifists, or bourgeois nationalists, or decadent reactionaries, or intellectuals of the false conscience, or because we were related to one of these. There was also a fortune teller, a geomancer, a monk, the priest, and at least one prostitute, whose Chinese neighbor spat on her and said, Why is this whore with us? Even among the unwanted there were unwanted, and at that some of us could only laugh.

The prostitute scowled at us and said, What do *you* want?

We, the unwanted, wanted so much. We wanted food, water, and parasols, although umbrellas would be fine. We wanted clean clothes, baths, and toilets, even of the squatting kind, since squatting on land was safer and less embarrassing than clinging to the bulwark of a rolling boat with one's posterior hanging over the edge. We wanted rain, clouds, and dolphins. We wanted it to be cooler during the hot day and warmer during the freezing night. We wanted an estimated time of arrival. We wanted not to be dead on arrival. We wanted to be rescued from being barbecued by the unrelenting sun. We wanted television, movies, music, anything with which to pass the time. We wanted love, peace, and justice, except for our enemies, whom we wanted to burn in Hell, preferably for eternity. We wanted independence and freedom, except for the communists, who should all be sent to reeducation, preferably for life. We wanted benevolent leaders who represented the people, by which we meant us and not them, whoever they were. We wanted to live in a society of equality, although if we had to settle for owning more than our neighbor, that would be fine. We wanted a revolution that would overturn the revolution we had just lived through. In sum, we wanted to want for nothing!

What we most certainly did not want was a storm, and yet that was what we got on the seventh day. The faithful once more cried out, *God, help us!* The non-faithful cried out, *God, You bastard!* Faithful or unfaithful, there was no way to avoid the storm, dominating the horizon and surging closer and closer. Whipped into a frenzy, the wind gained momentum, and as the waves grew, our ark gained

speed and altitude. Lightning illuminated the dark furrows of the storm clouds, and thunder overwhelmed our collective groan. A torrent of rain exploded on us, and as the waves propelled our vessel ever higher the faithful prayed and the unfaithful cursed, but both wept. Then our ark reached its peak and, for an eternal moment, perched on the snow-capped crest of a watery precipice. Looking down on that deep, wine-colored valley awaiting us, we were certain of two things. The first was that we were absolutely going to die! And the second was that we would almost certainly live!

Yes, we were sure of it. *We – will – live!*

And then we plunged, howling, into the abyss.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2018, is a *New York Times* bestselling author and Pulitzer Prize–winner for Fiction. He is also a University Professor, the Aerol Arnold Chair of English, and a Professor of English, American Studies and Ethnicity, and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California. His most recent book is *The Committed*, the sequel to *The Sympathizer*, for which he is the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim and MacArthur Foundations, and Le Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger (Best Foreign Book in France).

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