John Kent Harrison's
The Way of the Willow

It was in 1979 that the south east Asians were adrift, destination unknown. The news media did its best to illustrate the horrors of the condition of these "boat people." Civilized nations had no choice but to open their doors and accept their filth of refugees. The Canadian government adopted a refugee sponsorship program which encouraged private individuals and groups to assume responsibility for the refugees and help them integrate into a new environment. The task was monumental and deeply touched the lives of the many people across Canada who responded to the call.

One of these sponsors, screenwriter John Kent Harrison, then a teacher in Concordia University's film program, turned the experience into a film project for himself and his students. With the help of other faculty members they produced a professionally competent film called The Way of the Willow. The film is superb. It captures the very essence of the refugees' experience of their first days in Canada - which is the only way they can survive in their new surroundings. Harrison's film shows both the strength required and the pain involved in adapting to this alien Canadian culture with an elegance that moved me even more than did my own six weeks of intense research into the refugee sponsorship program. And in the course of that research I found it all - the loss of friends and family in transit, the psychological fears, the uncertainty, the bad teeth, the language problems, and the enormous difficulty of having to learn an entirely different way of life. The Canadiandomestic lifestyle. But it was while watching the film that, for the first time, tears of emotion wet my face as I actually felt some of the experience of the Tran family.

We share the experience of the Tran family: Hung the father, Anh the mother and Huw the three-year-old son. Having survived the horrendous ordeal of the boat, the pirate, the refugee camps and the loss of their second young son, the family arrives at Canadian Immigration to have their fate sealed as permanent residents of Canada. They spend their first night in an army barracks and as they get up in the morning Anh asks Hung if they are free. Hung doesn't know, but the audience knows enough about their own culture to understand that while they are legally free it may be a long time before they will feel really free.

Hung's need to keep one foot planted firmly on his belongings as he takes the mandatory morning shower; despite his natural shyness they create a perfect illusion of the suspicion he necessarily feels as a result of his sleepless nightmare. Having been warned by the Immigration officials - a sympathetic and kindly woman who recognizes the tremendous need of these people but is powerless to do much about it - of Anh's psychological problems because of the loss of her son, the Renshaw's the Canadian sponsors, take the Tran's to their new apartment.

We see Anh locked in an incommunicable world, failure repeatedly to find her way. All the plastic bows in the apartment are lined up neatly on the counter filled with the precious water she is saving from the incessantly dripping faucet in the kitchen sink. The beautiful mural of a Vietnamese village which she paints on the wall of the apartment brings down the wrath of an angry landlord. Her efforts to buy shrimp to feed her family only confirm her inability to understand how the Canadians use money. In the climax of the story she comes face to face with her ultimate failure - an inability to secure the well-being of her only remaining son.

Her desperation is crystallized as she wanders helplessly out of the Montreal General Hospital totally oblivious to the snow on her icy bare feet. Our hearts go out to her as we too understand that she can never go back to where her heart is, and that she has a long row to hoe before life will be bearable here.

One of the striking things about this film is its distinctively Canadian flavour. The profound influence of our documentary tradition makes this drama an important vehicle for a perfect illustration of the suspicion he necessarily feels as a result of his sleepless nightmare. Having been warned by the Immigration officials - a sympathetic and kindly woman who recognizes the tremendous need of these people but is powerless to do much about it - of Anh's psychological problems because of the loss of her son, the Renshaw's the Canadian sponsors, take the Tran's to their new apartment.

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