

Amy

Once upon a time, not so long ago, a girl was staying with her grandmother during half-term. She was watching television. Then the news came on.

‘Nearly bedtime, Amy,’ called the grandmother.

‘Granny, what are all those people doing?’ the girl asked. On the screen she saw men and women shuffling and scrabbling to climb up onto a truck. She saw armed soldiers pushing them. She saw children crying. She saw a baby sitting by the dusty road alone, not doing anything.

‘They’re refugees from the war.’

‘What’s happening to them?’

‘They’re being taken to a place of safety.’

‘I saw a baby. It was on its own.’

‘Poor wee mite. It’s probably been orphaned.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It means when both parents are dead, so there’s no one to take care of it.’

Amy thought that sounded rather exciting, to be alone in the world with nobody telling you what to do.

Her grandmother said, ‘Like your Uncle Ho. He was an orphan.’

‘But *he’s* not a child!’ said Amy indignantly. ‘He’s a grown-up. And he’s not on his own. He’s got you and Grandad.’

Although Uncle Ho was a man, he still needed quite a lot of looking after, sometimes more than Amy.

Her grandmother said, 'Yes, but Ho didn't always have us. There was a time when he had no one.'

Amy said, 'So what'll happen to that baby on the telly?'

'I expect someone will come and get him.'

'Like you got Uncle Ho?'

'Perhaps.'

The news ended. Another programme started.

'Come along now, Amy. Upstairs.'

When she was tucked up in bed, Amy remembered the war-baby on the telly and felt a very tiny bit sad for it, though not so sad that she didn't want a bedtime story. She asked her grandmother to tell her one of her special long-ago stories.

'And which ones are those?' asked her grandmother.

'Like you said you used to tell Uncle Ho when he screamed and screamed all through the night.'

'That was such a long time ago, my dear. I'm not sure I can remember them.'

'Oh, Granny. Please try.'

'Very well, dear. Which one did you want?'

'All of them. From the very beginning until you get to the end.'

'But that would take us from now till breakfast time,' said the grandmother. 'And besides, I'm not sure if there is an end yet.'

'Why isn't there?'

'Because Uncle Ho is alive and well and sitting downstairs, that's why. As you know very well.'

'All right then. Just tell me the first one. I love that one. How they found him in the gutter.' It was such a peculiar place to be found. Nobody with any sense would allow themselves to get put in a filthy gutter.

‘Very well, Amy. But then you must promise, promise to go straight to sleep and no nonsense.’

‘Course I will. I always do when I’m staying with you, because you’re the best grandmother there ever was.’ Amy sometimes told her other grandmother the same thing because she liked to keep her bread buttered on both sides.

In a Faraway Place

Once upon a time, quite a long time ago, in a beautiful faraway city where scarlet-flowering trees grew along the wide streets, and where tropical sunsets reddened the evening skies, a small child was lying in a gutter. It was late. Most people had long since hurried home and closed their shutters to be safe from raids and thieves and army patrols.

One tired policeman cycled slowly through the fruit market towards his home. He was off duty. All day he had been directing traffic and keeping an eye out for pickpockets.

As he pedalled along the boulevard beneath the flowering flame trees, he heard a frail squeaking sound. He thought it was his bike. He stopped to check the wheels. But the noise continued.

‘Meeew, meeeew.’

The policeman said to himself, ‘Hmm, that’s funny. It sounds a bit like a newborn kitten.’

He glanced round. He saw, lying on the ground in amongst a pile of market rubbish, a baby. It had huge brown eyes, and a mass of black hair sprouting upwards like spiky bamboo shoots.

The policeman bent down for a closer look. The baby was naked, dirty, and so thin its ribs showed under its skin like little twigs. It was a boy.

‘Meeew, meeew,’ the baby went, though there were no tears when it cried.

When the policeman picked it up, it wasn’t heavy for it was little more than a bundle of skin and bones. He searched the nearby streets for someone to hand it back to. But there was no one.

In those days, in that faraway country, finding an abandoned child in the street was not unusual, for there was a war which had been going on for years and years, ever since the policeman had been a schoolboy. Sometimes, children’s parents were killed, sometimes they went off into the forests to join the fighting, sometimes they simply ran away from their children because they had no more food and no more love to give them.

Babies were sometimes left with a scrap of paper giving their name. This one had nothing, not even a scrap of cloth for a nappy.

When the policeman found no one to pass the child on to, he heaped up some of the dry rubbish into a comfy nest and he replaced the baby on the pavement. The baby blinked its big brown eyes. It waved its thin scraggy arms and twitched its scrappy little legs.

The policeman said to himself, ‘I must get home to my own little boys. My wife will start wondering where I am if I’m late. She’ll be so worried. She’ll think I’ve been stopped at a roadblock or trapped by the curfew.’

But as he pedalled away, he could hear the baby’s frail mewling following him down the road.

He slowed down. He stopped.

No, no, no, he thought. I cannot leave that baby there, even if it does look as ugly as a skinned rat.

So he turned back and gathered it up out of the rubbish.

‘Upon the souls of my ancestors, I do not know what I am to do with you now,’ he said, holding it uncertainly. ‘However, since it was your Fate that you should be left lying in the gutter, and it was my Fate that I should be the one to find you, then it is Fate that will resolve the outcome.’

And, even though the baby was dirty and damp with pee, he tucked it inside the front of his uniform jacket. ‘But I really cannot take you home with me. I’ve five hungry children of my own.’

Because of the war, there were many shortages. There was hardly enough food for the policeman’s own sons, his wife, his mother, and his mother-in-law, let alone for an extra one, however small it was.

Just then came the screaming of jets flying in low over the city. You could hear them from a long way off.

EEEEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeee.

They were going to bomb the villages hidden in the deep green forests beyond the city. When they hit a target, there was another sound, bom bom bom, and the ground shook.

Some people said you grew used to it. But the policeman didn’t think that the sound of people and homes being smashed was something you ever got used to.

He ran with the baby to one of the round concrete drains that were used as shelters. Sometimes bombs fell short of their targets and hit the city instead. He crouched in the drain until the raid was over and it was safe to hurry home. But the policeman couldn’t go to his home yet. He still had the mewling infant tucked in the front of his jacket.

He walked slowly through the deserted market place, pushing his bike with one hand, supporting the baby with the other, wishing he could get rid of it to someone

else. But these days everybody had troubles enough of their own.

He came to a broken-down building. It had a roughly painted sign propped on the tin roof which said *Hoi Duc Anh*. Although he went past here nearly every day, he'd never before given it a second thought. *Hoi Duc Anh* meant *The Association for the Protection of Infants*. It was a place where children who had got no one to look after them could stay.

Why, of course! thought the policeman. It is Fate that I have come this way.

The orphanage had once been used as a school. A grumpy-looking old woman was about to secure the main gate for the night with a padlock and chain.

'Yes?' she said sharply. 'What is it?'

The policeman took the dirty child from his jacket and held it out for her. 'I found this,' he said. 'Near the fruit market. Just beyond the fish market.'

'Name?'

The policeman shrugged. 'I have no idea.'

'Then you should have looked for its parents.'

'I did. There was no one.'

'Well, you people can't expect to hand in every abandoned baby you find, just like that. We've got more than enough as it is. Can't you hear them?'

Indeed the policeman could. The distant wailing and grizzling and greeting and crying of a hundred or more sad babies' voices was almost worse than the screaming of an air-raid.

He said, 'I really must be on my way. My wife will be worried.'

'I'm not interested in all that,' said the woman. 'I've got more than enough worries here. If citizens bring in lost babies, I have to follow the proper procedure. Your name, and your address, if you please. I'll fetch the

book.' She unlocked the gate and beckoned him into the compound.

'My name? Why mine?'

'We have to make sure he's really a stray, and not one of your own that you can't be bothered with. People do that. Then, as soon as we've fattened them up, they reclaim them.'

She left the policeman standing on the verandah of the orphanage while she went off to find her registration book. He waited. And waited.

What am I to do now? the policeman wondered. I really can't stay here all night, and then wait some more while she asks me questions about my name and address. And if I do give her my address, she may hold me responsible for this orphan boy's future welfare. All I need is to be sure that he has a safe place to sleep tonight. I won't wait around another moment for that woman.

So he laid the baby in a big broken wicker chair in the corner by the door where the woman could not fail to notice him when she returned.

'I have done the best that I can,' said the policeman to himself as he climbed onto his bike and pedalled away. 'At least the boy will now sleep with a roof over his head.'

In fact, the rusty tin roof of the orphanage had holes in it that let in the rain. And there were many fat happy rats that lived in the rafters. But the policeman was not to know that.

The baby lying in the wicker chair put his fist into his mouth and began to gnaw and mew at the same time.

When the woman came back with her big book, she was irritated to find the man had gone.

'Oh my, what a to-do. Where's the fellow that brought you in? This is absurd, just dumping you here.'

It really won't do. But that's what they all do these days. No civic responsibility.'

The baby stared without seeing. He was now so tired and so hungry that he couldn't even be bothered to make the squeaky mewling noise.

'Oh, all right then, you,' the woman grumbled, and she picked him up, not very gently. 'You can stay. But just look at the sight of you, no clothes, covered in scabs, scraggy as a wet dog. *And* you've piddled all over the chair!'

She carried him to a bleak room, more like a shed, where there were a hundred and more children and babies. Fifty smaller ones lay down one side of the room on newspaper and blankets. Fifty-three older ones were contained in wire cots down the other side.

What a din and what a smell there was in that place. But at least there was a roof over everybody's heads and a chance of being fed. The orphanage had cartons of powdered milk and feeding bottles, though not enough of either to go round one hundred and three people. Each child had its brief turn. When their time was up, the dribbling teat was pulled from their lips and thrust into the next mouth in the line.

The grumpy woman wrapped a piece of torn cotton cloth round the latest arrival and laid him on the newspaper with the others to wait for his turn.

The next morning, in the office of the orphanage, the woman opened up the big book to fill in the details.

'We got a new boy handed in last evening,' she told one of the younger women who came to help at the *Hoi Duc Anh*. 'Picked up by a traffic policeman. The child looked near death last night. Didn't think he'd be alive by morning. But he's hanging on. If he lives, he'll have to have a name.'

The younger woman said, 'Could we call him Ho?' Her brother was called Ho. He was sixteen. He was a soldier away fighting. The young woman hadn't seen him for months. She wasn't even sure if she ever would see him again.

'Very well,' said the older woman. 'That's certainly better than calling him Boy-Baby.' There were already two children whose only name was Boy-Baby. 'And we'll need family names too.'

Even though the latest arrival didn't seem to have a family, he still needed a family name in order that the book could be properly filled in. Even a makeshift wartime orphanage had to keep its accounts in order.

The younger woman said the first name that came into her head. 'What about Ly Thanh?' It had been her last schoolteacher's name.

'Very well,' said the older woman. With a sigh, she wrote down that the unknown child's name was: *Ly Thanh Ho*, that he was male, that his former address was: *The Central Fish Market*. 'And now we're supposed to fill in his age. Though I really don't know why I'm bothering with all this. He's almost certainly going to die during the next bout of measles.'

The younger woman, who was more hopeful, said, 'Well, how old did he seem?'

The older woman shrugged. 'I saw he's got teeth so he's clearly not newborn. But he's very small, can't sit or hold his head up. Perhaps he's about one? Or maybe one and a half? Or maybe two?'

'Who knows anything about any of these children?'

The book had to be filled in so the woman wrote down that the boy was aged one and a half years. But she was tired of making things up just for the sake of keeping the accounts book up to date in case one of the city administrator's came to check up. So, where she had

to note *Father's Name* and *Mother's Name*, she wrote the truth.

Parents: Unknown.

Then both women went off to start mixing up the powdered milk. To be on the safe side, they added an extra bucketful of water to make it go further for nobody knew when the next delivery might arrive.

Later, the younger woman crept back into the office, opened up the registration book and, under *Ly Thanh Ho*, she changed his address from *The Central Fish Market* to *The Central Flower Market* because, as everybody in every country of the world knows, flowers smell far sweeter than fish.

So now, the brown-eyed boy, sleeping in the big bleak room with the noise of grizzling and whimpering all around him, had a name, an age, and a former address of his very own, even if he didn't have anything else.

When he woke again, the boy now called *Ly Thanh Ho* felt wet, hungry, and unsure where he was. He began to cry, along with the others around him. He cried intermittently until mid-day when another plastic feeding bottle, half full of pale watery milk, was pushed into his mouth.

By the end of the week, *Ly Thanh Ho* had learned that if ever a feeding bottle came near, he must suck as fast as he could because it would not be his for long.

And so, *Ly Thanh Ho* remained exactly where he was with the Association for the Protection of Infants for one thousand, four hundred and fifty-six days, which was four years, until Fate decreed that it was time for something else to happen to him.