“The Journey: A Hmong American Immigrant Story”

By Shue-Qa Moua

During the Vietnam War, thousands of Hmong men were recruited to fight alongside the Americans. The fall of Saigon in 1975 would force the Hmong’s great leader, General Vang Pao, and more than 100,000 other Hmongs to seek political asylum in Thailand. In that very same year of 1975, my father put my mother, her two brothers, and both my grandmothers on a boat to cross the Mekong River to Thailand while he stayed behind to settle unfinished business as a soldier who fought alongside the Americans.

Before sending them off, he gave my mother a silver bar, or as the Hmong will call it, choj nyiaj. During that era, these silver bars could be exchanged for other goods, very similar to currency. Silver bars were traditionally used to pay for one’s bride and for medicinal purposes as well. But to my mother, this specific bar that was given to her by my father was a token of his love and the only item that she would have in memory of him if she should never see him again. To this day, the silver bar remains close to my mother, holding great sentimental value.

Some weeks later, my father reunited with my mother in a refugee camp in Thailand. In November 1976, my parents emigrated to the United States and spent some years living in New York, where they had their first child and began to seek the American Dream. During the first decade of living in the United States, my parents moved several times to four different states trying to find steady work to support their growing family. After many years of chasing the American Dream, my father finally found work as a social worker for the county and bought the family their first home in 1988 in California. In 1992, my father passed away unexpectedly. It’s been a long time since he’s been gone but even so, when my mother tells stories about the life that she and my father lived to the journey they took to cross the Mekong River and to the first years that they spent in America, I can still hear the joy in her voices as she reminisces about the times she and my father spent together. When I look at this silver bar, I not only think about the love that was shared between my parents, but I also use it to remind me of my parents’ struggles from one country to another, the cultural values of the Hmong and, most of all, to reflect on myself and to never forget my roots, and to continue the journey that my parents started for me, and then to have my children continue my journey, and their children continue theirs.