

**SUCH A LOVELY  
LITTLE WAR**



MARCELINO TRUONG

# **SUCH A LOVELY LITTLE WAR**

SAIGON 1961-63

TRANSLATED BY DAVID HOMEL



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SUCH A LOVELY LITTLE WAR: Saigon 1961-63  
by Marcelino Truong  
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“Perhaps it’s true that people are simply the product of their times.”

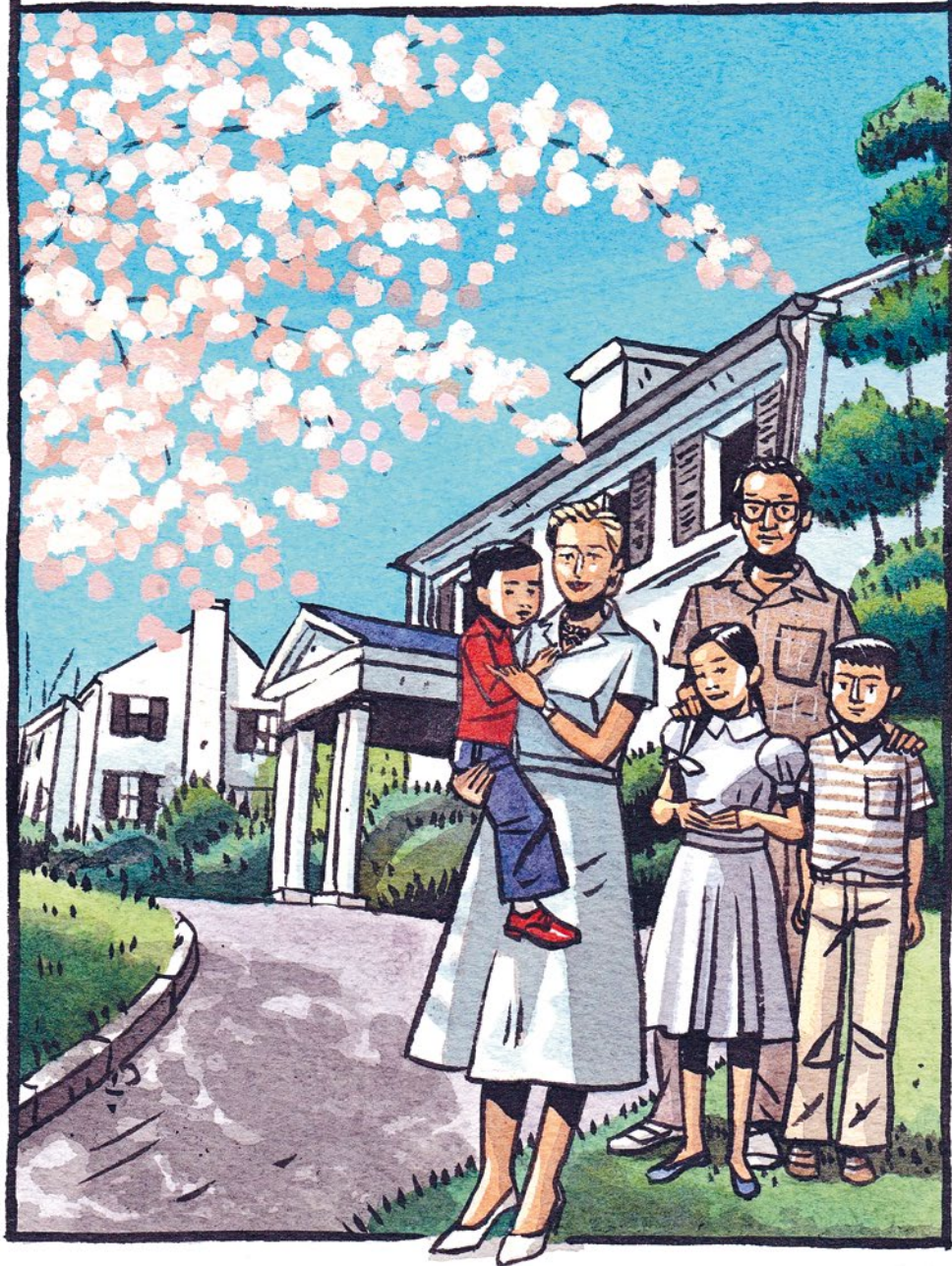
–Alexis Jenni, *L’art français de la guerre* (*The French Art of War*), 2011

“Independence, yes, but not just any kind. We must learn to distrust noble causes. In general, they are like the con artist’s suitcase,  
full of hidden compartments.”

–Serge July, *Libération*, April 30, 1985

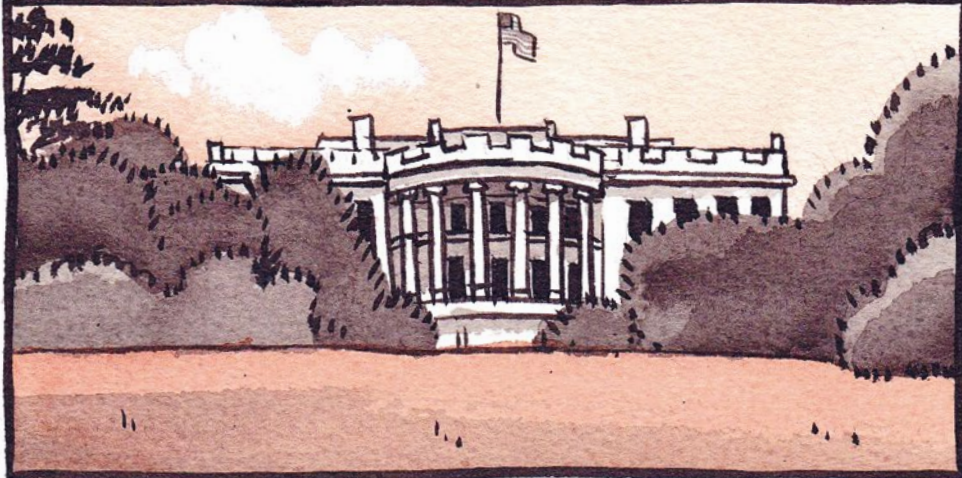


# WASHINGTON, DC





May 1961. Washington, DC. The White House ---



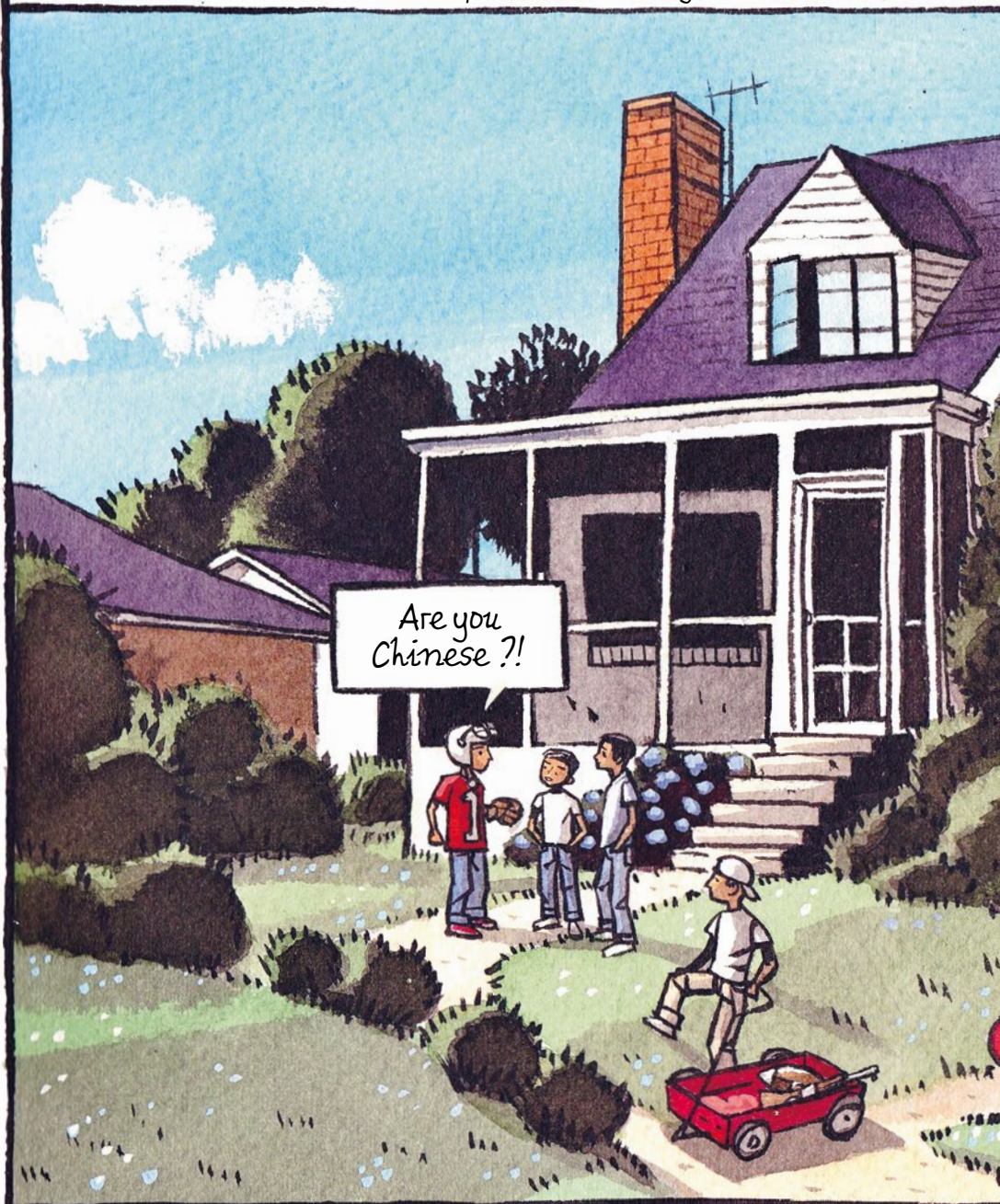
The Lincoln Memorial ---



Arlington National Cemetery ---

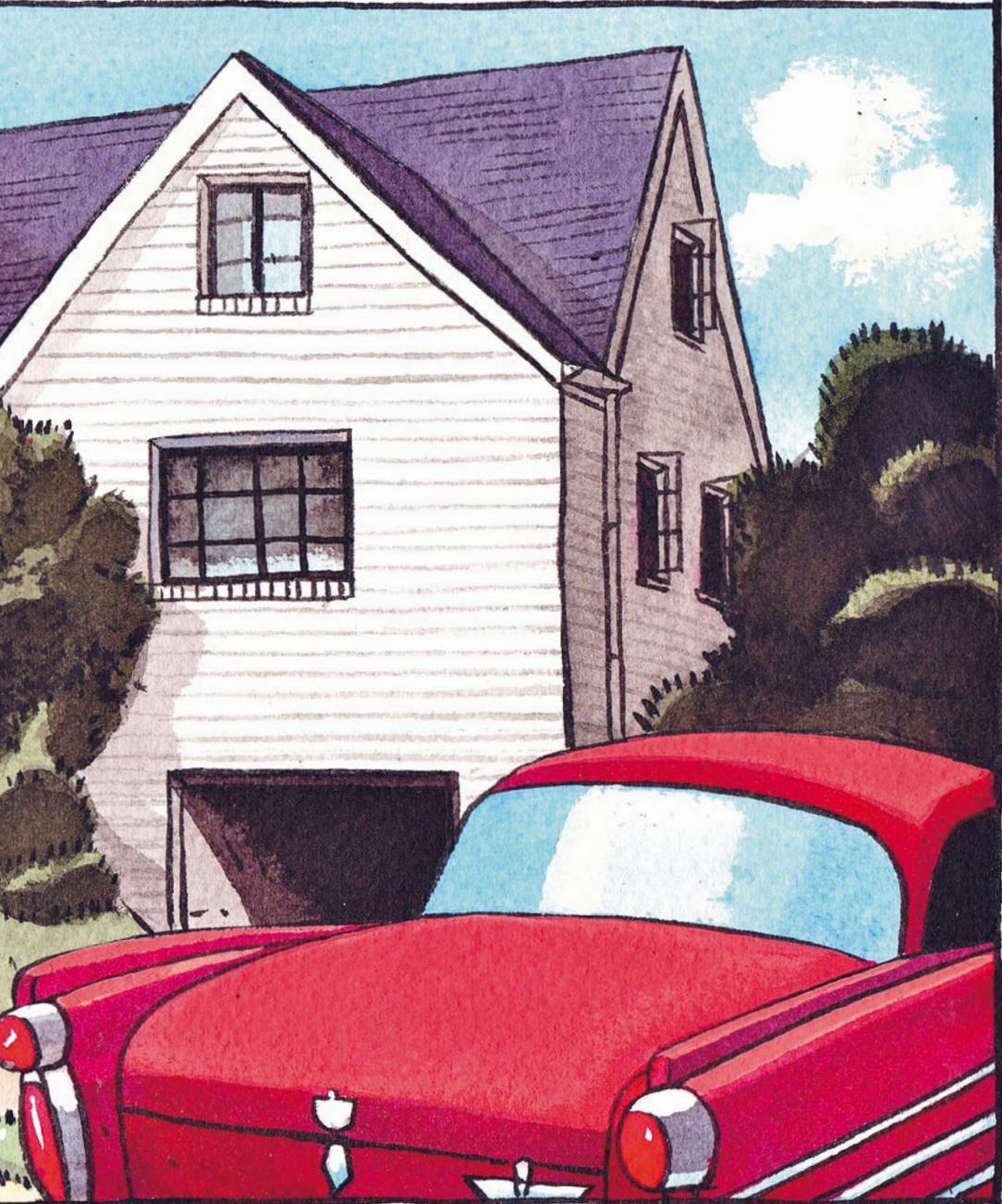


... and our house at 5004 Westport Road, in Chevy Chase,

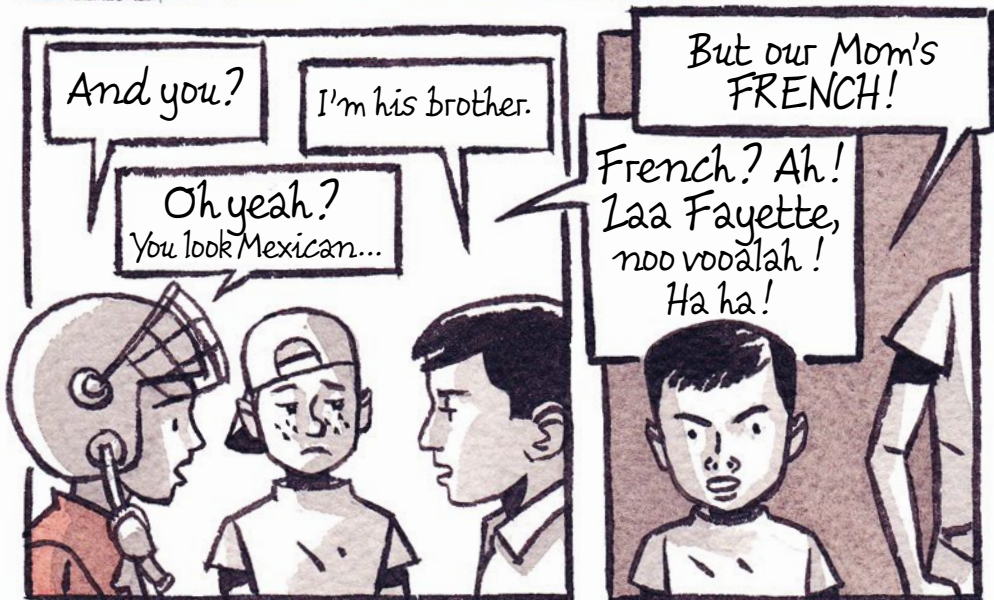


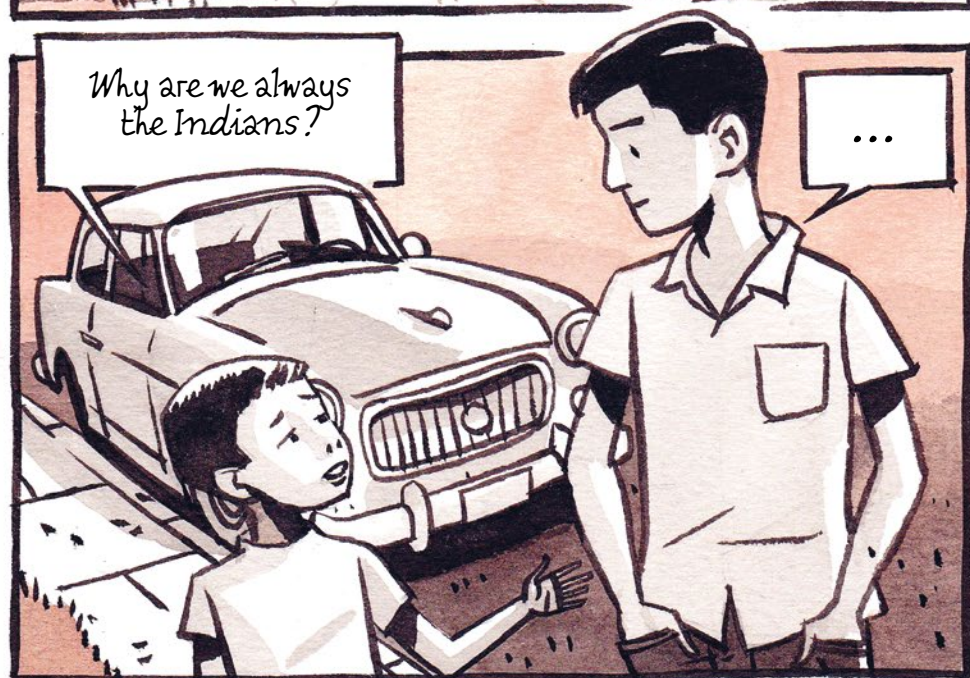
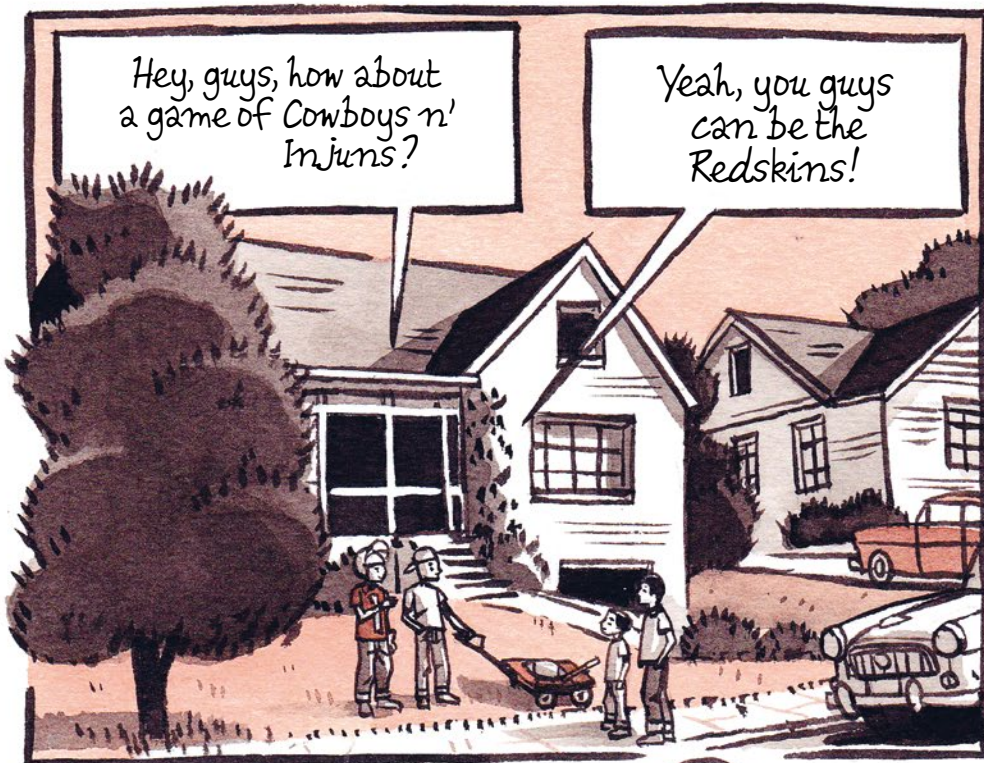
*America the Beautiful, like a Peanuts cartoon.*

*a quiet middle-class suburb, something Norman Rockwell might imagine.*



*Complete with cherry pie, a corner store, and Coca-Cola ---*

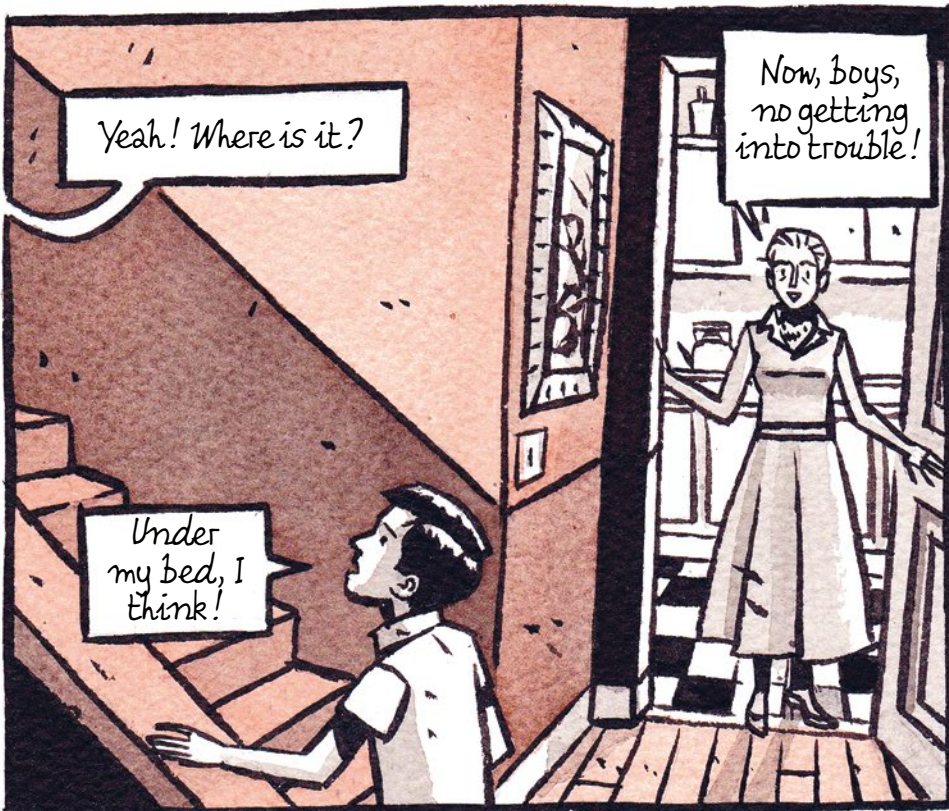






Dear Father and Mother,

We have our share of worries. After I don't know how many false starts, our return to Vietnam has been confirmed. The Ambassador received the letter from the Minister ...



*What a change that will be! The children are so happy here, with many friends their age, and they fly from one house to the next like a flock of sparrows.*



*I am worried sick when I think of all the troubles in Vietnam. Khánh never seems bothered and always says everything will be fine ...*



*In any case, the prospect of spending a year or two in Saigon is not very appealing, when you can't go any further than a few kilometers out of town, not to mention that I'm not very brave.*

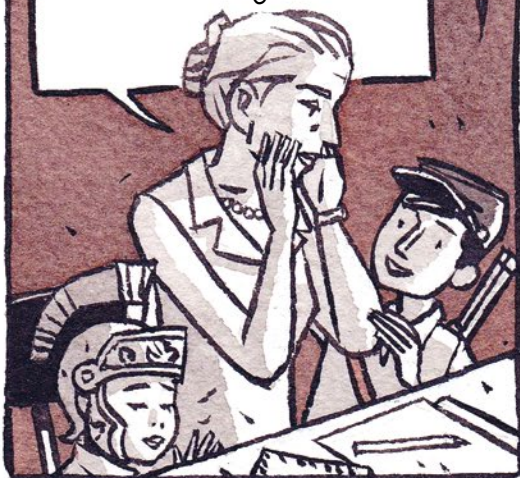


It's nothing. I'm writing to Grandpa and Grandma to tell them we have to go back to Vietnam this summer.



And that makes you sad?

It won't be the same there  
--- Life is so good here.



Don't worry, Mom, we'll  
protect you! We'll kill all the  
enemies!



Die, G.I.!!

Kill'em commie  
gooks!



We had been living in Washington for three years. Papa was a diplomat at the Vietnamese embassy, and his call back to Saigon sounded the death-knell for Mama's American dream.



No more picnics at Great Falls on the Potomac with the cherry trees in bloom!



Elected in November 1960 over Richard Nixon, President John F. Kennedy moved into the White House in January 1961, and began his 1000-day reign. The young prince took over a nation at the height of its power. JFK wanted this to be the American century.

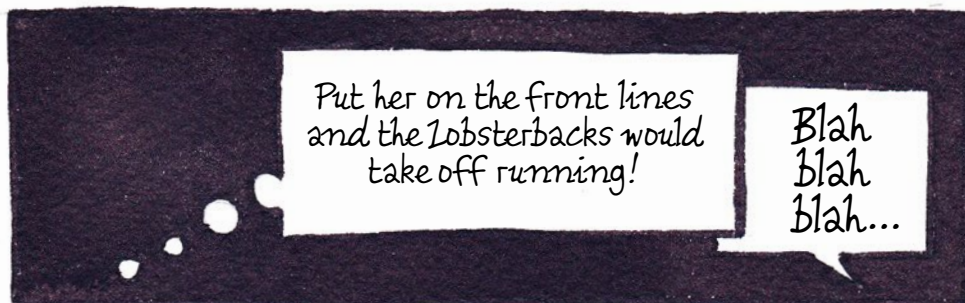


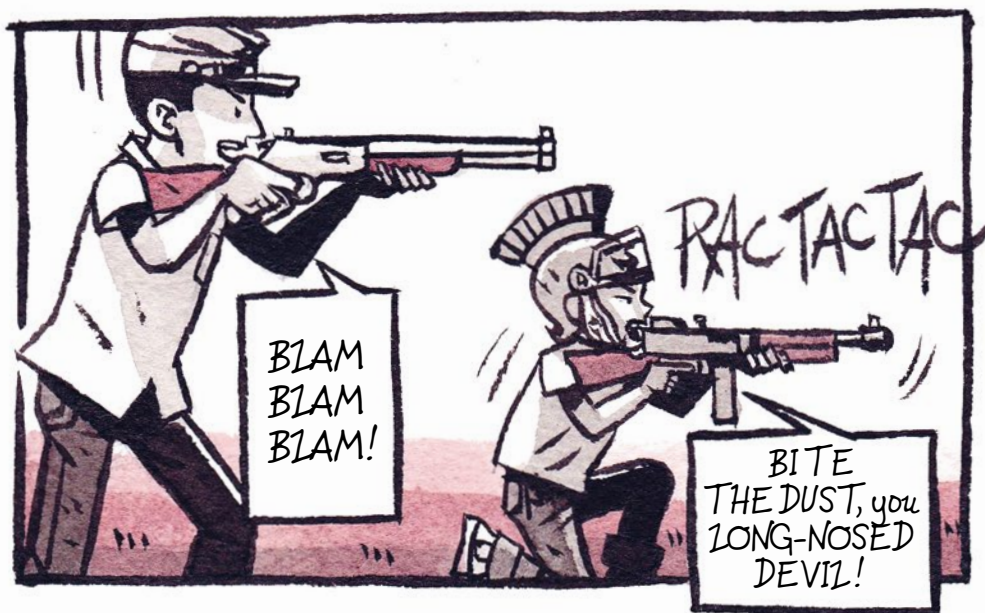
JFK worked on his image as a Cold War warrior, defying Khrushchev, the Red Tsar, in Cuba and Berlin. But in a country all but unknown to Americans – Vietnam – the real fight was on: Uncle Sam against Uncle Ho!

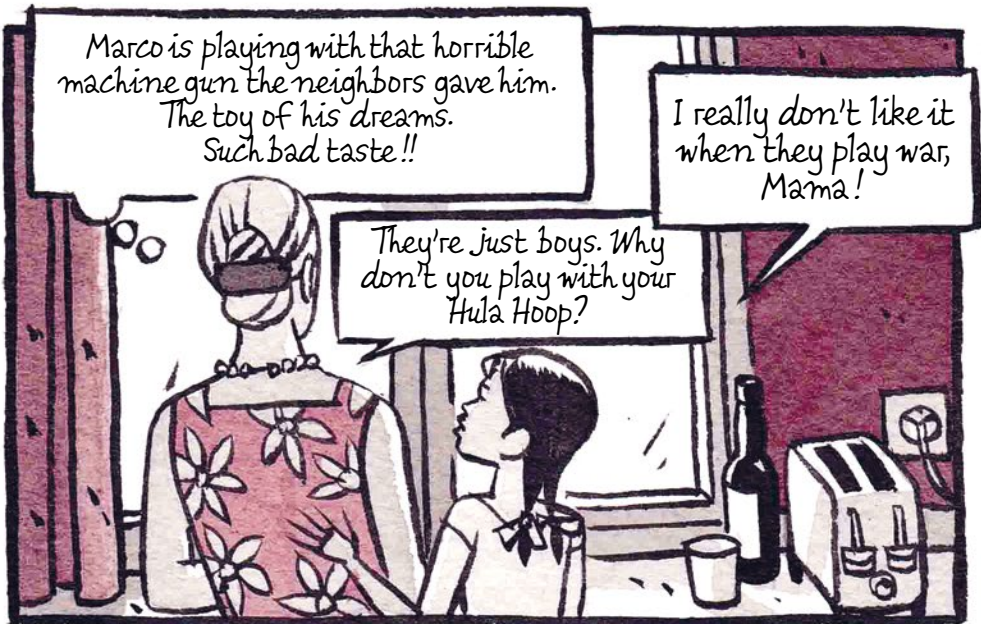


In his own way, my father participated in the global arm-wrestling. As the cultural attaché at the Vietnamese embassy in Washington, his work was to make Vietnamese culture more widely known, and look after Vietnamese students applying for scholarships in the United States.

France colonized us, but we emancipated ourselves.







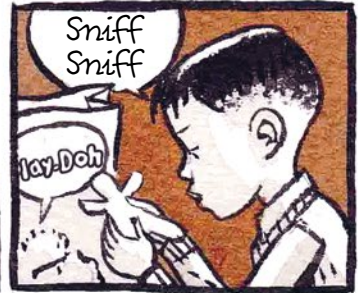
The Hula Hoop was invented in 1958. 100 million of them were sold in 1960.



I remember my first day at kindergarten.  
Mama at the end of the hallway like a long  
dark tunnel ---



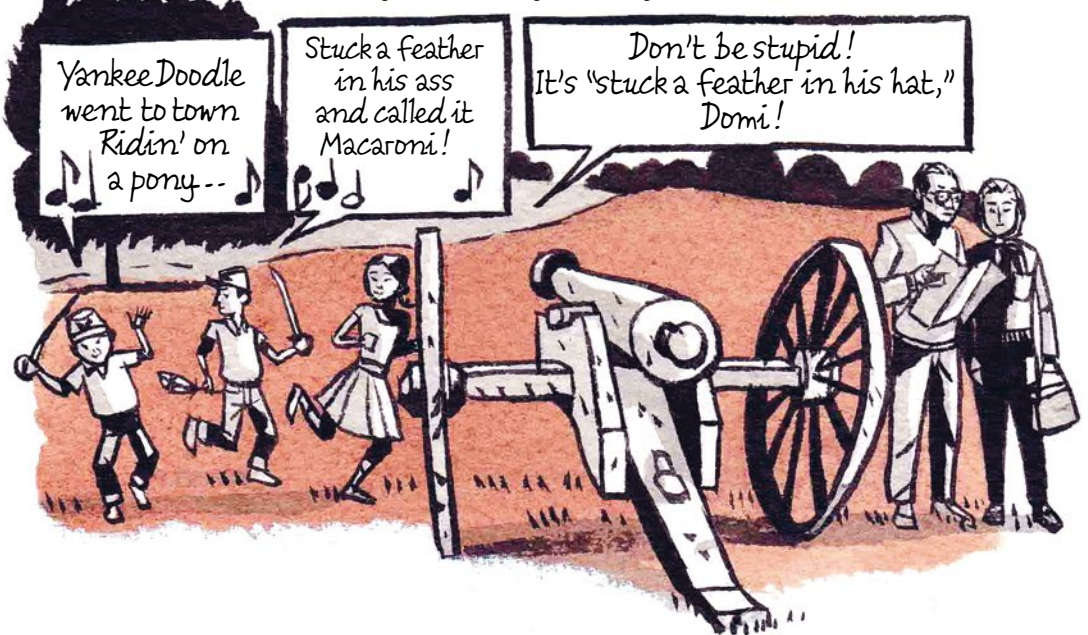
I got over my pain thanks  
to a powder you mixed with  
water: Play-Doh..



Every morning, on the playground, we belted out patriotic songs. "Saluting the colors," it was called.



We went on a field trip to the Gettysburg Battlefield, 90 miles from  
Washington, the site of great carnage during the Civil War, in 1863.



Washington at Halloween time—an important event—and in winter, sledding in the wet snow ---



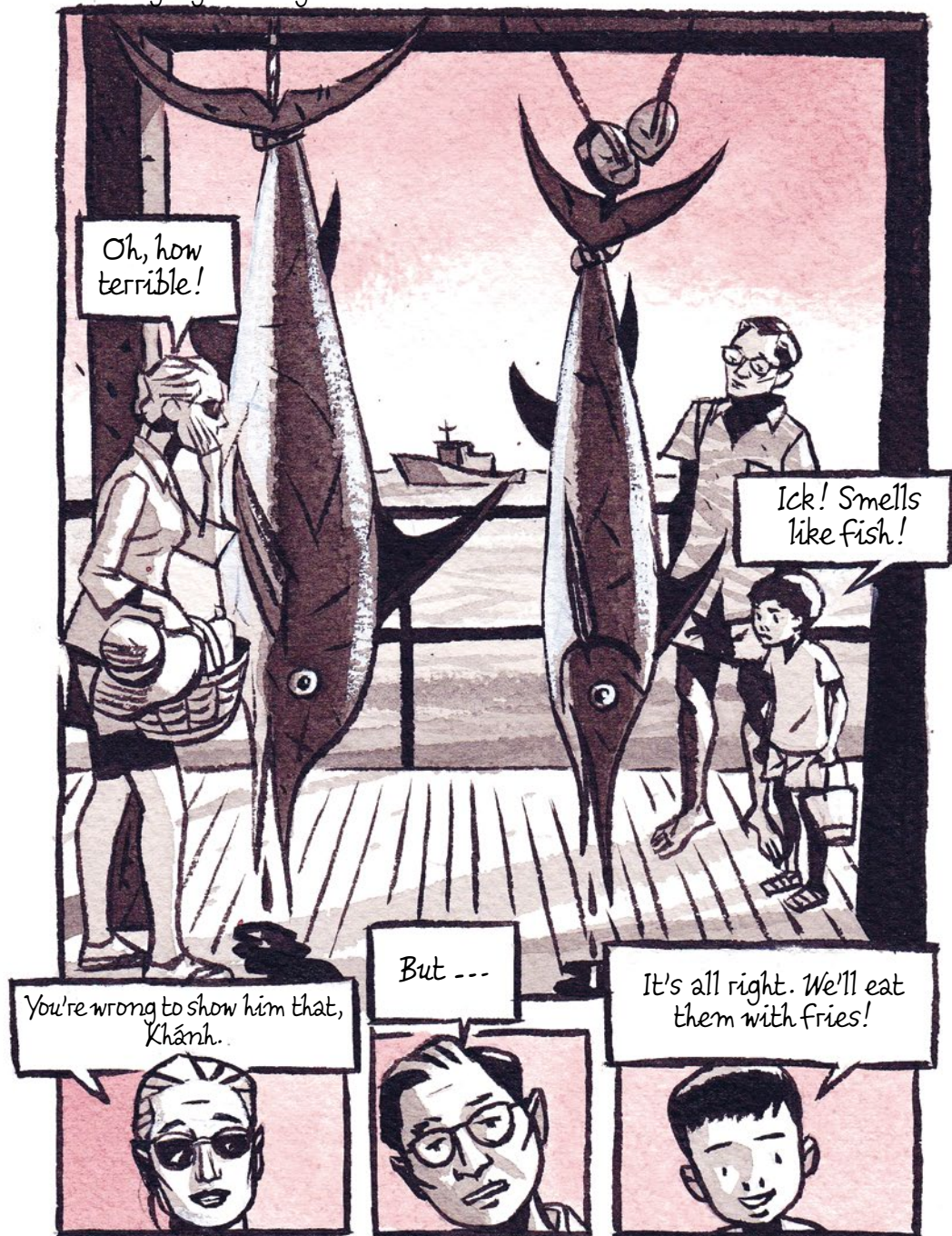
--- and American Christmases, with Frank Sinatra crooning ---



--- and sunny souvenirs of Ocean City, a beach in Maryland.



Ocean City was a spot for sport fishing. I remember enormous blue marlin hanging from a gallows.



Before we left for Vietnam, Mama had a bad anxiety attack.

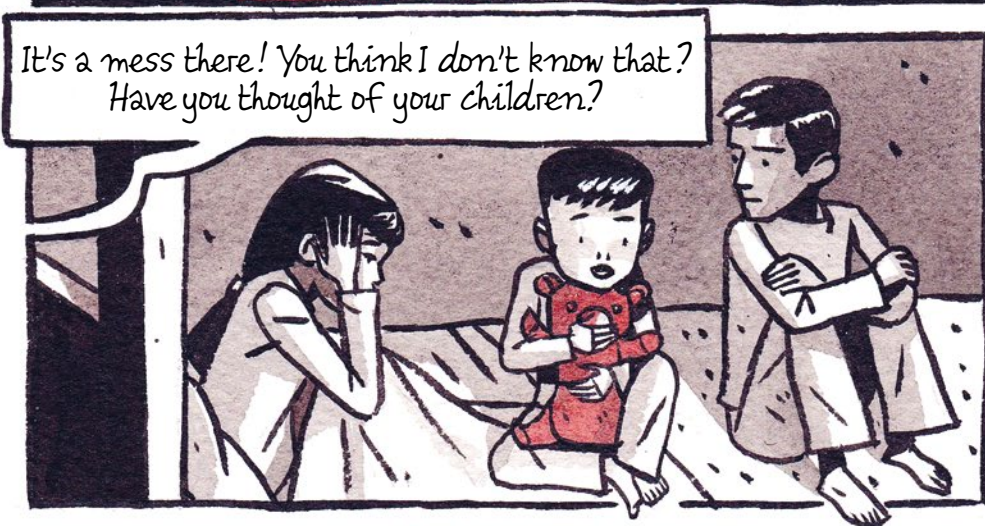


These storms could last hours --- or even days ---



\* Ngô Đình Diêm: the president of the first Republic of Vietnam (1955-1963).





(Sobbing) I should have jumped off a cliff  
the day I married you! (Sobbing)