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For Linh: An unmarked grave

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YUMA, Ariz. — The body of Huynh Thi O lies in an unmarked grave here.

Linh, as her friends knew her, fled Vietnam 15 months ago because she feared for the lives of her two half-American children in a Communist country.

She died last month of a gunshot wound in the home of Deputy Sheriff John Goldthorpe, her former sponsor.

He had rejected her pleas for return of her five-year-old girl, Mai Hang, and her three-year-old boy, Hung.

Linh's dispute with the Goldthorpes dates to June 1975, shortly after she and her children moved

into their temporary American home.

Deputy Sheriff Goldthorpe took Linh to the county courthouse to sign papers releasing her children to him for adoption. Linh, who knew little English, later told friends she understood the papers to be a merely technical, a temporary transfer of the children's custody.

She said the Goldthorpes told her she could regain legal custody as soon as she married or became self-supporting.

Two months ago Linh found work as a seamstress and asked the Goldthorpes for her children. When the Goldthorpes told her they intended to adopt the children permanently, Linh flew into a rage.

Goldthorpe and another deputy sheriff took Linh to Desert Manor, a private mental hospital in Yuma. She was committed involuntarily under the name of Lynn Marie Goldthorpe.

Linh's Vietnamese friends say that when they tried to find her, Goldthorpe told them she had moved to Tucson without her children. After 10 days under lock and key, Linh was traced by her friends and released.

Linh went to Carlos Flores, a resettlement officer for the U.S. Catholic Conference in Tucson, for assistance. Flores notes, "I read the release, and there were no indications of any mental disorder."

With the help of Flores and others, Linh began to prepare a

in the promised land

legal challenge to the Goldthorpes. The Goldthorpes made it clear they would continue to oppose returning the children.

On June 21, Linh's body was found on the floor of the Goldthorpe's living room.

Her death was first investigated by the Yuma County Sheriff's Department, for which Goldthorpe worked. But a week later it was transferred to the Yuma City Police Department. The police completed their investigation last week and ruled the death a suicide.

The critics of the official ruling charge that:

• Goldthorpe previously had threatened Linh's life. Police say he has submitted to two polygraph tests that indicated his innocence.

• A bullet hole was found in Goldthorpe's living room wall, indicating a struggle. But police say it was only a nail hole, and there were no bruises on Linh's body to indicate a struggle.

• A paraffin and a neutron activation test indicated that Linh had not fired a gun. But police say technical problems actually gave inconclusive test results. They say the autopsy showed that the fatal shot was fired with the gun touching Linh's right temple, a sign of suicide.

• Linh was not a likely suicide candidate. She was fighting hard for return of her children, her friends say, and had much to live for. The police say Linh was emotionally disturbed.