Language and Lies

I'd never realized how my student file had shaped me until I laid eyes on it in my early adulthood. Aside from academic excellence, there was private information like my birthday, background, and first language. Never have I thought of Vietnamese as my first language, but there it was, printed in bolded black ink. Not English, but Vietnamese. This felt like an immense lie, a lie I lived when I was young and a lie I'm still living today.

The first time my file came of use, as far as the school officials were concerned, was when I was in Grade 4. The office called me down from class to communicate with a new transfer student, fresh from Ho Chi Minh City. He sat on the couch where his feet couldn't reach the floor. The first thing I did while talking to the office administrator was shake my head in panic that made heat rise to both my ears and turned them red. Unconfident in my language skills, I lied to her by saying I couldn't speak Vietnamese at all. She still begged me to try talking to him, arguing that I was one of the only few Vietnamese students in school.

He, who was now within talking distance, craned his neck up to properly stare at me with his bright eyes. He breathed a string of soft and airy words which usually start with sounds that closely resemble English's "y" and "h". It was a familiar tune sung many times but still, I didn't know the lyrics. He was half my size, half my age, but when he spoke, he made me feel half of myself; not worthy of being Vietnamese.

For an awkward few minutes, I staggered around being both silent and confused. His eyes lost their shine and when I turned my head to the office administrator, her eyes dulled as well. She dismissed me, leaving me to walk to class weighted down by an overwhelming sense

of defeat. The shame stuck with me for hours on end: it was there on the playground, it was there in class, and was still there when I reached home.

A cacophony of Vietnamese welcomed me when I entered the house. It was a mixture that bounded back and forth between my parents. Some of the words comprehensible, but for the majority of the time for me, the knowledge gaps between the sounds were too large and I had trouble translating what they were saying— though no trouble hearing. Unlike the soft-spoken transfer student, my parents spoke in a tone that only seemed quiet to them. They used their guttural voices to enunciate words that were pronounced similar to English's "z". The thickness of their voices could be heard three rooms away and yet, the scratchiness soothed my ears with a comfort that the little boy denied me. After all, he spoke Southern Vietnamese, not the Northern dialect I grew up with. But the truth is, If I knew Vietnamese well enough, I could have spoken to that little boy. But if I had done so, there was a chance he wouldn't want anything to do with me, for he would have known I'm from the North side.

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Vietnamese is a language with three main regional dialects— Northern, Southern, and Central however, I'm only familiar with two of them. The Northern and Southern Vietnamese dialects are similar because they use the same writing system but some of the same words are pronounced differently. "Không", which is the Vietnamese word for no, has a Northern pronunciation where it sounds like "come" with a sharp "c" sound that grips onto the word's ending instead of letting it breathe. In Southern Vietnamese, the same word is pronounced "hum" but with an aspirated "h" that lightens as the ending airs out. A lot of words are changed

either dramatically or slightly since Northern Vietnamese likes relying on crisp sounds while Southern Vietnamese prefers using softer, euphonic consonants.

The differences between North and South, aside from the way consonants are sounded, became prominent in high school, when I surrounded myself with more Vietnamese friends. Wanting to know more about my heritage, I asked my dad about the Vietnam War. He gave me an hour's crash course on how from 1955-1975, Vietnam had a political divide where the North was communist while the South was capitalist. Eventually, the North won and converted the nation into a communist country. He said so many other details I still can't recall but I memorized this sentence perfectly:

"North and South Vietnamese people can get along just fine because some people don't care about the differences, but there are some people who can't let go of the history." Naturally, I thought he was exaggerating until I encountered the people he was talking about.

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I learned more about the language through Jenny, one of my Southern Vietnamese friends who put in the effort to teach me basic sentences and vocabulary. If there was a word I knew, I would tell her the translation I grew up with. This way and together we discovered multiple variations. In one of our sessions, we were awed when hearing our interpretation of the word, spoon. She called it "muổng", while I always called it "thìa". Then we pointed to a plate, we both knew was written as "đĩa" but Northerners pronounced the initial "d" while Southerners replaced it with a "y" sound. One word at a time, we understood each other more

while embracing our Vietnamese roots. Differences in vocabulary and pronunciation reveal our accents, which in turn reveals heritage. But sometimes it's better if people don't find out.

Whenever we heard the click of her front door open, we stopped sharing language and stayed quiet. A lot of the time, it was her brothers walking in and out, so we'd continue our lesson. But our conversation ceased entirely at the sight of her parents.

I remember one day when her dad walked in, looking stern as always, he spoke in a low and naturally intimidating tone. Upon closer hearing, I realized he was greeting me in Vietnamese. Some verbs were familiar, but the translation still slipped away the more the Southern accent dominated his sentences. Although his voice had the same intensity as the Northern tongue I grew up with, I knew too well not to respond in Vietnamese. I knew I mustn't remind him of the communists who proudly raise the red flag with a golden star on it.

There was probably a confused look on my face because Jenny's dad stopped speaking in Vietnamese and switched to English, which alleviated my stomach pains of stress but sent the nerves to my throat where I swallowed my disappointment and voice.

Jenny's mom was more welcoming. She invited me to stay for dinner that night; I sat at the family table while conversing with Jenny and her siblings. Her mom smiled widely as she packed a little extra rice in my bowl. The side dishes were filled with familiar flavours; tastes my parents created as well. In my hand was a "thìa" that I tightly gripped onto. Not letting go. Not wanting to unleash the power of this word that could so easily trigger Jenny's dad and turn her

mom's smile into a disappointed frown. This would stop me from ever being welcomed back to this table.

Jenny's parents weren't the only grown-ups I feared. Some people who were much older spoke Vietnamese to me and sometimes I took the risk and would communicate back. Having people slightly jolt back from hearing my Northern accent was a common reaction. It was always a 50-50 gamble on what would happen next. I hoped for them to continue treating me kindly, but sometimes they decided to distance themselves instead. This coin toss became a heavy chore so eventually, I started living on the safe side by pretending I knew no Vietnamese at all—instead of using the little I knew.

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In high school, there was a Southern Vietnamese boy who was one of my closest friends and I thought I'd won the gamble without even trying. Around him, I often spoke the Northern translation confidently, thinking he didn't care about my background until three years into our friendship when he called me a communist for the first time. He repeated the word in a light-hearted manner and jokingly threatened me by saying, "The communist better get out before Canada gets in*fected* as well." Electricity numbed my chest. The panging intensified the more he repeated the word but he didn't notice. Never had I viewed him as a gamble, but I lost the coin toss that day.

We were both Canadian citizens born long after the war but for some reason, he kept connecting me to history. He ignored how people on the North side also feared the bloodshed

that came from sudden bomb drops and rapid-fire. Just like some Southerners, there were Northerners like my grandpa, who fled the mainland because he wanted a safer life for his family and was against communism. But still, this “friend” couldn’t let go of his anger about the war and I couldn’t stop getting hurt by the history he used to target and shame me and my family.

The first time, I thought: *this is just one instance.* But that instance multiplied into two, three, then more than I wanted to count. He made fun of my accent by saying I spoke “wrong” and Southern Vietnamese was the *true* way of speaking. I tried refuting him, but I couldn’t argue well enough, especially since my opponent had already mastered his mother tongue. My mind tried catching up by filling in the language blanks, but it couldn’t keep up and was eventually filled with only blanks.

We finally cut ties with each other after high school graduation, but I couldn’t cut the word communist out of my brain. This word and that specific memory of him would strike my mind randomly whether I was struggling to sleep or out on a peaceful morning walk. I kept lying to myself, saying his voice wasn’t there, but one day I couldn’t pretend anymore. The electricity broke free and vigorously shook my entire body with a numbing sensation that powered my silent tears. I had admitted the truth: *I should have defended myself.* A realization that finally hit three years too late.

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That day when I looked into the bin of loose papers that was hidden in my house, I discovered a copy of my elementary student file. The first thing I noticed was the first language section; I finally understood why the office administrator picked me as that little boy's translator. Ironically, considering I couldn't communicate with that little boy, this document also listed my background as *Vietnamese* without specifying North or South— If only everyone could view being Vietnamese this way, regardless of dialect.

Converting my tongue to the Southern dialect would make life easier, but why should I switch mothers? I want to speak the Northern dialect fluently, but sometimes the idea of fluency is scarier than knowing nothing at all— Which is why I turned into a liar. I lied about not knowing the language. I lied by hiding my identity from other Vietnamese people. And I lied to myself by pretending the prejudice didn't hurt me. I will continue lying until I'm brave enough to take the risk and be a proud Northern Vietnamese speaker.