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F.O.B.



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Khoi picked at the hard specks of rice that had dried translucent into the sides of the white ceramic bowl as he wondered what Barrington Place Elementary would be like. The white walls reverberated with the sounds of the flute and a beautiful voice singing in his native language. From the outdated TV set, a young man with a round, baby face and overly gelled hair sang a ballad for an unknown lover. The first half of the chorus was sung in Vietnamese, but as the chorus switched to English, Khoi's grandmother fast forwarded the track until a new song in Vietnamese came on.

At home, Khoi only listened to Radio Saigon Houston 900 AM, "Paris by Night," or the Chinese dramas with Vietnamese dubs that his grandmother subscribed to. Khoi knew only enough Vietnamese to use at home; just enough to know how to ask to play on the computer; the polite things to say when greeting elders; the kind of language that is never corrected because there's no need for perfect grammar when conversation is only initiated to ask for something.

English dialogue did not exist in the two-story house his mother had just managed to buy with loans. Khoi could only really answer things like: "What's your name?" and "How are you?" and his conversations never extended past the answers: "Khoi," and "Good." He had encountered Britney Spears and Runescape on the internet and his grandmother identified Burger King as "bad food," but he didn't know who Hannah Montana was or what the Magic Tree House books were. Dialogue didn't exist because there was nobody for Khoi to talk to. "*Tôi tự hỏi...*" Khoi whispered as he wondered what his nicer school would be like.

Khoi's mother spent her days saving five to ten dollar tips from her job as a nail technician, prodding misshapen feet and breathing in the nauseating fumes of nail polish and acetone eight hours a day. As a nail technician, she could only take a meal break if there were no clients to attend to. Khoi's mother was a skinny woman.

Some of the women who came and tipped twenty dollar bills on a regular basis also loved to complain about their nine-to-five jobs that made them sit in their roly-office chairs and shop online. They had the kind of jobs that came with workers' benefits, a scheduled lunch hour, and seasonal office parties. They came in pairs to gossip about their coworkers; about how Linda- who overheard Jessica and Matthew talking in the breakroom- heard that Bill had cheated on Marnie with Mike. They talked about the charity work they did at church and how they "hoped to God" that the people they helped would just turn their lives around for the better. They also liked to suspiciously ask each other why the nail technicians were speaking in Japanese-or-Chinese-or-Korean-or-whatever to one another because they thought English was the only language that should be used in America. In one particular instance, the pedicurist humble bragged to the other in Vietnamese about how her son, Matthew, and how he made it to the last round of the school's annual spelling bee. "He didn't even study that much. He just loves school!" the doting mother announced with love and pride. Being condescending polishes sick, famished egos. And just like the damaged, yellow nail underneath the two delicate coats of red polish, an ego like that required a high- maintenance routine that is concealed by generous, disingenuous tips.

Amazingly, these conversations were not the reason for Khoi's mother's constant migraines. Khoi's mother suffered because of the dust and fumes of her workplace, and she popped Tylenol like Tic-Tacs to counteract the throbbing pain. When she finally had enough credit and money for the new house, she seized the opportunity to move to the suburbs. The suburbs were quaint, her neighbors looked like her and her family, and most importantly, the schools were better than the ones in Bellaire. Education meant success in America, and she didn't think twice about the sacrifices she made for her own son's success. Her son came first, and she made sure to move before applying to USC for Dental School.

* * *

I was sentenced to walk five laps around the hardtop for telling Aaron that his mom's boobs were bigger than his brain. Anybody who's seen Mrs. Rogers would have agreed with me, but Ms. Thatcher wasn't having it because, "Women don't talk like that." She also said something about how I wasn't supposed to sit with my legs wide open even though I was wearing sweatpants. I'm not sure why. Anyways, there's no justice in this world. Aaron ended up winding my favorite swings up around the top beam so that there were only two left on the set. I think he would have tried to wind them all, but my best friend, Ann saved the last two remaining swings from his gorilla-like wrath.

I was passing Daniel and Brandon on my last lap, who by the way, walk slower than most regular people, when I spotted a boy with black, wavy hair and skin like mine swinging next to Ann. He wore a light blue t-shirt and baggy cargo shorts and for some odd reason, felt that it was okay to sit in the swing that Ann had saved for me? We swing everyday because we want to get so high and so fast that we go in a circle around the top beam. We both knew this was probably impossible, but we enjoyed the heights and the agreed silence that came with swinging.

"Hey whatchu doin'?" I said as I ignored eye contact with the stranger. I don't really like boys because they don't play with me, even though I'm just as fast as them. "Phuong, he won't get up. All he said was "Hi, my name is Khoi" and sat down next to me. I told him that my friend was coming, but he acted like he didn't hear me. Let's go hula hoop."

I made eye contact with Khoi, and I saw the nickel-sized white scar on his upper arm that looked just like my mom's. When I asked her about it, she had said the government gave her a shot because she was from Vietnam, and Vietnam had diseases that America didn't, so they had to make sure she didn't bring any in with her. She said people who were born here do not have this scar. It is the mark of an immigrant.

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Khoi liked the idea of the swing set because he didn't have to talk to anybody on it. He watched two girls swing on the set yesterday, and he wanted to try it today. He also liked how high he could go, and he thought that maybe he'd be able pick up enough momentum to make a full circle around the top bar that was parallel to the ground. He had seen how Aaron, a large boy whose mom ritually brought him red boxes with an M and a smiley face for lunch, had pushed two of the swings so hard and so fast that it wound itself around the top bar so that nobody could reach or swing from them. Khoi wanted to make it to the top to watch his classmates from above.

He couldn't talk to them, so he often lived vicariously through the boys who played four square. On a swing, Khoi could embrace the chill of the wind as the sunlight warmed his back, instead of just enduring the cold on the shaded concrete sidewalk that sucked the heat out of your bare hands and legs. He could still watch the cherry bombs that bounced as high as the weather-beaten basketball goals, and the boys smacking the red rubber ball to protect their square realms from the eliminatory double bounce.

When Khoi saw the swingset, he wanted to sit away from the curly haired girl, but that boy named Aaron had tossed the two other swings to heights he couldn't reach. He also sensed that the girl didn't want him to sit there as he gently tugged the chain away from her grasp. He wanted to tell her that he was new; that he didn't really have anything else to do if he couldn't swing; that if she really wanted him gone, he could probably could just hang upside down on the blue parallel bars and act like that was fun.

When Khoi heard Ann call the girl with the slick black hair "Phuong," the familiarity of the name came with a rush of excitement. He imagined that Phuong would be able to speak to him and that he'd have somebody who he could finally talk to. He greeted

her with the excitement he greeted family friends' kids at Kim Son weddings, knowing that the night would ensue in a sweaty hybrid game of hide and go seek and tag. He thought he would finally have a friend.

* * *

“Chào.”

“Chào?”

He spoke in Vietnamese, but he didn't seem like the Vietnamese kids I played with at church. My parents said people who spoke Vietnamese first didn't speak good English later. They had accents and forgot the the's in their sentences. They said I needed to know good English to do well in school. They didn't teach me Vietnamese so I wouldn't be like the boy with the rabbit teeth at My Hoa who asked his grandmother “How many money is this?” My mother didn't want me to be mistaken as a F.O.B. She thought they were inauthentic; American wannabes who were obviously fake like the Louis Vuitton bags they sell at Hong Kong City Mall. I was the real thing. I was born American and I could do American things and speak English and I could be successful if I worked hard enough. The books that talked about being friends with new kids never talked about the ones who didn't speak English.

I wasn't sure if I could talk to Khoi, or why I would talk to him. I didn't need a new friend, and Ann seemed like she wanted to move. Ann suggested that we should just join the kickball game, and I agreed. Khoi was watching something else in the distance, so I don't even think that he wanted to play with us. We said bye to him, of course, because if we didn't, I think we would have felt really bad.

* * *

The wind chilled the sweat on William's face and neck as it rushed by, and the dried leaves on the chalked up hardtop rustled as William smacked the textured, rubber ball out of his square and next to Kevin's left foot. Kevin, unable to shift his position in time, fell prey to William's strategy, and the ball bounced twice after it hit his shin. William became king, and Robert was finally able to play after the torturous three minute wait.

"Hey William, isn't the boy on the swings new to your class?"

"I think his name is Khoi. I don't think he speaks much English."

William didn't need to turn his head to know who Ricky was talking about. He had seen the new boy watching their game of four square in the shaded sidewalk for the past few days, and he always contemplated asking Khoi to play.

He recognized Khoi from the times he would poke his head into Ms. Po's classroom to say hi. He never invited Khoi to play because he didn't know what his friends would think. There were already six of them, and if they added Khoi, that would mean three of them would always be waiting to play. But he also knew that Khoi didn't know how to speak to anybody. He knew that Khoi took ESL classes with Ms. Po; that Khoi didn't do very well during popcorn readings; that nobody approached him because he didn't know English. William understood what it was like to be like Khoi. William's parents solely talked to him in Chinese at home, and they sent him to Chinese school on the weekends before he started elementary school. His parents knew that English was important, but didn't act upon it until it directly affected their son. They started to practice their sparse English at church, slowly improving their use of the language with each voluntary class session. William started ESL in kindergarten, and Ms. Po was so impressed with his improvement that she no longer required him to come anymore after only two years. By the time he was done with Ms. Po's classes, William read better than some of his classmates.

It was hard to learn English, and it was so dangerously easy to hate when you didn't pick it up as fast as everybody expected you to. When he was struggling with English, his teachers gave him 60's and 70's and an occasional "check minus" on the English assignments he worked so hard on, often picking on him for not using articles and his verb-noun agreement errors. Ms. Po had once told his parents that he could fail the fourth grade if he didn't learn as fast as the adults wanted him to, so Ms. Po made sure to practice with him after school during his time at extended day to make sure he passed the state exams. She encouraged him to read anything that interested him, and he fell in love with DragonBall manga. Ms. Po helped William, and William felt that he should try to help Khoi.

* * *

The students were visibly restless by 2:55, and many watched and waited for the red second hand to pass the big 12 on Ms. Thatcher's clock five more times. Although the clock read 3:00, Ms. Thatcher had set the time five minutes early, compounding the restlessness of her students by tenfold.

William shook his leg under his desk with each passing second, because today was Friday, and Friday meant that he could play on the computer for as long as he wanted. There was no school next Monday, which made the weekend even more exciting because his parents would leave him at home with his younger brother, Kenny; and that meant they could venture out of the neighborhood and cross Dairy Ashford to CVS to buy the chips and candies that their mother refused to buy for them. Although Kenny rode the bus home also, the two brothers never sat together on the bus. Kenny had friends his age who rode the same bus, and William's friends lived in different neighborhoods. William didn't mind sitting alone because he enjoyed watching the window in silence.

On this particular Friday, one of the four buses broke down, so they combined William's bus with another. An emergency situation like this meant that students would have to sit three to a seat. William knew that he wouldn't be able to sit alone today.

* * *

Khoi walked up the steps of the bus knowing that he didn't ride bus 425, but trusted the other children on his usual bus enough to lead him to the right place. He wasn't entirely sure what was going on, but he sat at the last empty seat he found towards the back of the bus. This bench was above the wheel, and had a hump to rest your backpack and feet upon. William shuffled onto the bus, looking for the emptiest seat possible, and sat next to Khoi. Khoi saw William in his peripheral vision, and pretended not to notice him sitting down. He didn't know what to say, and even if he did speak English, he had observed that you usually don't speak to people you don't normally talk to. Although he watched William practically every day at recess, he thought William hadn't noticed him, and that introducing himself with his broken English would run the risk of complete and utter embarrassment. He ran the scenario in his head:

“Hi. I am Khoi.”

“Hi Khoi. My name is William. Whatdoyouliketodo? Whyareyousoquiet? Iknowyouwatchmeatrecess. Do-you-need-me-slow-down? You-speakee-English?”

He had already experienced rejection at the swingset today, and the day before yesterday, and a few days before that. So Khoi continued to stare unnaturally out the window to avoid eye contact with the boy who could relate to him the most.

William knew it was hard to talk to others when you knew so few words, but he also didn't know how to initiate the conversation. He stared at the torn brown seat in front of him, the upholstery filled with multi-colored styrofoam beads and yellow foam. The bus was already turning into Khoi's neighborhood and the crisp afternoon air blew his bangs back from his face. He blinked to protect his eyes as the wind from the opened window stripped them of their natural moisture. Khoi kept his open so that the parched wind drank the tears of frustration that almost spilled from his wet eyes. William didn't know when Khoi would get off at his stop, and with a push of confidence, he tapped Khoi's shoulder.

"Hey, I'm William. Are you Khoi?"

Khoi nodded his head, surprised that William actually touched him and initiated conversation.

"William," Khoi repeated. The bus was a stop away from where he usually got off.

"I like Ms. Po a lot. She was my teacher once. Did you know that I was bad at English a long time ago? I can practice English with you. You should come play with me and my friends at recess." William motioned an imaginary ball with his small hands. Khoi nodded his head, offering a soft smile because he didn't understand everything William was saying, but he knew William was being nice. He knew because William was smiling, and speaking a little slowly, but not insultingly slow. Khoi understood that William asked him to play, and that was enough for him. The possibility of friendship excited him, and when he motioned to William that he needed to get off, he impulsively smiled with all of his teeth. He said, "Bye William!" a little too loud, but William didn't mind. He scooted back towards the window and placed his feet above the hump of the wheel, looking out the window to wave bye to his new friend. Khoi waved back with an infectious smile.



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