

## The Gap - Khuslen, Year 12, NSW

### I

*The Gap is a dream.*

A stench. A broken streetlight, a spilt garbage bin, a paradise, a bowl of Vietnamese noodle soup filled with prawns. A mound of rotten mangoes split open on the pavement. The Gap is a boy swept away in a flood drain. A Thai man injecting Afghani dope next door to a girl sipping milk from Queensland's Darling Downs. It is a place that will kill you just as it will feed you, that will swallow you whole and leave nothing behind but the stench of your last breath.

The Gap is my quiet sigh, my reflection on war; on loss; on what it means to die before you are dead. My dumb pre-teen longing. My deliberate forgetting.

The train rolls through stations that should be unfamiliar, but are not. I have a drink in my hand, there is a bottle at my elbow. I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane, past the fibro houses and peeling weatherboards of The Gap. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my dark hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Vietnam into a darker past.

The funeral is in thirty minutes. By the time I get there, I may be drunk – I may already – though it will not do me any good.

The air is thick and sticky – it clings to my clothes, makes cigarette smoke hang in the air. Mosquitoes skim across puddles, wings whining in the heat, and the cicadas still scream.

Once, many lifetimes ago, I promised myself that I would never return here. But, not unlike most decisions I make, it was an elaborate system of evasion, of illusion, designed to make myself and the world appear to be what I and the world are not. There is something terribly cruel in finding myself brought up short, once more, before the snake in my own backyard – the yard, in the meantime, having grown smaller, and the snake much bigger.

The funeral is for Nguyễn Văn Duy. *Danny*.

### II

I grew up in a yellow house with walls thin as bone, in a street where boys carried knives, stuffed into the waistbands of cheap denim, and the girls wore glitter lip gloss, and kissed them anyway.

Danny and I lived on the same street, went to the same school. His parents ran a massage parlour off Corsair Avenue, one of those dimly lit joints with faded curtains and a buzzing neon sign that menaced OPEN all night long. My mother was one of the masseuses. It was natural then, that we spent so much time together: we played cricket when we were eight, stole hairspray when we were twelve, huffed paint thinner in the school bathrooms when we were thirteen.

We were the same age, but he seemed – somehow – younger than I had ever been, taller and more beautiful, and he wore his masculinity as unequivocally as he wore his skin.

His brother Tai was in a street gang, the ones you'd see lurking around the shops and redirect your trolley to avoid; made up mostly Pacific Islander or Vietnamese kids, pushing heroin and chasing down debts. Small wars erupted as quickly as they were extinguished, and Danny dropped out when he turned fifteen to help out. I remember calling him retarded for it, but this one time, he said something that surprised me. People are full of surprises, even for themselves, if they have been stirred enough.

“Nobody can stay in the garden of Eden forever, my friend,” Danny crowed. And then: “I wonder why.”

Perhaps everybody has a garden of Eden, I don't know; but they have scarcely seen theirs before they see the flaming sword. This was the moment I entered mine. I remember laughing and grabbing his head, just as I had done countless times before, when I was taking the piss or when he annoyed me. But this time, when I touched him, something happened in him and in me which made this touch different from any touch either of us had ever known. He did not resist, as he always did, but lay where I had pulled him, against my chest.

*But Danny is a boy*, my heart pounded. A slow nausea crawled up my throat. With everything in me screaming *No!*, the deepest part of me sighed *Yes*.

### III

The chapel is small, hot. A cloying mix of lilies, tiger balm, and cheap disinfectant lingers in the air, pushed around the room in slow circles. The hiss of the cassette fills the silence before the music starts, a scratchy, distant thing – some *Paris By Night* ballad taped over an old Vietnamese rock album. Danny would hate the whole affair. I dream of seeing his face, one last time, but the coffin is closed. I wonder if his hair has been cut or is long – I should think it was cut. I wonder if he is shaven. And now a million details rush in, proof and sour fruit of intimacy. Something shakes me, I feel shaken hard and dry, like some dead thing in the desert.

His mother stands by the coffin; scrawny, mottled with track marks. I call out her name, my tongue moving like a swung mechanical hinge, and she glances over at me, but her eyes are empty, blotchy, black. I have something to say to her – to her? – but of course, it will never be

said. I feel that I want to be forgiven, I want her to forgive me. But I do not know how to state my crime. My crime, in some strange way, is in being a man.

The priest; fat, hunched, white, speaks in empty phrases – of loss, love, gone too soon. Nobody says *heroin*. Nobody says *found on a public park bench, drowned in a tangy pool of his own vomit and urine*. Nobody says what they all know. I should be praying, or remembering, or something, but all I can think about is the Brisbane heat pressing against my skin, the way it clings like guilt.

Someone leans close, whispers in my ear: *Này bạn<sup>1</sup> – you were his best friend once, right?*

I do not answer.

#### IV

After the funeral, I walk back to the train station. The Gap hums under my feet: restless, angry, alive. Storm clouds brew heavy over Mt Coot-tha, and the sky sags, so low and grey, as though it might split open at any moment and swallow me whole.

I pass the corner store where we stole cigarettes, pass the servo where he taught me how to smoke. Past the fence we climbed to watch the skyline flicker, the city lights burned in my skin. My skin prickles every time I pass a stranger, because I imagine I will see Danny again, as he was at fifteen: so vivid, so winning, all of the light of that gloomy tunnel trapped around his head.

Somehow, I make it to the station, and somehow, the train moves beneath me. Roma Street, Toowong, Indooroopilly, Red Hill—places blur, time speeds up and it slows, twisting itself into an insidious Mobius strip. In every timeline, at every place, Danny is dead.

There is a vision I have, the same one, each night; seared into my mind, into my dreams. He lies curled on the park bench. I crouch beside him in the dim buzz of the streetlights, cup my hands in the rainwater pooling by the curb, and wipe the dirt of the city and the depravity of The Gap from his cold skin. I lift him by the arms, lay him down flat. With joss paper crumpled in my pockets, I fold gold for him to take, to unhallowed grounds where I can't yet follow, but will never truly leave.

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<sup>1</sup> Vietnamese translation: Hey you