



TÔ MINH SƠN

OUR MANGLED HEARTS

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I broke a boy's heart today.

I can see pieces of his heart running down his cheeks. I can see him struggling, holding back his broken heart, palms swiping away at his face, then pink and contorted. He tries to keep it together and feel his heart whole, but the sniffles made its way through. It was too late then, for him to keep it together. His voice cracked. He kept swiping and crying.

Then, he was just sobbing. My guts wrenched.

And I did this to him – *I made him cry.*

It was difficult for me to realize what I felt then – when I brushed his hair, wiped his tears, hugged him tight, and apologized repeatedly. When you break something that belonged to someone, I think, you would apologize immediately, bend down to pick up the pieces, and then offer to compensate for the damage somehow. Only that, I barely managed the second task and could not carry out the third one. There was much I would like to do, but so little I could do, and none I should do. In that split second, my heart swelled, and I felt compulsion to do everything to mend his heart, lessen his pain. Yet my lips did not move beyond profuse apologies, despite my chest warm and wet with his tears, my eyes watered beyond his sight, and our bodies jerked in the sniffing rhythm. My heart – once his everything – urged me to do more.

But there was only so much I could do: *I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.*

What I felt then was either pity, love, both at their extremes, or none altogether. The emotion escapes the language I write here, and I find the right word in my mother tongue, her only language, Vietnamese: *Thương*. It is an emotion different from love and pity yet stands behind both of them. It might resemble compassion or kindness; sometimes it is, but not always. Compassion or kindness can be done out of duty or righteousness, to both strangers and close friends alike. But *thương* - you have it for those whose plights you have seen, felt, and lodged inside your heart like a bullet or a scar. Empathy as a word captures only the process before it, but it is not empathy: it is the destination of that empathy, the final



feeling before action. After *thuong*: only doing something about it, else your heart breaks, too.

Then, my heart broke, too, right after his; pieces of my heart lingered in my eyes amid the nothing I could have done.

But he wouldn't know it: he was too busy looking for his heart in my chest.



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Ma,

Thuong. I've felt it for others, as there are those whose plights I cannot but feel for. But to say it to someone, their eyes holding me inside – I've only done that to two persons, and one of them is you. Somehow, tracing the contours of my heart leads me back to you. Maybe it is because, when I first opened my eyes, the first thing I saw that activated my instincts, was you. The first sounds I heard – the first sounds that mattered – were the sounds of your exhausted but sturdy heartbeats against my fragile ones. The first word I spoke was you – 'ma.' And so, everything else that came after – people, hearts, and words – trailed behind you, like my tiny face behind your legs, as I stood in your shadow, afraid to leave your embrace for the kindergarten in front.

Your heart – did it ever break, ma?

Have you ever felt its pieces strung upon your brows and crow's-feet, then went down the wrinkled lanes of your cheeks? Have your hands, rough with a lifetime of labor, ever tried to hold your heart, so resiliently lived, together? Has your nose ever made sounds beyond the chronic sinusitis that comes to you every morning you wake up – every morning living with you that I can remember?

I only caught a glimpse of your heart broken before. It was when my sister's mind collapsed. And so did your world. The afternoon light was soft in that quiet Hanoian time for naps. My eyes were closed, and my mind was elsewhere beyond the dark room with punctuations of sunlight from the window. I was still in my school uniform, speckled with dirt, dust, and fumes of a few hours outside in the sun and on the labyrinthine streets in Hanoi where countless lives flashed by on motorbikes. The sweat slowly dried under the cool breezes of the aircon, which whirred carefully like muffled whispers in a library.

I was nudged back to life by some noise upstairs. That same soft light blurry in my groggy vision, I sat myself up, feet bared upon the cold floor. After a few moments of composure, I stood up, my ears caught again that noise of something – clearer this time. A voice too faint to make out anything – or too incoherent to be anything – but loud and near enough to pull me up from my bed and out of my dark, cool room. I made my way to the source of the noise, feet dragging with the weight of an interrupted nap and arms dangling on my torso. I stood still at the sight on my destination, speechless.

I think, what I saw back then, was the start of your whole world coming apart.



She was throwing vitriol at everything that was caught in her vision and memory. She went after Adam and Eve, to Vietnam, its people and society; to truth, philosophy, music, knowledge, esoterica; to us – to you, pa, our family, our relatives, me; to technology ruining youths, the phone in my hand, taken out of my pocket, almost smashed by her hands; to my disheveled uniform and hair, my shitty school – her shitty school; to her prestigious university that you and pa pushed her to go, Vietnamese education, and the economics they taught as a farce. To everything, anything that had ever been for her – and to nothing, nothing at all. Her quixotic crusade against the world, valiant though she believed it to be, was to no avail: There was so much in her words, yet so little. I can hardly make out in her words a crooked logic known to none but her in what would be her first episode of schizophrenia. The hysterical logic of no logic at all, screaming at me, its arms flailing, feet stumbling, eyes squinting. Its thighs, thick in a pair of shorts, scribbled upon with Chinese characters it studied from and outside school, looked melting, blurred by the sweat that matted her hair and made everything messy.

That Hanoian time for naps was drenched in her mindless vitriol. The aircon whispered. The afternoon light still soft.

How did it feel like, ma, to see your child going mad right in front of you?

To see your own child – once the tiniest being you'd ever known, held near your breasts, suckled for its life, your eyes fixated, hands cradling, its first word being you, its world, your world – losing its mind? To see its world – your everything – unravel by the seconds, collapse into mere words; words that are just that, words without meanings, empty words; words by instincts, words from memory melting into reality; words reduced to sounds, vomited into nothing?

You were not there, where I was. But you were there, in other times, other places, because there would be other episodes – of things coming apart again.

Pa – the father, the breadwinner, the pillar of our family, as our saying goes – found his words torn apart. His knowledge and connections – the same knowledge and connections he'd used to keep our big family of six alive, well-fed, schooled, roofed, and amused – could not quell her rage. His façade cracked in his stuttered answers to our confusions, deflections abound. He gave us his word that she would be fine, that she was just a little bit sad, that she just needed us to support her, and that everything would be okay. That he knew some doctors, some pals from work; that the pills would work; and when the pills did not work, more pills would work, a whole cabinet of them; and when the pills did not work, the hospital ward would; and when the hospital ward did not work, the monks



would; and when none of it worked, all of them together would. His words piled upon each other, given to us meaningless, just like hers.

Ma, your whole heart you gave her, poured into her meals; you followed her steps, held her hands. Your heart stayed into the nights, listened to her mumbling about things you would never understand – things no one would understand, things beyond understanding – and nodded understandingly. Your heart, hands extended, forced those pills even as she struggled, snuck out of the house, vomited her meals.

You knew how that all turned out, ma. You knew how she would improve, then find a job, then make some friends, then with the clarity of her mind that hid her damage under the makeup expected of girls, people treated her with the stress they'd treated everyone. To find a family, more friends, a better job, more money, continue with the education because it was good, this economics she found insufferable, and a lot more. Then, she got stressed, she could not control herself, she quitted her job, disconnected from her friends, forgot her pills, started to fall...

She shattered again. Then, we start over.

There it was: a cycle formed after 5 years; a cycle of everything coming apart, then coming back together; a tragic – fucked up – cycle, within which I'd felt the damnedest things ever. I'd heard her screaming threats to kill you and pa when the moon peaked in the blackest sky, the hard slaps from you to her, and the big thud as pa wrestled her down – and more screams. I'd posted on Facebook that she'd gone missing, when our whole family lineage went out looking for her, thinking that we had actually lost her, only to delete that post when she was found wandering in the middle of a faraway street a day later and mumbling to herself with cut-up hair and empty stomach. I'd seen my youngest sister, still in her middle school, grew up too quickly, her words jaded, her solace outside the family. I'd seen my oldest sister delayed her marriage to supervise her, comfort you, and help pa. A cycle of something bad, then something normal – not 'good', just 'normal' – then back again.

But it was a cycle, nonetheless. And in a cycle, there was predictability and certainty; it can be studied, and our methods can improve. Things, with all the hopes in your heart, could still be better.

Pa's words became less stuttered: he found better doctors, more appropriate pills, better finances. Your world gained back cohesion: you knew what to say, what she liked, how to deal with her outbursts. The madness toned down and became controlled, with the right balance of words, pills, and people. My oldest



sister eventually got married, becoming your and pa's most successful achievement. My youngest sister eventually found her own world, her own friends, and she continued with her studies, perhaps the brightest in our house with an entrance into a good high school. The cycle, once studied and tempered, oscillated less violently; its ups and downs were neither high nor low.

I was not there, where you were, in her every waking moment, so that she could pick up the pieces of her mind. I was not there, in those moments where you were, because you took it all upon yourself out of the guilt that swallowed your heart, so that I might continue with my life under some feign sense of assurance. Your heart has been through so much, so mine can remain unbroken.

I asked of your heart, because I only caught a glimpse of it all, because you were always so skilled at holding everything together. I only saw your eyes, red cracks at its edges, beginning to well up for a few moments, before you turned away, your fingers holding back your cracking heart. On the kitchen table, you talked about her with only your voice shaky – I could not see where the pieces of your heart were.

And if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?

Your heart is a paradox, ma. And to glimpse is not to see; to glimpse is to only glimpse, a perspective reduced, its object concealed. That's why I asked you if your heart was ever broken.

Your heart a paradox, you and pa kept our hearts together as much as possible. While your world came apart, you kept your heart a secret, and mended our worlds back together.

Ma, *thuong* – I felt it in my bones, my heart, for you.

All of me. *Thuong*. You.

And because I felt it for you – that final feeling before action – I was compelled to do something for you: I kept my heart a secret, too, so that yours can remain unbroken.

Ma, when was the last time you saw me cry?



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Bầu ơi, **thương** lấy bí cùng

Tuy rằng khác giống nhưng chung một giàn

Oh gourd, you should ____ the pumpkin,

Though of different species, you share the same trellis.

- Vietnamese proverb

Let me return to that start of your world coming apart. Under that soft afternoon light, when words became mere words. So that we may continue the tracing of hearts.

I was speechless, yes. *What was I feeling, ma?*

It was fright. Fright, first and foremost.

Then, not *thương*.

Because what came next was contempt.

I'm sorry, ma, but I have never loved that sister, just as much as she did not love me before. Tracing the contours of my bruised heart, I could still feel her kicks against my growing body, short and stout by the baby fat that stayed with me in primary school, when I did something to wrong her – something, or anything, really. I was curling up, fetal position, arms shielding my stomach, the target of her kicks. It was a few steps away from her frightening and contemptible being now – in the room adjacent to the one to be filled with her word vomit. Still on that floor, yet another room, I was shut inside because I did not finish my fruits. I stayed there with the fruit piece half the size of my palm, green with a warm coat of slime from holding onto it too long, the sweat of my palm mixed into its juice. I took bites, small enough so that I could swallow without chewing, my tongue cowed under my bottom row of teeth from its nauseous texture and taste, but big enough so that I could finish faster. She stayed with me the whole time, her eyes stuck on my hands, her gaze forcing that chunk of slimy, green, and warm flesh down my throat – I did not waste one bit of it. I still do not like fruits now.

That callous scrutiny picked on my tiniest details in the way I eat, talk, study, play, and simply be. She had her reason: an excellent student at school and disciplined daughter at home needed someone to aspire not to be.



There are other things, but I had forgotten them so I might keep my heart beating. Those moments, I remember because I could not forget.

The word I reserved for her was not something special to Vietnamese: **hate**. I **hated** her.

But it was special to her, because I do not use that word lightly on anyone – I did say I'd felt that very Vietnamese feeling for others, too. She was the first and only person who I'd used that word on – a word you were never supposed to place upon a member of your own family. And if you became the basis of that feeling so utterly Vietnamese, she – also my flesh-and-blood – became that of a despicable feeling thus far irreproducible. Of the hate I felt for myself in front of the mirror every morning, my waist tightening the outsized pants I wore, my torso hidden behind a huge shirt, my face pimples and weird and ugly and disgusting – always morose, everyone would say – and my studies lackluster, demotivated, and directionless. Of the hate imbued into my being, carved into my heart, forced down my throat, and kicked into my stomach.

...

Wait, ma; let me correct myself:

It was fright. Fright, first and foremost.

Then a brief amusement, because I found justice in the way she squirmed. In that soft afternoon light, she deserved this.

Then not thương.

Because what came next was contempt.

Contempt – my hate disguised –
because she became less of a human in my eyes.

She became an 'it' – a parasite upon our family.

...

But, you know, I *hated* her - past tense. A hate in the past. A hate whose imprint I could still feel, like a scar, but no longer burning – a hate extinguished. Because there were only ashes left.

When a house had burned so violently, its metal core damaged beyond salvation by the roaring fire, you have no choice but to let it burn. You could minimize the



damage by preventing its spread to other houses or trees, but you cannot stop it. It will stop when nothing was left but ashes and charred debris.

Wandering the remains of the house, I wonder:

What happened? What could have started a flame so destructive?

Fire does not just happen. It does not just start on its own. Something must have ignited it. A damaged circuit, maybe. A gas left open, perhaps. A cigarette left burning, somewhere. Or something fundamentally wrong with the house itself, its mite-ridden wood or water-softened cement, unrepaired and unbothered for too long by the silent hearts that once inhabited there.

I found the source of fire in the language you spoke – your only language, that language with that special feeling – in a saying rooted in the collective consciousness of its speakers, passed from their ancestors, lingering with them today. A saying so ancient, that it became authorless, ageless, and thus wise. A wisdom, its history turned authority, stood unquestionable, and carried on with the force of its age:

“Thương cho roi cho vọt, ghét cho bùi cho ngọt.”

“To _____, give them rod and whips; to hate, give them honey and sweets.”

In my experience traversing languages, I do not think the concept of parents disciplining their children to show care is a statement unique to Vietnamese. *“Spare the rod, spoil the child”* – that sentiment exists in this language, too, this *lingua franca*. But the Vietnamese took the rod, then disguised it as our final feeling of empathy, and gave it to parents to whip their children with all the might of a timeless filial love. To cry from pain is to be loved; our cries evinced parental love.

So, you loved us, yet with your heart hidden, we cannot see that love. And if I learned to keep my heart a secret like yours, my sister learned to love me from you.

I am the only son in the family – the 3rd child, after two sisters. My youngest sister came because you and pa wanted another son to harmonize our family – yin and yang, 2 girls, 2 boys. Yet who came was a girl, and so I became your only son. Me, being your only son, and us, being Vietnamese, I sucked all the attention from you and pa, attention that should have been given equally to my other sisters. You gave to her at her young age and my even younger age, not any word of praise, but a burden: *“Keep an eye on him, so that he can grow up to be the man of the family.”* That burden, buried into her heart and mixed with her



jealousy of the attention you gave me, made her mature too quickly for her age; its weight, I could feel too for myself, tracing the contours of my heart, already bruised before by your love.

That alone, however, could not have broken her mind. Fire could not start by itself. I could pour oil all over the ground, but it would not burn. What makes it burn is a trigger. Something must have caused her mind, under the stress of a good daughter to an unruly brother, to break.

It was her heart, ma. Her heart broke, and her world went up in flames.

Why it broke, I did not know truly why, because I was given two truths: that, in the rare few hours of a clear mind long after that afternoon light, she confided in me she loved him so much, she gave all her heart to him, did everything for him, but he ignored it so he could focus on his passion; and that, when that soft afternoon light just started to die down, after words became just mere words, when you and pa returned to find her in shambles, she shouted that she was raped.

Two truths, one told to me in sanity, and one shouted to me in despair. In the end, truth was left to divination – only Heaven knows. I could not find it out, because, us being Vietnamese, it was more prudent to leave things outside the prying eye of the law. We did not press charge, so you told me, but pa had ‘talks’ with him, while you sat with her. What could a father say to the man who broke – or raped – his daughter, I could only imagine. Whatever it was, it does not matter now. He stayed out of our lives, some compensations were had, some things were signed, taken care of swiftly long ago. Whatever it was, the damage was done – the fire burned anyway.

A house long neglected, once burned, does not stop burning. A heart long closed, once broken, does not stop breaking.

But that house, now just charred debris, brought down too that was once unquestionable. It died with the flame it started. New houses could be built, sturdier this time, lessons learned.

As you poured your heart out for my sister, you had dropped your rod and let us – me and the younger one – free. You stopped your whips, those scolds once so harsh into our grades and the chiding once drilled into the ways I spoke and walked. Your expectations were no longer so heavy; in its place were gentle encouragements and comfort, to the little one’s surprise and delight when she showed you her less than excellent grades. You learned to let us go, in your love for us. You let us go, so that we can make new friends, have new memories,



make new mistakes, have regrets, learn our lessons, for our own sake, while you stayed there to care for my older sister. With your rod dropped, we bloomed.

You said, a slight smile on your face, unhesitatingly, the most remarkable words Vietnamese parents, their love disguised as rods, could not have said easily:

Do what makes you happy. We will always support you.

You knew how that all turned out, ma: good. Things worked out, despite all of it. We moved on. That cycle subdued. Our paradoxical hearts kept on beating.

Yet I sit here, my heart in my mind, my mind on my fingers, feelings to thoughts, thoughts to words, and come back to you. Though our house was rebuilt, it was still those hearts that inhabited it. The hearts that, for all of their lives, only knew how to keep a secret from each other. Because old habits die hard. After all, to kill one, it had taken an entire house down with it.

I clutched my heart in my fingers, its palpitations heavy and rapid, not knowing how to show it to you. I have become too good at keeping it a secret from you, my world a language away from yours, so your heart can remain unbroken – less broken.

In my own imagination, I speak as if you understand me, open-hearted. “I speak”, because you will never understand these words, spoken in my imagination.

My fingers tremble, their clutch loosened on my bursting heart, stranded between your newfound support in what makes me happy and the terrifying thought of the house burning down again:

Ma... do you have a minute, or an hour, maybe? Can we sit down?

I have something to tell you. It's important.

I think, I might cry... Ma...

I broke a boy's heart today.

But you will never know it's broken. So that the house may not burn down again.



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Standing by the river I wonder,

Do I need a stone?

No. My heart is heavy enough.

It will drag me down for sure.

- Agnieszka Surygala, 'River'

The word *mother* holds the strangest place in the Vietnamese language. Never have I seen a word so battered and bruised, yet so revered and respected, but not divine, thus made flesh.

That word, we put into every cuss we could muster. To deride and insult someone, '*fuck your mother*'. When we stub our toes, '*mother fuck*'. When we joke with our friends, over tea or alcohol, '*your mother*'. When we were surprised, outraged, confused, angry, indignant, morose – just about any hard feelings, really – that word comes up, adding weight to our sentences, and then get fucked. From the most trivial to the most painful moments, we call out for mothers, and mothers come up, sooth our pain, and then go away – life continues.

At the same time, that word holds an aura of immense reverence and respect. Motherhood is perhaps the most inspiring subject in Vietnamese literature. The love of a mother for her children, in their narratives, always breaks through all obstacles. Students from young to old have learned by heart the wisdom passed from our ancestors: next to the father's deeds as tall as mountains, the mother's kindness is as endless as spring water from its source. In history, we learn stories of Vietnamese heroic mothers who birthed, raised, and housed revolutionaries for the cause of our fight. The word mother is so strong, that even Communism, its historical strength felt worldwide by academics and politicians, cannot tame it: communism had to be adapted to motherhood, so that people would follow. The ideology knelt before mothers, bestowing respect; only then did men join its cause, now for the motherland.

But in all those stories, both proverbial and historical, from time immemorial to time ideological, the mother always sacrificed herself in the end. To be a mother, she had to suffer for her children. Because how else could you show your love, in a culture that saw pain as love, its rod disguised as a Vietnamese feeling for their fellow people?



The word mother, in Vietnamese, occupies both the highest and the lowest, both sacred and desecrated: a paradox that lives as long as her heart beats.

Upon this paradox, my entire world had been built. My first touch was my mother's skin, first taste her milk, first sound her voice, first word 'ma'. Everything else was only in a reference to her, my world a silhouette of her paradox.

From motherhood came brotherhood. But the word brother made no sense to me anymore, as I traced the contours of my heart to its starting point where I found only a paradox. Because what is a brother anymore when your sister kicked you in the stomach and forced a fruit piece down your throat to love you; when you saw her going mad, her mind broke only to get back together and break again; when you heard her told you two truths, only to never know what really happened; when you found freedom only at the cost of her broken mind. *What sense could there be in such cruel irony?*

When I broke a boy's heart, my words broke, too. And when words break, they break exponentially: a word broken, then another breaks, then several more break. The whole system comes apart; a narrative comes undone. Their fragments in my hand, pieces of hearts in our eyes, I was returned to that soft afternoon light and the whispers of the aircon. When words became mere words, their meanings emptied – brotherhood, hatred, motherhood, ancient wisdom, altogether meaningless.

In that moment, as my heart raced to keep itself together, mother came again and soothed my heart: I found the single word from her tongue, her only language, to make sense of my feelings – *Thương* – and my heart held to it, tightly.

In that moment, I stood before her, my fingers trembled as she gazed into my racing heart, fully exposed. I will not know what she says, because that moment is yet to come. Though the torchbearer stares unto it, the house will not be burned down yet again.

How would it feel, ma, when your only son told you he loves only men?

But I already know what I would do. There is nothing so much I could.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.