

Unspoken Things

James Tran

Parlez-vous français?

Here's a quick funny story:

When I was little, now I mean little, I never spoke a single word. I had my parents worried like no other. They would try and coax me to say things like "ma" or "ba." Instead, I would stare at them oogle-eyed and play cute. Not that being cute was a bad thing. Now here's the funny part: My mom was so worried something was wrong with me that she took me to the doctor. The doctor laughed and said, "Don't you worry Mrs. Tran. That boy will speak when he wants to speak. And until he starts speaking, enjoy the silence. Once he starts, he'll never stop." Now here's the other funny part: My mom caught me one day playing with the dishes. I had broken all of them. She looked at me. I looked at her. And I said in Vietnamese *The dishes are broken, throw them away.*

I remember my mom laughing, telling that story. I don't remember how the conversation came up, but I remember the tears flowing down her face as she laughed and laughed. The part about the dishes was made up, I'm sure, but even so it gave us something more to laugh about.

Now here's another story:

When I was little, I could speak Vietnamese really well. Hell, it was the only thing I could speak. Now here's the sad bit: My parents sent me off to kindergarten. It was fine and all, the teachers quite nice, lots of shiny bits to play with. One problem: they didn't speak Vietnamese. They would say, "Time for lunch," and I probably stared at them funny and went back to playing with those shiny bits. Frustrated, the teachers sent me home with a note explicating the graveness of the situation. My parents, being good parents, took the teachers' message to heart and henceforth only spoke to me in English. The end. No more Vietnamese, only English. And so, if you were to ask me what my first language was, it would technically be Vietnamese; but if you ask me what my first language was, I would probably answer English.

I remember when I asked my parents why they didn't try and teach me Vietnamese. The answer was simple. They didn't want me involved with the Vietnamese community. They wanted me to be American. And so, they did it the best way they could: using the language barrier. On one side of the wall was me, on the other side was the Vietnamese community. The way my parents talked about it, I never wanted to figure out what was on the other side; in fact, I wanted to avoid it. Then grandpa came.

What we think to be whole coherent stories are, often, collages of smaller stories composed of even smaller bits of memory:

I remember waiting at the airport with my family. I didn't remember how old I was when my grandfather had decided to come over to the states. What I do remember, however, is the long wait at the airport. All the aunts and uncles were assembled, arranged in neat rows on the plastic chairs outside the gate anxiously waiting for that moment. I sat at the far end with his cousins, bored. I wished I had brought my gameboy, maybe a book, anything to help pass the time. So bored...

I remember grandfather asking me to get something in Vietnamese. I didn't understand at all, I just knew I wanted something. So I gave him a banana. He wanted some water.

I remember him wandering around the school grounds at night, me trying to find him and convince him with giant hand gestures and English to come back, even though I knew no matter how slow I talked, no matter how hard I waved, grandfather wouldn't understand.

I remember first real conversation he ever had with his grandfather. It wasn't in English, or Vietnamese, but in French. Bad French at that.

"Bonjour p p .  a va?"

"Quoi? Vous pouvez parler le fran ais?"

"Oui. Je suis en train d' tudier le fran ais au lyc e."

"Ah, c'est bon  a! Pourquoi tu ne peux pas parler le vietnamienne? C'est dommage  a."

I couldn't speak a single word of Vietnamese, and it would be a long while before I would learn how to speak French. It never bothered me much though, not being able to speak Vietnamese. I knew enough to understand simple things; I was a good Americanized boy after all.

Stalker

"Are you Japanese?"

I turned around, coming face to face with a old man, probably homeless.

"Um. Nope."

"Oh. Sorry. Your hair, it's so spiky. I thought you were." The guy quickly dried his hands and left the restroom.

That was weird I thought to myself. I don't remember spiking my hair. I looked at myself in the mirror Oh, right. Bed hair. I finished washing my hands and went back to writing my paper in the library.

"You are so cool. Do you speak Japanese?"

Why does everyone think I'm Japanese? What the hell? I turned around, coming face to face with a senior. Her name was Alisha. I remember we did some community service together.

"Um...no. I don't. I'm Vietnamese."

"Oh!" Her eyes, which already seemed to sparkle seemed to light up even more. "Do you speak Vietnamese?"

Here we go again. "Not really. I understand it, but I can't really speak it."

The girl sat down next to me, dropping her bag onto the floor. "Oh right, sorry. Name's Alisha. You must be James. I don't remember how I know that."

I looked at her. Short hair bleached hair with blue and red highlights. Mannish face. Braces. Interesting. "We did some community service together."

She squealed. "Oh right! We did IRC together!"

I cringed and reached into my bag to grab a highlighter, looking around to see if anyone was looking our way. This was the school library after all. No one. Good. I went back and faced her with a smile. "Yah, that one."

She looked down at my homework. French. “Hey. You’re taking French too.” Another shriek of what I assumed was joy. “*Cette classe est très deficile, non? J’adore Wortham, mais il est comme le diable.*”

“The class isn’t that bad, even if Wortham is evil. But we get to make fun of him a lot.”

“*Ma classe aussie. Il y a Jessie Dean qui se moque Wortham tout le temps. Qui est dans ta classe?*”

“Um, we have Josh Volmer, and Melissa, and Laurence Benjamin...”

“*Je ne les connais pas.* I just love talking in French. He’s such a good teacher.”

“Yah, he really is.” I turned around and looked at the clock. Almost time for class. I reached down for my backpack. “It was nice talking to you. See you around.”

She picked up her things and walked out with me. “I have class too. I think mine is next to yours. You have physics with Kjar right? I see walk in every now and then. And after that I think you have Hickman, right? You’re taking AP lit, of course?”

Joy. I think I have myself a stalker.

“My brother thinks you’re so cool. He thought you were Japanese. I told him you weren’t. He said you were still cool.”

I didn’t know what to think. I smiled. “Oh, I see. That’s funny.”

“Do you watch anime?”

“Just a bit. Not really.”

She let out a shriek. Or maybe it was a squeal. It’s hard to tell. “You don’t watch anime? But you’re Asian. And anime is so awesome. So that makes you doubly awesome!”

I chuckled. “You have to come over to my house sometime. I’ll show you what your missing out on. Hey, what is that on your necklace? Is that a penny?”

“Oh, this? It’s Buddha. I’ve had this necklace for a long time.”

Another squeal. “That is so cool! So that means your Buddhist right? *Kawaii yo!*”

Oh dear...

“Nice to meet you Mrs. Mossé.”

“Pleasure is all mine. I’ve so much about you from Alisha. Oh no, that’s alright. You don’t have to take off your shoes.”

A squeal. “That is so cool! Do you always take off your shoes in your house?”

“I thought everyone did.”

“I love it how you’re so Asian.”

“Asian? Don’t people normally take their off their shoes when they go inside. It’s nothing special really.”

“James, come cosplay with me”

“Cos- Wha?!”

“Cosplay. I’m dressing up as Midna from Twilight Princess.”

“I...”

“You just have to show up in a tuxedo. You already look the part.”

“James, we need to talk.” It was summer, and Morgan had called to hang out. She sipped her coffee. “You know what she’s doing right? I know you’re oblivious, but you can’t be that stupid.”

"I know."

"You sure? She wants to marry you."

"Heh."

"I'm serious. Last night when you guys met up with us, I was talking to her and she was surprised to find out you still talk to me." Morgan put her drink down and stared at me in the eyes. I shifted in my chair. "And she even told me she's going to marry you. She told me you guys have your future planned out. A beach house in Tahiti?"

"What?"

"James."

"What?"

"James!"

"What?!"

"Do you even like her?"

"Not really. Just as a friend."

"Have you told her that?"

"Not really."

"You idiot. You better tell her or something. Keep this up and you're going to find yourself into some deep shit. The movie is about to start, let's head in."

The next day, I vanished. It's hard, cutting bonds with people you know. I know I overdid it. I could have talked to her and not have to bear the guilt, but I was never much for confrontation. So instead, I packed that guilt and left for without a word. It's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I remember what she said to me one day when she was talking about her ex. "There is a special place in Hell reserved for people who abandon their friends and family."

Azn

Panda Mochi man says:

hey Adam, how ya been? long time no see

Chewy says:

Been good; sorry I haven't responded to facebook. I've been studying abroad in Taiwan.

Panda Mochi man says:

Woah... nice

how is that going?

i hear the food's great over there

Chewy says:

haha

yah. the food is great

I'm going to get really fat

Panda Mochi man says:

i r jealous! send me some food!

Chewy says:

lol, will do. So how have you been? What are you going to do over the summer?

Panda Mochi man says:

*been good, planning to take the MCAT
and you?*

Chewy says:

MCAT?

Wow, you really are totally azn

That's a lot of work you know.

I'm impressed, I could never do that.

Panda Mochi man says:

lols...

Chewy says:

So...did you want to become a doctor by yourself?

Or did you parents make you?

Panda Mochi man says:

um...i shadowed a doctor last summer, and i learned that i want to become a doctor now it's funny, i think my parents always wanted me to become a doctor, they just never directly said anything about it. but that's alright. it works out that my interest coincides with theirs

@(^_^)@

Chewy says:

oic

that's cool =)

It's funny, that. I never thought about stereotypes much even though I was born and raised in Utah. In actuality, it's actually quite amazing how I unperceptive I was to race growing up as a child. It was as if all of Utah had mutually agreed that it was impolite to point out racial differences between people.

This is also funny. The only time I ever thought about race was when I was around other colored people, as if their presence added some color to my colorblind perspective.

Arrowhead Bits

My childhood wasn't necessarily tragic. By all accounts, my childhood was a happy one. I remember playing with my brother. He was tall and lanky, black hair, brown eyes, narrow face. His voice was playful in a *what-would-the-parents-think-if-I...* kind of way. It was a winter Saturday with lots of snow. The sun was out, the weather perfect for building a snow man; we went to work. Peter rolled a giant ball for the base; I rolled an even larger one. He laughed and hoisted his giant snow ball onto mine. By the time the sun had set and the sky had turned to auburn hue, our snowman was complete. Charcoal face, carrot nose, and black top hat. He said we would build a new one next year. Next year never came.

That story is made up. I probably never played with my brother in the snow, but I like to think I did. I like to think we had great adventures and that he was a caring older brother, and I was the bratty younger one. But that would be a lie. No harm in lying, right?

My parents would never tell me what happened to him. His name was like TNT. Sparks would fly off, and fireworks would light the sky. Their anger was a spectacle to behold. They would scream, "That good for nothing. That fuck. That shit." They would smash vases, shatter

tabletops, and batter furniture. In the end, I gave up. In the end, I had lost my brother. Not just the person, but his memory, his story. But, then again, what was he to me than just a story?

Ask me if I miss him, and I can say, honestly, "Yes."

Or I can say, honestly, "Of course not."

Hard to miss what you can't remember in the first place.

It's funny, that. When we try to remember the past, what comes to mind, often, are those odd little fragments that have no beginning and no end:

Dad with Bear, the overgrown chowchow, in the back yard yelling at Peter, "Go! Play with James." I wandered over through the driveway to the backyard to see what was happening. Peter ran to me with a strange look on his face and took me inside. I could see dad digging in the backyard through the window, Bear lying down at his side.

Or climbing the icy steps of the police station. Dad had decided to take me along, told me to not tell mom; she would have no end to it he said. I didn't understand. We sat. Waiting. Then an officer came, and led him behind the fogged glass, leaving me behind on those uncomfortable wooden chairs. I strained my ears, listening, squinting, to try and discern the silhouette of my father. Then I heard his name. Peter

Or the car ride with mom. "Where's Peter?" It had been 8 years since I had last seen or heard of him. The car stopped. Mom turned at me with fury and tears forming in her eyes. "Don't you ever mention that name again. You have no idea what he tried to do to you and this family," she screamed. She turned back around and sped. We were already late for school. *What about Uncle Peter?* I thought. *Can I still say his name?*

I was very little at the time, I'd guess around the age of six, and as a consequence, I have only a handful of memories that bear his name. *His* name. We never mention it in our house now. It has been that way ever since the day he left. I never missed him much, my brother. He probably didn't spend a lot of time with me. But then again, I probably can't remember. But I do remember that when he left, life continued as usual. There was no before or after. Just us, as it always was.

I remember these things, too.

The large cottage with the large white woman in the middle of nowhere.

Dad bobbing his head to the radio as we drove east, so far east, past city and suburb and farm and factory, deep into the mountains where the road stopped being road and turned to trail.

Peter sitting on the quilted bed, handing me an arrowhead, smooth like polished glass, saying, "One day, I'll give it to you. It'll be yours."

Frosted window panes and socks for snow gloves.

Winter daylight, so pure and bright.

Peter running up to dad, hugging him, saying, "My dad."

Me running up to mom, hugging her, saying, "My mom."

It's been twelve years now, since I last remember seeing him. He should be almost thirty. His birthday is in the summer. I don't remember when. Last I heard, he was in the air force,

stationed in Arizona with a wife and possibly a child. The Peter I remember in the past is as distant as the Peter of the present, catching only brief glimpses of him through my cousins. They talk with him sometimes; but they never talk about him to me. They tell me facts, but never stories. I want stories; otherwise, I have nothing to remember.

100 Things

James, you never talk about yourself much. We don't know anything about you
What's that supposed to mean?
Well, you never talk about your family, or your ex.
What about them?
You never talk about them.
What do you want me to do? Fill out a form talking about my life?

001. Real name - James Tran
002. Nickname(s) - Jim, Jimmy, Jimbo, JT, Papa Bear, Zuzu
003. Status - Single
004. Zodiac sign - Cancer/Gemini depending on what chart you look at
005. Gender - Male
006. Religion - Buddhism
007. Elementary - Challenger School
008. Middle School - 6/7 Challenger School; 8 Rowland Hall St. Marks
009. High School - Rowland Hall St. Marks
010. Hair color - Black
011. Eye color - Brown
012. Loud or Quiet - Loud around friends, quiet around others
013. Sweats or Jeans - Jeans
014. Phone or Camera - Phone, i fear the camera
015. Health freak - Don't think so...
016. Favorite Physical Quality - Eyes
017. Do you have a crush on someone? Yes haha
018. Eat or Drink - Eat, om nom nom nom!
019. Piercings - nope, but I do remember my mom trying to get me to pierce my ear...she's interesting...
020. Tattoos - nope; cool to have for a day, but horrible to have for life
021. Water or Fire - Water, Katara's water wooshiness makes me happy
022. Love of your life or 4 Billion Dollars - Right now I'll say love of my life
023. First fear - Karate Class...all the screaming and punching scared me
024. First best friend - Patrick Zoo in 1st grade. He moved away shortly after to California
sighs
025. First award - Presidential Fitness award in 3rd grade
026. First crush - Danielle in 1st grade
027. First pet - Two dogs named Teddy and Bear
028. First big vacation - Family trip to Canada land when i was about 4
029. First big birthday - First one I remember would be in 2nd grade.
030. Brothers - Short answer: no, Long answer: yes

031. Sisters -None
033. Favorite Dessert - French Silk Pie...mmmm
034. Favorite toy in your house - Computer
035. Promise Ring or Chastity Ring? Neither
036. Favorite Season- Summer (for the outdoor fun) and winter for the skiing
037. Favorite Flower(s) - Chrysanthemum, it makes good tea
038. Favorite Sport - Skiing
039. Pancakes or Waffles - Pancakes
040. Left- or Right-handed- Right
041. Ever been kissed? Yes
042. How many relationships have you been in? One...and a half...
043. Silver or Gold? Silver
044. Checkers or Chess? Chess even though I fail at it
045. Desktop or laptop? Laptop
046. Place of birth? Utah, USA
047. Ever been out of the country? where? Canada and Italy and soon to be Japan
048. Big City or Small town? Small town close to a big city
049. Favorite Food type - Munchies and snacks...*pats belly*
050. Favorite Drink - Boba! (Bubble tea for the rest of yas)
051. Dogs or Cats- Dogs. Or cats...
052. I'm about to – fall asleep
053. Listening to – “Broken Strings” by James Morrison
054. Plans for today – study study study
055. Waiting for – the world to change
056. Your Height- 5' 10"
057. Contacts or Glasses- Both, mainly contacts
058. Want kids? - 2 or 3...we shall see
059. Want to get married? - Eventually yes
060. Careers in mind - Doctor
061. Rain or Snow- Snow for skiing or for sipping hot coco while you sit by the fire...
062. Gloves or Mittens- Mittens, hands nice and warm
062. Favorite Girl's Name- Never thought about it
064. Favorite Boy's Name- Cyrus
065. Believe in Magic? No
066. Soda, Pop, or Coke? Soda
067. Brain or Braun? Brain
068. Prefer Lips or eyes - Eyes
069. Great body or great Personality? Personality
070. Do you want to be Shorter or taller? I'm happy with me height
071. Do you want to initiate the relationship or him/her? I can see the other getting impatient with me...I'm quite shy
072. Romantic or spontaneous - Spontaneous
073. Nice stomach or nice arms - Both I guess
074. Sensitive or loud - Loud...
075. Hook-up or relationship - Relationship most of the time
076. Should you be friends first or date first? Doesn't matter

077. Trouble maker or hesitant - trouble maker
 078. Chivalry or not? Kindness and Courtesy yes; chivalry is Disney fiction
 079. Favorite Board Game- I like cards
 080. Lost glasses/contacts - Once to the lawnmower
 081. Ran away from home - no
 082. Hold a gun/knife for defense- Screw that, I have my fist *punch*
 083. Killed someone?- No
 084. Heartbroken - Yes
 085. Been arrested - No
 086. Done anything illegal- College kid with computer illegal, but not big time illegal
 087. Cried when someone died - People in movies count? Then yah.
 088. Cried by Yourself - When I was little
 089. Laughed till you cried- Yes
 090. Believe in Miracles? -Yes
 091. Believe in Love at first sight? - No
 092. Heaven - yes
 093. Santa Claus - No
 094. Say 'I Love you' on the first date - Maybe
 095. Kiss on the first date - maybe
 096. Hold hands on the first date- Yah
 097. Is there one person you want to be with right now? Yes
 098. Are you seriously happy with where you are in life - There is who we want to be and who we actually are. The best we can do is be happy with who we are and strive to become what we aren't.
 099. Do you believe in God - In a sense yes
 100. Favorite Quote – “I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells. Fantasy is a necessary ingredient in living, It's a way of looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope. Which is what I do, And that enables you to laugh at life's realities.” – Dr. Seuss

In heart
 107-8
 100

There. Happy?

Voice

I shadowed a doctor once. It was fun. I learned many things. And then a nurse came up to me. He was large, a retired opera singer everyone said. “Where are you from?” he asked.

“I was born here in Utah.”

“No, I mean, *where* are you from?”

“Oh, I’m Vietnamese.”

“Ah, that explains your accent.”

I was confused. I turned to the doctor I was shadowing. “I have an accent?”

He looked at me and laughed. “No, you don’t have one. Just ignore him.”

I looked at the nurse as he turned around and started to sing.

Empty Hands

Jim Christianson was the step son of our karate instructor, but that didn’t happen until much later. He was the oldest, but that never stopped us from messing with him. His hair was

bobbed, his body lean, built like a track runner. Jim had barely bought a new car. "It's kind of old, but I'm going to put in some nice speakers, and maybe fix up the engine a bit. It's going to be awesome," he told me proudly. Jurry was the youngest, but only by a year. With his blond, spiked hair and stocky body, he was built to be a punk rocker, or maybe a model. We couldn't decide. We figured he was half Italian; his uncle looked the part. He never talked about himself much. Hell, I never knew the kid's last name.

We were the three Jay birds. Jim, Jurry, and James. How long did we grow up together?

Ten years of karate technique and training boiled down into sixteen grueling minutes of sparing and endurance. The test proctors were a far call from the soft-spoken lady who would proctor our SATs and APs and ACTs. Our proctors, for this exam, were large burly black belts.

I drove there with Jim. "You ready for this James? We're gonna get our black belts tonight."

"Kinda nervous. Sixteen minutes? That's crazy."

"You've fought these guys before. They were cool."

"Yah, but shit. That was one on one. Not *four* on one. And remember that other guy? He's built like a tank."

Jim laughed. Any of them compared to me was built like a tank. "You brought your cup?"

"Wait, I supposed to bring that? I thought this year was no groin."

"Not for this test. Everything goes."

"Shit."

Jim laughed.

We arrived around 10 pm, it was already dark. We climbed the stairs and before entering, Jim patted my back and said, "You get to be first."

"Shit."

Too tired to argue, I pushed open the door. Ceiling floodlights burned down, drowning everything in dreary synthetic light. They had prepared everything. The ring was already marked out with masking tape. Not that it would matter. People had a tendency to fly out of it anyways. The punching bags were shoved off to the side to keep people from smashing the mirrors. Hell, they even had a small table to the left with some snacks: chips, soda, and even some cheese.

"Well," I finally managed. "There it is."

I broke a mirror, a very big mirror, even though through the wall of kicking bags they set up. Gussed they never thought I would be tossed that hard. Can't believe I got myself tossed. Shit. I was about to flip that guy off me, too. I wonder which guy pushed me off balance. Glass shards sparkled on the floor, but that didn't matter. How much longer did I have? Ten minutes? Five minutes? I lost track of time. Shit. I think I have blood in my eye.

Jim didn't do much better: he got tossed on the snack table. It got smashed. Jurry, I think was the luckiest. He got them last after they were tired out. That's right. We tired them out for you. Nevermind. They got new people to fight him.

We rose from our knelt position and faced forward. Gary came around, and presented our black belts.

“I come to you with only Karate, ‘empty hands.’ I have no weapons, but should I be forced to defend myself, my principles, or my honor; should it be a matter of life or death, right or wrong, then here are my weapons, Karate, ‘empty hands.’”

We finally made it.

Jurry looked at me and joked, “So what do we do now?”

I left. Rather. I quit.

“You have your black belt now. I don’t need to pay for your lessons anymore.” It was late at night when I arrived home. “Besides, you need to focus on school. I don’t want you getting shit grades.”

I check my grades. They were all As. He knew that. “There are belts beyond black belt.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Second and third degree black belts.”

“And how high to they go?”

“Nine.”

“And you want to get them all?”

“No... Besides. I have a tournament next weekend.”

“Where?”

“The Salt Palace.”

“You’d rather spend your time fighting some stupid idiots than spending your getting good grades then be my guest. If you want to continue, go right ahead. I’m not paying for anymore of your lessons anyways. You know how much money it costs me to send you there anyways?” He drank some water and went back to the basement.

“Yah, I know how much. Nothing. Teaching pays for it.”

I dream about the dojo sometimes. I dream about going back, and sparring with the jaybirds. Waking up is the most painful part; so I just keep on dreaming.