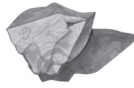


In 1992, I found out that I was going to be missing two of my front teeth. I was eight, lying on the dentist's chair, staring at my velcro shoes when I heard Mrs. Nguyễn, the office administrator, cry: "We must help her!" My x-rays had just been processed, and they showed that my permanent lateral incisors did not exist. Just a week earlier, on the playground, I had been picking at my baby incisors, noodling my tongue around them and peeling them slowly away from my gums. They were the last of my baby teeth; I was getting excited for my permanent smile. But my excitement turned to confusion and anxiety upon learning that my smile would be abnormal.

Dr. Don rolled his chair over, x-rays in hand. "The teeth you just lost will not be replaced by new ones. Now, say: "O-O-O-O-O-O-O." He kept talking while he examined my mouth with his circular dental mirror. "We will have to figure out what to do with you. Some people let their teeth naturally fill in the empty spaces, so your canines would sit next to your front teeth. Others push the canines back to make room for false lateral incisors. We don't need these teeth anymore, and someday, no one will have them. You might be ahead of human evolution."



Four hundred million years ago, rain fell on Gondwana and eroded the limestone in the Earth. The Earth shifted. Wind pattered, slapped, and whipped, boring into the hollows of the rock, pushing the water ahead of it and sculpting the rock into an ecosystem of caves. Over millions of years, countless species thrived at the places where the meeting of acidic water and corrosive rock had created a matrix of riverways.

The Phong Nha Karst is located in the Annamite Mountains, which spread across the borders of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. “Phong” is a Vietnamese word, derived from the Chinese word—“fung” in Cantonese or “feng” in Madarin—for “wind.” “Nha” is Vietnamese for “teeth,” though it is more commonly combined with other words to describe things related to teeth. For example, “Nha sĩ” means dentist; “Nha khoa” means “dentistry.” According to Chinese mythology, the Phong Nha Karst is the Earth’s teeth, carved by wind.

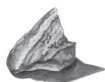


In 1992, Vietnam adopted a new constitution. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the country sought to become more viable in the global economy; the new constitution allowed for more foreign investment and ownership.

In this same year a former farmer, Yang Guoqiang, opened his company Country Garden—a real estate developer that, decades later, would change the shape of land in Asia.

As Mr. Guoqiang started to grow his company in ’92, another farmer named Hồ Khanh, who lived in the Phong Nha Mountains,

wanted to hide away from the rain. He found a hole and crawled in, only to find that the hole was endless, so he kept going.



My uncle was born Võ Văn Nhứt. It was agreed by everyone in the Chợ Cây Quế neighborhood of Sài Gòn that he was the most handsome man in the area. He was tall, broad-shouldered, kept a muscular physique, and carried himself with a macho confidence. The beauty people saw in him he also demanded of others; he associated beauty with wealth, and wealth with success. He expected people to have high noses, fit body frames—and, his biggest fixation, a straight and glowing smile.

In the 1960s my uncle was a pilot for the South Vietnamese Air Force, and they sent him to Texas to train. This might have been when he decided that America possessed the most beauty, wealth, and success of any country on Earth. He became a successful businessman in the '70s, after he was released from duty. Seeded with Western ambition, he began exporting Vietnamese porcelain for a company with an office in Florida. Back and forth he went, pushing empty vessels from Vietnam in the land of dreams. He pushed so many vessels that he was able to build one for himself, in the form of a giant French-style house for his mother and ten siblings.

Three years later, when he was traveling with a fleet of empty vessels from Vietnam to Florida, he decided to escape westward, from Florida's balmy beaches to the arid desert of Reno, Nevada. Under a sublime sun, the Sierra Nevada Mountains infused him with a motivation he had never felt before. Sporting a tough, squeaky leather jacket in his Chevrolet Chevelle, he cruised the wide highways of Nevada, looking for a permanent path in America.

It didn't take long for him to map his road by way of a Vietnamese woman, already a US citizen, named Maria. My uncle married her, and together they ran a nail salon in Reno, tending to the aesthetic aspirations of women, and their appetite for the casino scene. It must have been around this time that he changed his name to David Van—David was for David who fought Goliath, and Van, extracted from his real middle name, was meant to make his new American name sound a little Dutch.

By 1980, the nail salon had become tiresome and the marriage had lost its luster, so David Van bundled all of his savings to score a taxi medallion in San Francisco. That piece of metal would soon make him millions. He leased it out to other drivers at inflated rates that started to earn him a reputation, particularly among the Vietnamese drivers: my uncle was a crooked dude.

Despite my father's hesitation about David Van, my mother loved him, and he became part of my daily life around 1992, when his life collapsed. By then he had three ex-wives, an abandoned business with the first, a disowned child from the second, and two more kids who left with their mother from the third.

Alone, he started to come to our house for dinner several times a week. He would tell long yarns about this person and that person, pounding his fist passionately on my parents' oak dining table. He'd be wearing a short-sleeved polo shirt, his left tricep flexing beneath it when his clenched hand hit the surface of the table. Seated directly across from him, I would see David Van's gorgeous American eagle tattoo, which wrapped around his upper arm. It was an image of the fierce bird of prey with its wings slightly spread upward. Both of its claws clutched the pole of an American flag as the banner waved behind its body. The ink of the tattoo had blended and faded to a peaceful greenish-grey color. It really seemed to be a part of my uncle's skin; as his tricep pulsed, the eagle and the American flag breathed with it.

After dinner, my parents and David Van stayed up for hours watching *Paris by Night* videos. In these highly-produced concerts, Vietnamese entertainers of the war diaspora would sing and dance to traditional music and contemporary pop tunes. Sitting back in the recliner with a grin on his face, still clenching his fists, my uncle would point out which performers had veneers, which had implants, and which had natural teeth. His own smile was perfect and, I always assumed, natural (later, my father told me that my uncle's perfect smile, just like his nose and eyelids, was fake). "Teeth are everything," David Van advised my parents. "The Americans take you seriously when you have a nice set of teeth. It doesn't matter how smart you are—if you have a good face with nice, straight white teeth, people will take you seriously in this country. You'd better take her to see the orthodontist."



My orthodontist, Dr. Tinloy, had an office across the street from Dr. Don's on Van Ness. The glory of the American Dream could be traced along this famous street, starting from its southernmost tip. There, you found San Francisco's cultural institutions: Davis Symphony Hall, the Asian Art Museum, and the Main Library. Moving north, the Civic Center gave way to UC Berkeley's Hastings Law School campus, followed by clothing boutiques, movie theaters, car dealerships, steak houses, and office buildings, until, finally, you reached the Russian Hill neighborhood—one of the wealthiest areas of San Francisco, full of Victorian townhouses with views of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Insurance wouldn't cover the cost of the braces. After seeing the bill, my dad looked up at Dr. Tinloy and asked, "Is this necessary?" "It's entirely cosmetic," the doctor replied. My dad hesitated, then nodded and took out his credit card. A week later, I got my braces.

The appointment took two hours. First, they cleaned my teeth, then they covered them with a glue that smelled awful, like nail polish. Next, a variety of metal parts were secured to the adhesive. My molars were fitted with hooked metal frames that encircled each tooth like a corset.

The reason these metal squares had this particular, tiled configuration on top of them was because braces technology depends on an interaction between a wire strung across your teeth and your teeth's movements. The wire would be fed through all the metal mechanisms and then be secured to the hooks on the back molars with rubber bands. If some teeth needed to be pushed apart, springs could be beaded onto the wire, putting pressure on the metal squares which would then push your teeth apart over the course of a few weeks. And if you needed to pull teeth closer together, they could attach a rubber band to the metal pieces that had a hook.

There were two treatment plans for someone with my birth defect. One path was to close the spaces created by the absence of the lateral incisors. The canines would tightly sit next to the front teeth and be reshaped to blend into the smile—it would look like something was still missing but you couldn't figure out what. The other path was to push the canines away from the front teeth to create space for prosthetic incisors. Anyone with any foresight (my dentist, my orthodontist, and parents) knew that a path leading to permanent prosthetics would be more time consuming and exponentially more costly. My protocol would be the first one, to close up the gaps.



The day after I got my braces was exciting, and painful. I couldn't eat anything, not even the recommended treat of ice cream. I

remember that phở noodles were the easiest thing to eat, especially when they'd been soaked in my mother's broth; if I cut up the noodles, I could slurp them into my throat and bypass chewing altogether. By the third week, I was back to normal. The metal on my teeth had become part of my body. My lips couldn't remember a time when the surface of my teeth was smooth. By the third week, I was also doing all the things you weren't supposed to do, like eating popcorn and chewing gum.

On my first routine visit to the orthodontist, Dr. Tinloy made a consequential decision in a matter of seconds. He noticed that if my teeth were to continue moving along the trajectory they'd started, I would eventually lose my ability to bite. Without explaining to me why, he changed my protocol and started using the braces to push my teeth apart.

Over the course of five years, Dr. Tinloy pushed my canines away from my two front teeth using a sequence of springs: one sixteenth of an inch, then an eighth, then three sixteenths, then a quarter, and on and on until the springs were half an inch long. Springs became a signature feature of my smile throughout middle school and into the 11th grade.

The thing about having missing front teeth is that it is worse than having ugly teeth. Having missing front teeth is more than a merely deformed smile. To David Van and my parents, this meant that you were poor and uneducated, and I believed this too. I'm not sure if anyone noticed that two giant openings were being created in my mouth, but I know I found solace in my "mouth full of metal." It kept me from being a girl who was missing two front teeth.

In my five years of having braces, no one mentioned looks. No one talked to me about beauty. Instead, they talked to me about my bite. The stated goal of any orthodontic treatment was to

have a good bite, one where your upper teeth and lower teeth lined up correctly as “nature intended.” In a proper bite, front teeth slightly overlap, and bottom molars act like the negative mold of the upper molars; there aren’t any awkward meeting points between your teeth that would create a risk of grinding. The other reason people gave for getting braces was hygiene: less food gets stuck in a mouth of straight teeth, making them easier to clean.

But I didn’t have crooked teeth. I had spaced-out teeth; I barely needed to floss. I didn’t grind my teeth either. My bite was fine.



My husband and I met our tour group in Quảng Bình Province, the region of Vietnam through which the Phong Nha Karst weaves. I was immediately awestruck by the sight of the mountains in the distance. Miles of rice paddies surrounded them like a carpet, or a grand driveway, or a gigantic lawn meant to emphasize the importance of a place. The rice paddies glistened electric green, a shade you might see at a nightclub or painted on a Lamborghini. It was strange to see such a green in nature.

Our group consisted of a German family of four and a young Dutch couple who were both dentists. Our guide, Đông, had lived in the Quảng Bình his whole life. On the drive over to the Oxalis Adventure office, Đông gave us a friendly brief about the region. “A long time ago,” he said, “the whole region was water, and you can tell which caves are younger because water still runs through them.”

We had to walk 45 minutes to get to the mouth of the first cave. As we entered the forest from a flat dirt road, the landscape turned immediately picturesque. In the distance, the mountains



waited peacefully for us, covered in foliage like dense, curly hair. A stream appeared where some buffalo were drinking water; a few young ones tailed their mothers and others grazed at the grass. As we kept walking we came across some large dirt platforms. “This is how the village people bury their dead,” explained Đông. “After the body decomposes, the remaining bones get transferred across the road, where the other family members are buried.”

“This is also the home of King Kong,” Đông continued. In 2016, Warner Brothers, Legendary Entertainment, and Tencent Productions brought part of the \$185-million dollar *Kong Skull Island* production to Quảng Bình. They set King Kong’s birthplace in the exact area we were passing. “They shut down this whole area for weeks,” said Đông. In a video posted online, the director, Jordan Vogt-Roberts, can be heard praising the region’s beauty over a soundtrack of Hollywood adventure music. “I kept asking, do people understand how beautiful this is?” he asked. “To me, it’s so otherworldly and spectacular, and it’s just the daily life of other people. I hope that they realize how special the place that they live in is.”

Đông continued to educate our group. “Our village didn’t get electricity until 2003. Before tourism, life was hard. Many people were hunters and gatherers, using hand weapons and oil lamps to gather food and to make a living. You could eat anything you found in the forest. Most of our meals were wild birds, rats, and small gophers. We have more opportunities now with more people coming to visit.” The grass got taller until we were walking amidst human-sized shrubbery. We reached another stream and submerged ourselves, entering the water up to our waists to cross.

There were two porters who followed our group, carrying our jugs of water and snacks: bananas; packs of Oreos in strawberry,

original, and blueberry flavors; and rice crackers. The porters also helped us to get over difficult crossings, where it got steep or thick with shrubs. As we moved along, one of the porters started to sing a Vietnamese country song. I didn't know the song, but I have deep childhood memories of the style: my grandmother would play similar songs, loud, from VHS recordings brought over from Vietnam.

“O-O-O-O-O-O!” The porter's lone voice bellowed around us. These songs often feature a bird, a fish, a river, a longing for a past time, usually a lover. The melodies are melancholic, each long note slurring into the next, never a bright interval. They almost always end in a fadeaway. Wherever I hear these songs—at my parents' home through their booming karaoke system or here in the jungles of Vietnam—I can feel the structure of the melody sculpt itself into the physical world. Each word ricochets off whatever surface it can find—be it a living room couch, rock, chair, or leaf—and molds its sadness onto my surroundings.

*“These must have been the same songs that were sung in war,”* I thought to myself. We were not just walking along an adventure trail to a geological wonder; these jungles were part of the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. I asked Đông where exactly the trail was. “It was everywhere,” he said, his hands gesturing all around him. “If not for the Hồ Chí Minh Trail, we would have lost our country.”



Also known as the Trường Sơn Trail, the Hồ Chí Minh Trail was not a trail in the sense of a path that connects point A to point B. It was a changing, breathing organism: a network of dirt roads, much like the one my group and I were trekking on, that started in the south of Hà Nội in Northern Vietnam then moved southwest into eastern Laos and Cambodia, through the Annamite