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HARVARD REVIEW

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## David Rompf

*Viet Q*

“He has his father’s cheeks.”

“And his mother’s eyes.”

“His hair is light.”

“He looks like his uncle.”

“He doesn’t look Asian, does he?”

From one angle Rubi Quang Tran looks Vietnamese, from another you would never know, and from straight on he simply looks like the child of my sister and her husband.

“He looks like a little Uncle David,” his father said, holding his newborn son while a doctor snipped the umbilicus. From years of travel and study, Asia had been absorbed into my system. With Rubi Quang’s arrival, it now coursed through my family’s veins.

In the local supermarket a stranger trails my sister and nephew up and down the aisles. Tall, white, and middle-aged, he’s shooting odd glances at Rubi Quang. What does he want, what sinister thoughts grip him? Stirred into action, my sister draws her child closer and quickens her pace. Finally the stalker vanishes, only to reappear at the checkout lines. He stands anxiously behind them now, staring, his strong arms within reach of my little nephew. As my sister prepares to dart into a different queue, the man puts his hand on her shoulder.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he says. “I just wanted to say that you have a very beautiful son.”

When I am visiting my family in California, I take my mother and father to places that they would not otherwise explore on their own—unusual restaurants, cafés, Vietnamese shopping malls. For more than two decades I have served as their guide on local and distant turf, escorting them through London, New York, Tokyo, Vancouver, a sizeable chunk of Europe. They have never been abroad without me. When I reveal plans for my own exotic trips, my mother pleads, “Take me *with* you.” She feigns tragic boredom and longing for escape. In her heart of hearts she knows very well that she would not enjoy sleeping in a grass hut on some remote Indonesian island or roaming Bangkok’s weekend market in the sweltering heat, yet she relishes the romantic notion of travel. I drive my parents to Little Saigon, a mere six miles from the modest suburban house they’ve occupied for forty years. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, large numbers of Vietnamese

refugees began settling in a section of Orange County where strawberry fields and citrus groves once flourished and where, more recently, the eruption of beige stucco apartment complexes and strip malls signaled California's population boom. Today the neighboring cities of Westminster and Garden Grove teem with Vietnamese merchants, realtors, doctors, dentists, pharmacists, lawyers, beauticians, bakers, and gold dealers, whose vibrant signs line Bolsa Boulevard. When I was a child there was no reason to come here. Now you can't find a parking place.

We go for lunch in a shopping mall called Asian Garden, which looks like a double-decker concrete block from the center of Saigon. Near the entrance, old Vietnamese men stand in the shade, puffing cigarettes and gossiping. My parents push through the doors, willing but cautious travelers from another world. My father keeps the crew-cut he wore in the 1950s, my mother has old-world qualities of her own, hints of her Croatian grandmother.

Inside Asian Garden, dozens of shops are crammed with children's clothing, toys, Vietnamese CDs, cooking utensils, glass cases filled with gold and jade. Shiny, placid Buddhas reign over all. You can buy phone cards or cheap airline tickets to Hanoi via Singapore, but why would anyone need to go there—except to see a family member—when Vietnam exists right here in breezy southern California?

At the restaurant my mother says, "You order for us. *You* know what this stuff is." I choose *pho ga*, and moments later the waiter delivers three oversized bowls of soup loaded with thin rice noodles, skinned white chicken and a sprinkling of chopped green onion. A separate platter is heaped with cilantro, lettuce, bean sprouts, and quartered limes. Steam rises from the bowls, misting our faces. I tear some cilantro into my broth and squeeze lime juice over the top. "Try it like this," I tell them, but my mother and father remain unconvinced. I show them how to eat the noodles with chopsticks in one hand, sipping the hot clear liquid from a porcelain spoon in the other. But there is no hope for it. When the waiter brings forks, my parents finally indulge.

"This is *delicious*," my mother says.

And then my father: "*Really* good, hey?"

They seem surprised that the food hasn't stung them or made their eyes water. I tell them the obvious: it's only chicken soup. In minutes their bowls are empty. At a restaurant in Tokyo my mother and father gagged on raw fish. Their sudden departure from the sushi counter shocked patrons and chefs alike—and marked a lapse in my judgment as worldly guide.

After lunch, while walking through the mall, I wonder if they have been thinking about their Vietnamese grandson as having a connection to the proprietors and patrons of the noodle shop. Their stoic expressions suggest a tentative getting-to-know-you approach with the unfamiliar. This is their way of stepping up to the gate separating them from the rest of the world. They would not have entered Asian Garden without their trailblazing son. They would not have ventured to Japan or England had I not been living there. In the commercial epicenter of Little Saigon they suddenly seem anxious to cut the outing short. I can tell the moment we have overstayed, when their fascination fails and stimulation becomes a drain. My mother looks fatigued. My father is no longer engaged. Time to go home. Time for a tuna salad sandwich.

But then, as we are leaving, my mother's interest is revived. She singles out a young Vietnamese boy in the crowd. "Look," she says. "Doesn't he remind you of Rubi?"

At Christmas dinner Rubi Quang sits up straight in a chair next to me, surveying the table. Proud uncle, proud nephew, we know that we have the best seats in the house. On my other side sits my companion, quietly devouring my father's sage-infused stuffing. Suddenly Rubi assumes the expression of a boy poised to shatter the peace. "Uncle David," he says, peering up at me, "Do you and Hien sleep together?"

My mother and father aren't accustomed to a suppertime laced with personal questions, especially those leading to intimate details of my life. Better to speak of the perfectly roasted turkey or the off-season fog. Better yet to let silence preside over the dinner table. Eat quietly and speak only when spoken to are fine rules if you're not a child with sparkling curiosity.

What is the boy thinking? What should I say? There are two answers: yes and no. During holiday visits I sleep in my childhood room, which has a narrow twin bed, while Hien takes my sister's old room—the one with a double reserved for "guests." This is the arrangement my parents have tacitly demanded. Comfortable for them, unconscionable to me, and for years I suffered through it to preserve an edgy, tenuous peace. When we return to northern California, Hien and I are back sleeping in the same bed. Yes and no. I give Rubi the simple, truncated answer that is, in fact, quite complicated: at Grandma's house we don't sleep together. By this time the inquisition has veered to topics far more intriguing to him.

My sister and I have never discussed this striking commonality: both of us have partnered with younger Vietnamese men. And why not? Perhaps we realize that no explanation exists, or that we live in a milieu where the odds aren't so slim. Someone has said that a family is an accumulation of consequences. I would add: we are an accumulation of coincidences, and here is one of them.

Dat Tran met my sister when he began working as a research assistant in her university lab. He was an undergraduate; she was thirty-one, divorced, the mother of a six-year-old girl.

A few years earlier, Dat and thirty-seven others had crowded onto a fisherman's boat and fled Vietnam, but days after pushing off from shore they became lost on the South China Sea. Rough waters rocked the small vessel, throwing several escapees overboard. They could not be saved. Workers on an oil rig eventually rescued the surviving boat people and brought them to Thailand, where they were held in a refugee camp for eighteen months and then transferred to a way station in the Philippines. Two years after leaving Vietnam, Dat Tran arrived in the United States. The quest had cost his family the lives of two sons drowned at sea.

I met Hien a year after my sister married Dat Tran in a mountain ceremony, with my niece and three impatient dogs attending, and with Rubi Quang, already conceived, quietly turning our family Asian-European- American.

With his parents and four sisters, Hien left Saigon in 1989. Two older brothers had escaped Vietnam a few years earlier and one sister stayed behind for love. I've seen photographs of Hien taken shortly after his arrival in the United States. At fifteen he seems stunned by his new life in northern California. In those early pictures he appears thin and vulnerable. Vietnamese authorities permitted him to exit the country with the equivalent of only five dollars in his pocket. He spent that on meat to augment the meager helpings of rice and vegetables served at a Thai refugee camp. He arrived in the land of plenty with

one change of clothes, an album containing childhood pictures, and his school records from grades one through nine. He could not speak English. Twelve years later he would visit Vietnam as a young man with an American college degree, a male companion, and a job that paid him fifty times the per capita income of a country whose government had seized everything his family owned.

Hien was twenty-three and I was thirty-seven. By the time we met I had lived in Japan for a year and had worked with immigrants and refugees in San Francisco's Chinatown. I had traveled extensively in Southeast Asia and published articles about the region. I had spent many Wednesday nights at a Buddhist monastery in Berkeley, sitting on cold wood floors for meditation and lectures. Asia had saturated my life. Now it engulfed me in ways I never imagined.

Another coincidence: Hien and my nephew share the same middle name—Quang. When I point this out to Rubi, he listens intently, his mind forming a question with ferocious speed. "Is Hien your brother?" he asks. I could answer easily this time—Hien is not my brother, he's my boyfriend—but I am careful not to preempt my sister's parental authority. She might, after all, wish to explain our relationship in her own way.

"Hien is not my brother," I tell him, adding, "But I am your mother's brother."

My nephew screws up his face. "No!" he says. "You are *not* my mom's brother!"

Rubi has not accepted the concept—that his mother and uncle are related, that we were children together, that we have the same mother and father. Yet he is completely at ease with the possibility that Hien and I are brothers, despite the radical differences in our appearance. Then it occurred to me: knowing my precise relationship to Hien was a prerequisite to my nephew's understanding of *his* relationship to Hien. To put it another way: could Rubi call my partner "Uncle"? No one in my family, including myself, had suggested that he could refer to him as such. I am ashamed by that early omission—as troubled by it as by my complicity in our holiday bedroom assignments.

My teenaged niece Tahoe—she is named after the deep clear lake high in the Sierra—decides that Rubi's question is the most hilarious she has ever heard. She laughs, throws her long blond hair back, and quizzes me in her own tantalizing and ironic way: "Yeah, is Hien your *brother*?" She's laughing because she knows the truth and enjoys flaunting her insider's knowledge next to Rubi's innocence. Her mother had *the talk* with her a few years earlier.

Who was Hien? Brother-in-law to my sister, son-in-law to my parents, uncle to Rubi? Legally, these are unsanctioned titles and, hence, unsanctioned identities. My mother and father treated him as family, but more than ever I craved the formal blessing of law to help answer the question.

Meanwhile, Tahoe yearns for a boyfriend of her own. Having a "BF"—as she likes to abbreviate the word in emails—qualifies me as her advisor. "But that is so *wrong*," she says, "that my uncle has a boyfriend and I don't!" I become her BF mission expert: she solicits my tips on how to meet a boy, asks me whether a kiss given on a dare is a real kiss (no), and sends emails with descriptions of her ideal mate—tall and thin (hunky is acceptable) and "probably blond." As her trusted lead scout in the field of romance, I am charged with identifying all qualifying sixteen-to-twenty-year-old males, wherever on the planet they may exist—and phone numbers would be appreciated, thank you very much.

One operation takes us to a multiplex swarming with teenagers. We decide to forego the

movie and instead engage in a serious round of boy watching. Sitting at an outdoor café, we employ elaborate codes to announce a “sighting.” *Eureka at nine o’clock! Moving into nine-fifteen!* One of her tall, lean types has strolled by, he glances in our direction, what do you think of him? And him and him and him?

From afar, documents have emerged: my father removes a stack of pages from a large envelope and passes them across the kitchen table. The image on the first crisp sheet resembles an organizational chart carefully handdrawn. On closer inspection, I see that our last name has been neatly penned into several rectangles connected by lines traveling across and up and down the page. Unfamiliar first names also appear in those boxes: Elias, Jacob, Johan, Heinrich. I have never known the names of my ancestors. Neither has my father. Now here they are, spelled out methodically, shoulder to shoulder.

Topping our paternal family tree is the name of Elias Rompf, my greatgreat- grandfather, born in 1801 in Germany. According to municipal records, Elias worked as a “royal head smelter.” We know nothing about his father or mother. The history of my father’s family begins with the man who is Rubi Quang’s great-great-great-grandfather. Five generations ago, what would our Grandpa Elias have said about the mingling of Asia and Europe in our blood?

In the United States, Generation X babies were already being born before the Supreme Court struck down the last laws prohibiting mixedrace marriages. Mind-boggling but true: space exploration, computers, and promising genetic research preceded the ultimate dismantling of antimiscegenation doctrine.

In June, 1958, Mildred Jeter, a black woman, and Michael Loving, a white man, were married in Washington, D.C. When they returned to their home state of Virginia, a grand jury indicted the Lovings for violating the state’s ban on interracial marriages. At the time of the Loving indictment, sixteen states still maintained laws forbidding such unions. On January 6, 1959, after pleading guilty to the charge, the couple was sentenced to a year in jail. In its judgment the Circuit Court wrote: Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and He placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The Lovings’ jail sentence was suspended for twenty-five years on the condition that they immediately leave Virginia and never come back.

In November, 1963, Mr. and Mrs. Loving filed a motion to vacate the judgment against them and set aside the sentence on the ground that Virginia’s law repudiated the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. In October, 1964, with their motion not yet decided, the Lovings filed a class action in federal court to declare the law unconstitutional. I was four years old—too young to understand that man-made laws lag behind social and cultural evolution. In January, 1965, the Lovings’ motion to vacate their judgment was denied. Finally, in 1967, the Supreme Court, in *Loving v. Virginia*, held that Virginia’s statute preventing marriages between persons solely on racial classifications violated the Equal Protection and Due Process clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. Mr. and Mrs. Loving could return home, refugees and criminals no longer.

In the high-tech California valley where I lived for two years, the supermarket bustled at nine o’clock at night with Vietnamese, Indian, and Latino families and hardly anyone who looked like me: white and nearly middle-aged and buying quantities for a household of one. Running out for a quart of milk, I traveled ten thousand miles in fifteen minutes. God or continental drift might have assigned us to different places but in Rubi Quang I see the earthly plates reunited. And in my mother and father I observe the nervousness of wanderers who must dip their toes in strange silt.

A ninety-one-year-old woman boards an airplane, something she has never done before. She has long white hair and bright, girlish eyes. Everyone else in her family has departed long ago and now she will join them in a place known only from letters, filtered news, black market videos, and relatives who come back too infrequently. She does not speak a word of English. This will likely be her first and last trans-Pacific journey. She is leaving Saigon forever.

After arriving on the other side, the woman visits the house of strangers. She removes her sandals before stepping up into her first experience of a fully carpeted living room. The softness underfoot amazes her. She digs her toes in and smiles. She points at things—crystal candy dish, fancy drapes, luxurious sofa—and then approaches a glass door and gazes out into a patio and a backyard that is expansive even by American standards.

A small boy bursts into the house and sees his great-grandmother for the first time. She reaches out as instinctively as my sister clasped her son in a moment of caution. The old woman scoops up Rubi Quang in her thin arms and hugs him tightly. She has pronounced him beautiful.

They slide open the glass doors and walk outside, ambling across the lawn, as plush as the carpet inside. The others follow, watching, smiling. American grandparents, Vietnamese great-grandmother, Rubi, his mother and father. All families are ancient. And where have I read this: all things change toward their opposition through movement? Everything within itself contains its opposite. In a Buddhist text, the laws of physics? Out in the yard we are pitched to and fro, opposites tossed into sameness and back again. Rubi carries a portion of each of us, from his grandma raking her feet through the grass to a man called Elias and a couple named Loving, and for that reason he seems older than any of us.

My new life began at twenty-nine when I paid a visit to my mother and father at the end of a five-week trek through Thailand and Malaysia. Soon I would enter law school and become temporarily lost in a world that was far more foreign to me than the destinations of my travels. I had returned from Asia thin from a diet of fruit, fish, and rice, newly bearded, tanned and smoothed by days spent in warm salty bays. My altered appearance, I thought, might remind my parents that I was no longer a child. I came to them as a man—self-assured, deliberate, adventurous, an adult who had ended one journey to begin another.

That evening I pulled my father away from the televised baseball game casting silver glints on the wall of the den. I told my mother that we needed to talk. The three of us sat down at the kitchen table. In her nightgown my mother looked insouciant and youthful, her tiredness obscured by dim lighting. I felt the chafing weight of duty, procrastination, fear. On the surface we are a simple family, so I kept it simple: This is who I am. I want you to know. Do you have any questions?

“I thought you were going to tell us that,” my mother said.

My father’s first worry: that I would not carry on the family name, that my revelation marked the certain death of the family tree as he perceived it. To him, my words were poison fed to the roots.

While sitting with them, I began to feel the giddy weightlessness of relief. My mother purported to have known all along. My father, distressed by our name’s dead-end, quietly went to bed. Although they could not say it, my mother and father feared that they would

be different because I was different.

The next morning, an hour before my departure, my mother cried.

“I just want to say there’s no one else in the family like that,” she said. “So how could you be?”

But I was not alone. I was merely the first to proclaim myself. At night, lying on my back, I conjured the bent and soaring limbs of our family tree and recognized the faces of those before me.

My father’s aunt, the elderly spinster and writer.

My mother’s handsome male cousin, a photographer who never married and who withdrew to the Nevada desert.

My father’s cousin, the eccentric loner deemed content in his charming, comedic ways.

My grandmother’s sister, the nun draped in black, a mystery in life and death.

In lonesome moments I embrace this lineage. Writer, artist, comedian, nun, all linked by the connective tissues of family and circumstance, by a common background silence, alone and yet not alone, each locked in a perpetual limbo between belonging and not belonging. All of them pressed into lifetimes of secrecy.

In the year of their fortieth anniversary, I accompany my parents on their first trip to New York City. For their debut I’ve dressed them in chic big-city black. Over four days they will become what they have never been: urbanites, theatergoers, cultural dilettantes.

Meandering through the West Village on Saturday evening, we pass a shop called “Condomania.” I begin to direct my mother’s attention elsewhere, to the bakery with home-style cakes or to the charming antiques shop—anywhere—but then I stop myself. This is New York and I am being ridiculous. We should be peering through the window together, laughing and aghast at the super-sized products. Fear, shyness, indecision, myth—these have ruled my parents’ lives for too long. I want them to see worlds they’ve kept at a safe distance. I want them to see their son clearly and wholly. Strolling through downtown, I should only hope that they notice everything.

We step into a café off Seventh Avenue and take seats near the window. After ordering coffee we watch the steady foot traffic outside: mostly young men in tank tops venturing out to clubs or bars for the evening. After a long silence my father says, “Have you noticed that the men around here work out a lot?”

“I’ve noticed that,” I say, adding, “You look good in your new shirt, Dad.” He grins. Back at the hotel, he had resisted putting on the outfit I’d bought for him. A son does not dress his father. A son does not sleep with his boyfriend in the family abode. Yet some rules, unlike the energy of the universe, can be created and destroyed. As man-about-town, my father settles into his new look.

I have come to Vietnam with Hien Quang Le to tour the country, from south to north, for two weeks. Hien’s first visit since leaving as a teenager shuttles him, moment by moment, between nostalgia and confusion. In Saigon he sees familiar scenery and recognizes the alleys he once played in, but he cannot return to his childhood home. The family house still stands on a side street near Cholon, the old Chinese district, but that part of his life is

gone forever. Most of his friends and relatives have dispersed to California, Paris, the countryside. He holds an American passport now. He has paid a visa fee to enter Vietnam. And still he is caught between two cultures—two lives. This is most apparent when he struggles to remember a Vietnamese word while speaking to his family and, at the same time, he has not learned the English equivalent so that he can tell me what he yearns to express in his mother language. It is a hard, lonely place, a dark interstice where I cannot reach him.

In Saigon, Hien observes that people now own more appliances in their homes but daily life has not drastically changed. In the house belonging to his sister who stayed behind, chickens are cooped in the kitchen and slaughtered there for Saturday lunch on the same concrete floor where laundry and dishes are scrubbed clean by hand. Fishmongers call at the front door. On the sidewalks outside, women who are well over seventy operate portable cafés with miniature stools and canisters of hot tea slung over their bent backs. “I expected more dramatic change,” Hien tells me. “I have a connection to the country and to the people but I feel that I don’t belong here.” His face is fuller and he sports a stylish haircut but I see the same expression from the picture taken after he arrived in the United States. He has not left Vietnam entirely and he cannot fully return. His pilgrimage to the motherland has turned into a formidable undertaking, the immensity of loss and gain too heavy for one person to bear.

In the center of the country near Da Nang, where American troops once kept base and got their R & R at China Beach, we visit Hoi An, a busy fishing hamlet of narrow streets and picturesque foot bridges. In the afternoon heat we come upon one of the town’s oldest structures, now protected as a historical landmark. It’s called the Tran Family Chapel, but it’s not a church in any usual sense of the word. It is the ancestral home of eight generations of a family that shares my nephew’s last name.

Pale yellow walls surround a lush courtyard and a large single-story house where family members tend to their chores, keeping the Chapel in order and working as guides and translators. Fine ivory carvings, embroidered panels, and intricate scrolls fill the rooms. A young Tran escorts me to the back of the house, through French doors to a patio overlooking an enclosed yard, where numerous miniature trees grow in tall pots. This part of the Chapel, my guide tells me, is called the Placenta Garden. For hundreds of years the Trans have buried the placenta of their newborn babies in the soil of the potted trees, believing such practice ensures that their children will always come home, no matter where they go in the world and regardless of their successes or failures. Lingering in the Placenta Garden, I try to absorb its tranquility and significance, but the idea of eight generations of inhumed afterbirth begins to break my heart. How many never returned? How many realized what Hien realized—that returning is impossible? How many grieving parents? I think of Dat Tran’s brothers, drowned at sea, and of Dat himself, who has not gone back to Vietnam and who does not, to my bafflement, teach his son to speak Vietnamese.

What blend of soil and flesh calls back missing parents? At the close of the Vietnam War more than 125,000 Amerasian children were left behind by their American fathers: sons and daughters of servicemen and civilian contractors in Vietnam, Thailand, Korea, Laos, Cambodia, Japan, and the Philippines. These children have been called the Forsaken Ones. I’ve seen them, as young adults, on the streets of Saigon. Glance and glance again. The resemblance astonishes me. In their faces I see an older Rubi Quang.

We ride a motorcycle through Saigon, Hien in front and me in the back. There are no traffic lights and no one stays in the lanes. In the thick, continuous traffic I try to

understand the flow. Bikes and people stream without end and the smoky air coats my throat. Surrounded by motorbikes, some carrying entire families—father, mother, child, grandmother—I am overwhelmed by the thought that my annual income could support 180 Vietnamese and the cost of my vacation alone would double the yearly salary of the cyclist in front of us. In the hot wind of the ride, Hien and I feel at once burdened and free. As travelers on holiday we are not obliged to reconcile disparities, yet we're faced with many: between his new and old countries, between the person you are and the person you might have been with only the slightest twist in circumstance or coincidence.

Despite a profound love for this country, Hien knows that he will never live here again.

On the eve of our departure we take Hien's young niece and nephew for a swim at a fancy sports club. Like Rubi Quang, the boy exhibits boundless, happy energy as he rides me piggyback across the length of the pool. The water on a humid night feels good against the skin.

From the deck, a Vietnamese man watches us. He's in his thirties and has been drinking beer with friends stretched out lazily on lounge chairs. "Where are you from?" he asks me. From California, I tell him, although the truth is I've lived in so many places that I no longer know how to answer the question. "I'm from Washington, D.C.," he says. "I'm a U. S. citizen now, but I came back to visit my family." He speaks with evident pride; it is true that many in Vietnam would consider him fortunate. I wonder if he is a Tran, if his mother and father had buried part of him to guarantee his return. As he prepares to dive into the pool, he says, "But I don't like D.C.— too many blacks."

My lover swims across the blue pool, children in tow, splashing, splashing. With regained breath I make my way toward him. But what am I swimming from? Hatred, fear, the opposite contained within? Our movements are slow. I try to float on my back and watch for the evening's first stars, but my body is now tired and I begin to sink in the cool, darkening water.

After four years—so many flights, so many visits—the arrangement changed. I cannot pinpoint the timing of the shift or explain how the decision was made. Perhaps it happened because my old room had become storage, or perhaps time itself simply lives up to our proverbs. At Grandma's house, Hien and I now sleep together. We sleep together and in the morning my mother and father see that we are still the same.

At the end of one recent stay I back the car slowly out of the driveway. Hien sits beside me. Everyone else—everyone who is close to me—stands together in front of the house, waving goodbye.

The boy, like his great-grandfather, like his Vietnamese uncle, has traveled a great distance at tremendous speed. These days my own journeys are more modest. I spend more time close to home, listening to whispers from a bedroom, a kitchen, a shaded patio garden. I do not expect to have children of my own. I have yet to fully understand the families I already have. As I drive away, my nephew's voice becomes louder.

"Bye, Uncle David!" Rubi Quang says. "Bye, Uncle Hien!"

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