

## Chapter 1

# The Sticky Rice Seller

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‘Take a seat! Take a seat! Don’t stand there thinking about it. Make a choice. Trust me. Everything is tasty and cheap. Only seven sickles a serve. Ten clams if you’re hungry or five twigs if you’re on a diet. But you’re already so slim, you don’t need to worry about that. In fact, why don’t you buy a jumbo serving with extra dripping for 15 Uncle Hos? It’s enough for your breakfast, lunch and dinner. And I bet you’ll be back tomorrow for more.

‘Take a seat! Here’s a serving with pummelled mung beans. Eat first, pay later, you won’t be disappointed. It doesn’t get better than this.’

I learnt a long time ago that you can’t afford to be timid when it comes to selling sticky rice.

That’s not to say I’m pushy or think I’m better than I am. My stall is small. Fifteen little stools and an old market umbrella – that’s all the style and comfort I have to offer. I don’t pretend to be a skilled chef or aspire to own a restaurant. Why would I want to do all that training only to make food that people don’t know how to eat? And even if I had the money to open a restaurant, why would

I want to pay rent and taxes, fill in forms, follow regulations and manage people? Better to be my own boss, work in the open air and make the most of what the heavens have given me.

I know my place and it suits me fine.

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I'm forever grateful to my grandmother, who started teaching me how to make and sell sticky rice when I was six.

Gran took great pride in rubbing people the wrong way. My mother says that her mother could cultivate curses like they were bean sprouts. She swore at the competition, at customers who did not treat her with respect, and at strangers she didn't like the look of.

'Put some clothes on, hussy!' she once hollered to one of my high school classmates who was walking by. 'Yes, I've heard about how you could seduce the Buddha in all 28 of his manifestations. Your mother was no different. Go home and slip into a pair of pants or a long tunic – that skirt's so breezy I'm catching a cold looking at you. And while you're there, clean that syrup off your cunt before a wasp comes along and stings you!'

Another time, before I left Gran to go north with my mother, I gave some money to a beggar with only one leg and one arm. I don't usually give to beggars but it was the New Year and he said he was a war veteran who needed the money to return to his village. When Gran saw what I was doing she called the beggar a drunken retard who didn't know a fart from a shit. With lightning speed, she snatched the money back, put it in her shirt pocket and told the beggar he had two more limbs than he deserved.

Last time we spoke on the phone, I told Gran I was doing well enough in Hanoi but I still missed her and didn't have many friends.

'Your problem is not a lack of friends. It's that you don't have any enemies', she exclaimed. 'You're too abiding. People piss all over you and you smile as if it's perfume. A good woman needs enemies. That's why I am not rich and respected, because my enemies have been sub-standard, too easy to overcome. You're even worse-off because you don't have any at all. You have to learn to push back, make people fear and hate you. Otherwise they'll screw you over.'

Gran is really something. And I suppose she's right. I'm not one to swim against the current. I like to float along. And I can't hold bitterness in my belly and hurl abuse at others like she does. I prefer to be sweet-scented and supple, like my rice.



Gran and I are a little alike in the sense that both of us can't help but make up stories about people. The difference being that while she insults others, I try to identify with them. I also keep my stories to myself.

It's usually less than a minute of inactivity before I am conjuring up tales about strangers on the street. For me the traffic is a procession of warm and wonderful characters. As the parade rolls by, I marvel at the drama of each character's life. In my mind I follow them home at night to peer through their windows and listen through their walls. From my street corner I discover people's heartfelt aspirations and deepest secrets.

There's 'Mr Binh', license plate 29-Y2-6258, who some days wears a white helmet with 'I love lipstick' on it and on other days a yellow one branded 'Versace'. Both of them, I imagine, were chosen by his wife sometime in 2008 after motorbike helmets became compulsory. They were newlyweds then and his wife couldn't decide whether to get the white one – because it had a hole in the back for her ponytail – or the yellow one, because it was cosmopolitan and sassy.

Mr Binh insisted they buy both. His wife protested because they were trying to save money to set up a sushi stall and move out of her parents' house. 'I don't need one for myself,' Mr Binh asserted, 'I'll just wear whatever helmet you're not using.'

When she said it would not be proper for him to wear a woman's helmet, he responded: 'What could be more manly than for me to look after my wife?'

Now I imagine that they have a son, their business is up and going and they have a second motorbike. Over the years, Mr Binh's wife routinely suggests that they buy a new, more befitting helmet for him. But he's always maintained he would not use it: 'Sharing these helmets reminds me of our humble beginnings and makes me pay attention to how you do your hair each morning.'

And there goes 'Mademoiselle Trinh', licence plate 56-A1-2344. She is younger than I am but has seen the world and encountered both triumph and heartache. I am drawn to the tiny butterfly tattoo on her right ankle and envisage her having had it done in a Parisian parlour near the Sorbonne where she attained her business degree.

After going to work for a British finance company, she met and fell in love with a young law graduate who had a black camel tattooed on his right arm, a tribute to his father's Moroccan homeland. He adored Trinh and called her his *petite papillon*, despite her having grown five centimetres taller and six kilograms heavier from eating creamy sauces and croissants.

When the global financial crisis hit, Trinh's company went bankrupt and she decided to return to Vietnam, where she had been offered a prestigious consultancy position with an oil company. Before settling upon this decision, Trinh and her boyfriend stayed up through the night discussing their future over red wine and kisses. On several occasions Trinh's lover had said he'd like to move to Vietnam. She told him that her country was at once developing and struggling, and that there were many opportunities for someone like him to make a difference. But in the morning they agreed that he should stay behind to pursue a career in politics, as they were convinced he was destined to become France's Barack Obama.

Sometimes I wonder what would happen if Binh, Trinh or one of the many characters from my daydreams stopped to talk to me.



They would surely be friendlier and more fascinating than some of my regulars, especially the ones who are always complaining. Not about the quality of the sticky rice, of course. Usually they object to the prices, which they seem to think go up for them alone.

'My costs are rising too', I remind them. 'Do you think I'm in the sticky rice business to make it big or something? Look at my clothes! Hardly high fashion. Look at my waist! Where's the fat? The only thing thinner is my profit margin.'

Old people pine for the days when a serving of rice cost a 100 su coin. The ex-neighbourhood cell leader says he preferred it when he had to line up for rations and didn't even have to think about what to eat or how much it cost – it was all on the ticket. University students moan because they don't have enough for rent, books and food, although soon they'll be making much more money than me. Even rich people sometimes complain about the prices, but I suppose they wouldn't be rich if they didn't know how to pinch their pennies.

Fortunately, most of my customers don't complain – most of them don't say anything. I have served some customers more than a thousand times without ever exchanging a full sentence. Sometimes I don't even know their faces. They pull up beside my stall with their facemasks on and their engines still running: 'Corn rice, 10 clams worth' or 'Same as before', is as much as I'll get.

I like to identify them by the pattern on the facemasks they wear to protect them from the pollution and dirt. Mr Red Tartan comes at 6:45 every weekday morning and has black bean rice wrapped in a banana leaf, no condiments. Mrs Paisley Green and her Yellow Love Heart daughter like deep fried shallots on their peanut sticky rice. When I see my reticent regulars coming I begin preparing their parcels so they're ready to go before they have even stopped. I leap up, loop the bag over the hooks on their motorcycles, collect the money and wave them on. That's what I call service.

The morning exercisers who come to my stall in groups and bark orders are also locked into my memory by their clothing: badminton player short shorts, tango dancer heels, tai chi buttoned tunics, and walkers in their matching cotton tracksuits.

And there are the junior high school students who have eaten my rice since they were spoon fed it by their mothers and their maids. I feel like an older sister to many of them, but while it was easy to chat to them when they were happy toddlers, now most of them are dark and burdened. They grunt more than speak and stare down at the ground as they eat, resenting the sun for bringing another day.

'Have a seat, little sister', I said to one young lady the other day.

'Got sticky rice?'

'Every type and in any way you want it.'

'Got egg?'

'Aye yah, I'm out of boiled eggs. Do you want some pork? I'll get you a nice juicy piece.'

'Whatever.'

'Do you want some gravy on the top?'

'Okay. Whatever.'



Sometimes I also wonder what sort of stories my customers and passers-by make up about me.

'She's nice enough', I guess they would say. 'Honest, never misses a day's work. She's from the countryside for sure; there's no way she has a residency permit. Not much schooling by the look of her. She's done fairly well given where she's come from. Probably makes just enough to get by and sends home whatever she can. Poor dear. She would have been pretty were it not for the birthmark on her face.'

They would be right about me working hard and of course about my birthmark, but wrong about everything else. While I am not from Hanoi, I've been living in the city now for seven years. And I have a permit because my father is a property-owning resident. He's a professor of fine arts, or was before he retired. My mother was once a famous lacquerware artist and, although I don't really know them, I have a half-brother in Germany who is a famous sculptor and a half-sister in Finland who is married to a fashion journalist. Obviously, I'm not rich; but I make a steady income, enough to pay my way and save a little for the uncertain future. I can even pass on some money to my father each month, which he calls his 'fund for green tea and mung bean sweets'.

And although I am not brilliant like others in my family, I too have a talent, one that I prefer to keep hidden.

I'll never forget when I first discovered this gift. Mother and I were pressed beside one another on a little wooden desk and bench set that my father had bought for me on one of his visits. She was teaching me the alphabet. My mother liked to draw each letter so that a B was never just a B, but also a butterfly or a bouncing ball. Every A she wrote was a picturesque snow-topped house from a Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale. At that stage I didn't know that my mother had been a celebrated artist; I didn't really know what an artist was. So while I liked her ornate pictures, I sometimes took them for granted and on occasion was frustrated when her doodling stopped me from moving on to the next letter. Once when I grumbled that I wanted to draw the letters by myself, she snapped and told me that people would have paid a great deal for the creations that I brushed aside or scribbled over.

Shortly before my fifth birthday, I was copying letters my mother had written for me when I told her that 'I like writing Ds and Đs the most. I like how I can change a furry brown letter into a slick and shiny one with just a single little line.'

My mother froze. I knew I had done or said something horrible. It was as if I had suddenly transformed into a monster before her eyes.

My mother slapped the lead pencil from my hand. ‘Heavens above! Isn’t the birthmark enough punishment? How many possible ways can this child be cursed?!’

She regained her senses and stood up to retrieve the pencil before returning to the desk and looking straight at me. Mother said I was not a bad girl, but that there was something bad inside me, a seed planted in a previous life by nasty spirits that could not be allowed to sprout. She said that my senses were confused, my wires all crossed.

‘Letters are letters – and that’s that. If they’re black, then they’re black. If they’re on paper then they feel like paper. Simple as that. Normal people don’t see them as colours or feel them. That’s how it is. That’s the way you should be.’

Mother held my hand, the one she had just slapped, and said to me in a slow and severe voice: ‘It’s important, Mai, that everyone thinks you’re normal. I’ll try to help you fix this, but you can’t tell anyone about it, not even your Gran. Otherwise people will not like you and they’ll say horrible things about me.’

As I grew up and went to school, I gained a better idea of how different I was to others. I realised that even if I tried as hard as I could, I could not help but associate letters and also numbers with colours and textures. It was and still is inescapable to me that 1, 10, 100 and so forth are red and rough like gravel; 2, 20, 200 are blue and puffy like clouds; and every *u* is gunmetal grey and wet like fresh rice paper. One of the first things I did was to find a red pencil and write ‘2’ after ‘2’ after ‘2’, thinking that this might somehow reset my senses. I could see that it was red on the paper. Yet no matter how hard I tried, ‘2’ was still puffy and blue.

But in truth it was not long before I stopped trying to fix myself, largely because my gift had benefits and gave me comfort, even some pleasure.

Whereas other children had to repeat letters and words many times over before they could spell them, I only needed to hear or see them once or twice to remember them forever. I also learnt arithmetic much faster than others because there was always a multicoloured abacus floating in front of me that I could manoeuvre in my mind in a fraction of an instant. In history and science class I never had to cram or use crib notes because recalling dates, facts and formulae was a cinch.

The major difficulty that I had at school, along with being lonely, was the crushing boredom. I dealt with both by thinking of my favourite numbers and progressions – multiples, exponentials and Fibonacci sequences – which enveloped me in a warm, familiar haze. Even today I find myself constructing this shield around me whenever I am anxious.

But of course I never told anyone at school about my condition. This was not hard given that no one was interested in me. I was the pitiful girl with the birthmark on her face. I never put my hand up in class, and when the teacher called upon me to respond to a question I often answered incorrectly. Usually this was because I was not paying attention, but there were also times when I gave the wrong answer because it seemed like the right thing to do. It was what others expected of me. And it would've made my mother happy to know I was doing my best not to stand out.

Mother occasionally encouraged me to tell her about my gift and how I coped with it. I suspect this was not to support or console me, but rather to monitor it in the same way that she might a disease. But I don't mean to speak unkindly of her. She always tried to keep me safe and do what she thought was best.

When I was older and after much prodding, Mother told me that I was not the only one in the family with special abilities. My father had an older sister who saw numbers as colours and smelt letters. When my father's mother discovered her ability, she did everything possible to cure her. They made regular trips to the family communal house and church in the hope that the ancestors and the Almighty could help them to drive away the evil spirits tormenting my aunt. They tried acupuncture and all manner of concoctions from simple rice and onion soup to expensive bear bile and Western elixirs. One or some of these measures was apparently effective, but the side effects and stress made my aunt giddy during the day and kept her from sleeping at night. Because everyone knew she did not sense things properly, my aunt didn't have any friends and never found a husband despite being very beautiful; no man wanted to risk catching her affliction let alone having children with her.

I would have liked to meet my aunt and have always thought that we could have helped one another. After I moved to Hanoi, I asked my father about her and he told me she had passed away in his home village not long after his mother. Father said that he didn't want to be reminded of his sister, so I never mentioned her to him again.

A few years ago when my neighbour bought a computer, one of the first things that I searched for on the internet was whether there were other people out there whose senses were jumbled. Back then I didn't know anything about the internet and computers, so I asked my neighbour to look it up for me and told her I knew someone who knew someone who had that affliction and thought it eerie but also a little cool. I was curious to know more.

We found a story about a 43-year-old man in Kien Giang province who claimed to be able to see and feel time as if it was a colourful spectrum that spanned out and up ahead of him. As a consequence, he had a stopwatch in his head

accurate to the millisecond. The story began by claiming that the man was possessed, but it ended with some facts and figures that made me feel at ease. Apparently, babies are born into the world with their senses mixed, but quickly learn to discriminate between touch, taste, sight, smell and sound. One per cent of the population hold on to part of this trait and associate colours with letters, numbers or days. There are others who smell words, see music and even taste names. Most importantly, I learnt that my condition had a name: 'synaesthesia', which as a word is honeydew melon green and feels like a plush rug rubbed the wrong way.

When my neighbour called the guy who could see time a freak, I agreed. But in my heart I felt connected to that middle-aged man from Kien Giang. I wondered if, like me, he had experienced sensory overload the first time he entered a train station and was hustled and bustled by all the colours leaping out of the timetables and notice boards. And I have always been grateful to the journalist who wrote his story, as it gave me hope that there were people out there who might understand and accept me.

Today I'm more accepting of my gift and do not hesitate to use it, especially at work. On busy mornings I can handle several transactions at once without getting flustered. And I take great pride in never giving the wrong change. I'm not all that good with faces, but am excellent with everything else – number plates, names, dates, clothes, songs and colours – so there is always enough information for me to recognise my customers and give them that personal touch.

Of course, I don't want them to know about my gift and don't expect them to care where I've come from, what I can do or who I am.

But there are times when I wish they could judge me by something more than just my humble trade and the birthmark on my face. What bothers me most is when people glance in my direction and whisper to one another with belittling sympathy, as if I had just arrived from the rice fields and had never seen my reflection ... as if I had not once imagined what my life would be like if I was unblemished ... as if the sight of me had never brought my mother to tears because my face reminded her of all the wrongs she had committed in this life and others.



To know the seeds sown in former lives,  
Behold the fruits reaped in this one.  
To know the fruits of future lives,  
Behold the seeds sown in this one.

My mother has long been guided by this folktale about the origins of watermelons, and is forever reminding me to heed the weighty presence of karma in our lives.

But Mother has never really got beyond the first two lines. For her the past is rusted on to both the present and the future; she is convinced that wrongdoings accumulate across lives and down the generations, so that the most people can ever hope for is to stop our karmic condition from getting worse.

I take a more positive approach to my destiny and focus on the last two lines, which tell me that by avoiding evil and doing good, I can enrich my soul for an eternity.

But I don't blame Mother for being the way she is. And I know from speaking to Gran that my mother was once a lot like me.

My mother was one of the most promising and beautiful lacquerware artists in the South. She was so talented that she received a scholarship to study at Can Tho University when she was only 16. This is where she refined and developed her unique style, producing work that was praised for capturing the joyous soul of the Mekong. She adored how each layer of lacquer is a fresh start. With every wash, Mother once wistfully told me, she could incorporate new colours and apply different techniques. At the same time, previous layers were ever-present, so that strokes of both folly and genius could never be totally glossed over.

Mother had learnt the craft from her father's brother, who was a well-regarded lacquerware artist in the North. Their family had moved south in 1954 because their priest had told them Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam was no place for Catholics. For a time they slept in makeshift tents on the streets of Saigon, receiving handouts from the church and the government before moving to my home town in Long An province, where my mother was born. My great uncle eventually opened a successful shop, Thang Long Pty Ltd, specialising in evocative images from the North: one-pillar pagodas, Co Loa spirals, Temples of Literature and misty Fansipan Mountains.

He also trained apprentices, the most talented of whom was my mother. My great uncle conveyed this to me not long before he died. 'Her varnish was as shiny as a cockroach's wings and elusive in the sense that you were never quite sure if they were red, black or brown. She had amazing instincts. There are many vagaries when it comes to lacquerware. For most artists it takes years for them to judge how their paints and lacquers set, particularly when the humidity and temperature fluctuate. Even the oldest master is prone to errors that result in undesirable shades and sheens. But your mother picked it up very quickly and never got things wrong. To this day I don't know how she did it, and fervently wish she could have taught me.'

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My parents met in 1986, not long after my father became a professor at the University of Fine Arts. As one of the youngest professors ever appointed, he made his reputation as a prolific sculptor during and after the American War who had published pamphlets, articles and a much-respected book on the function of art as a binding and mobilising agent in revolutionary societies.

It was for this reason that father caused a great stir when, after being awarded his professorship, he declared that he had outgrown both sculpting and socialist realism. In what is now regarded as a historic lecture to faculty and students, he pronounced that the time for war was over and therefore wartime art should be confined to the dwindling twentieth century. A new and renovated creative spirit, he asserted, was needed to connect the people to their past and inspire them to march forward. And so he had chiselled his last square jaw, and all of his tools along with his extensive collection of casts in the shape of hammers, sickles and stars were stacked outside the door of his studio for anyone to take.

But this did not mean that my father was no longer an artist-patriot. On the contrary, as he explained in his speech, he was heading across the 17th parallel to study Southern culture and explore ways to bring it together with the North and the Centre.

He was especially keen to see how lacquerware had developed since the Vietnamese marched south from the Red River Delta. Previously he had thought that only Northern art, with its longer and purer history, could be truly Vietnamese. Now he suspected that his Southern brothers and sisters had fashioned something distinctive out of their contact with the French and Americans, and that these vestiges should be preserved rather than eradicated. The North was of course the cradle of Vietnamese civilisation, but this didn't mean that Southerners were barbarians. My father recognised that the Southerners knew how to make money, which after the war was a most valuable skill. He sensed that the export market for lacquerware was about to mushroom and generate much wealth for the people while also promoting their culture overseas. Many regarded my father as a radical, others called him a revisionist, but it was not long before he was celebrated as a visionary.

My mother played a large part in his success because it was her artwork that my father first brought back to the North, where it was met with much acclaim. Their relationship, however, was thorny from the beginning. Mother was frightfully cold towards my father's advances. It took two separate visits to

Can Tho University and over four days of constantly watching her at work and asking her questions about her life and art before my father could even coax a sentence from her: 'So, you're the professor from the North are you?'

But for all her aloofness, Mother was impressed by him. My father enchanted her by recalling trips to China and Eastern Europe, and inspired her by speaking of the changing seasons in Hanoi and all the places up and down the coast of Vietnam that he had visited.

He was far more suave than anyone she had met. Mother once told me that she had hardly ever seen a man tuck his shirt into his trousers until my father came along. Now, as he did then, my father ensures that the colour of his shirt matches his socks. His out-and-about shoes always have buckles because slip-ons, in his view, should never leave the house and laces are only required for sport.

Even today, when he is well into his sixties, Father can charm people with only a few words. He has an air of esteem that allows him to look down on others, even though he is a little shorter than most men. I've always noticed how my mother stays close to him when he talks to other women and looks wary, as if she would prefer it if he did not.

If there was one thing that finally warmed my mother's heart, it was the feature article that my father wrote for *Van Nghe* magazine, in which he recorded his encounter with a Southern belle who had mastered the art of lacquerware – an article which now occupies a prized place in his library. In the article he describes my mother's astonishing gift for turning two dimensions into three, such that the first time he saw her pictures any doubts he harboured about giving up sculpture dissipated. He felt as if he could reach out and touch her images in the same way they reached out from the wood panelling and touched him. Her human figures were sometimes abstract and a little romantic, but always revelled and sang. And he was sure he could smell her dazzling yellow apricot blossoms and *mai* flowers that reminded him of spring. What impressed him most was her mix of precision and improvisation when inlaying mother-of-pearl and crushed eggshells into her pictures; as if each speck had been placed on the picture by a swallow that had grown tired of building nests.

Looking back, I am certain that my parents were brought together by fate. It did not matter that Father was twice Mother's age and that he lived a thousand kilometres away – neither of them had a choice. And ultimately it didn't even matter that he was already married and had two children. Although my mother maintains that she did not know until it was too late, my grandmother insists otherwise: 'There's no goddamn way a man like your father would be single and it did not take an artist's eye to see the impression the ring left on his finger.'

I can also thank my grandmother for a more recent revelation that, while my parents' union was foretold in the stars, my coming into this world was not.

'Your mother was very young – much younger than you are now – and so very frightened', Gran disclosed to me. 'She was afraid of what people would think about her and what it would mean for our family. I knew it would be hard, but said that she had done the deed and had to face the consequences, and that I would help her. After all, I had a fair bit of experience as a war widow and single mother. And I assured her that I would slap senseless anyone who spoke poorly of her or our family. I don't think this helped. And so for a while I thought I would have to tie up your mother and force-feed her until you were born. But in the end, it was your father who came to your rescue with his pandan-sweet words. Apparently he was, for perhaps the very first time, honest with your mother. He too was a Catholic and although he had hardly been to church since he was confirmed, it still meant something to him. It was an anchor that weighed down his soul. It meant that he could not leave his wife and family in Hanoi, nor could he take her on as a second wife. Above all, it meant that neither of them could risk eternal damnation by aborting their unborn child.'

Father said he knew Mother's suffering and shame would far surpass his and that she would have to give up her scholarship and return to her home town, at least for a while. As penance, he promised to send whatever money he could to her every month and promote her career, so that in time she would not need his help.

With newfound steeliness that she had built up over tearful nights, my mother told my father that he could keep his money and favours, and that he should not overstate his powers of manipulation. It was *their* mistake and *their* weakness and not his alone. Moreover, he would need the money to visit her and the child every year. This was the first of her three conditions. The second was that he was never to commit adultery again, especially with her, and that she in turn would know no other man. This was because they could consider themselves betrothed with the wedding ceremony set for one month after the first anniversary of his wife's natural death. The ceremony would be civil or Buddhist because this whole affair had given her the reason she had been seeking to reject the Almighty and condemn Catholicism as fit only for those who are either totally bereft of power or intending to abuse it. The final condition was that my father tell his wife in Hanoi everything and in so doing pass on my mother's deepest apologies.

My father agreed, and their contract sealed my entry into the world, with the stain on my face serving as evidence to all that a mistake had been made.

After I was born, my mother tried to revive her career. But her pictures were gloomy, almost macabre, and did not appeal to the buyers of the late 1980s and early 1990s who were looking for uplifting images.

New technologies also arrived, polymers that hardened in minutes rather than days and were easier to work with because their colour and sheen were predictable under all conditions. The factories that replaced the family stores in my home town could produce dozens of pictures a day: exact copies of girls in long tunics riding bikes, egrets in lotus ponds and boys on buffaloes playing the flute. Mother insisted that natural materials were far superior because the richness of their colours improved over time, while the artificial products would fade. But this only made her look outmoded and desperate.

It was not long before she turned to the factories for work. But her heart was not in it, and it became impossible for her to copy the same image over and over again. To make matters worse, she was castigated by her boss whenever she introduced the slightest creative deviation. After a few months the new polymer toxins started to sear her skin, causing sores on her hands, which meant that she could not hold me when I was small.

Eventually, Mother gave up and began helping Gran sell sticky rice and volunteering at the pagoda. When I commenced school, she relented and accepted some money from my father, but it was sent to my grandmother so that she would never have to see or touch it.

It was not until I was 17 that we moved north and my parents were finally married, although my mother maintained that she would have been just as content to wait longer. Only a few of my father's friends and colleagues were present at the ceremony and reception. I remember it was more solemn than romantic or celebratory. Everyone knew it was a marriage of redemption. To this day my mother refuses to lie in the same bed as my father, asserting that there is no room for both her and the spirit of his first wife.



Mai – she has the same name as me – lives in a serviced apartment two districts away, but once a week comes for my peanut sticky rice. She says she likes it because it is a little sweeter than others and because my sesame garnish reminds her of the old country. I always stock a few Styrofoam containers for when I run out of bowls or banana leaves – Mai insists on eating out of one because she believes it's cleaner and more modern.

Although I would never turn anyone away, sometimes I wish Mai didn't come as frequently as her once-weekly visit. She sits at my stall for up to an hour and has a knack for getting on my nerves and embarrassing me in front of customers. I hardly get a word in with her and when I do, she reminds me that more and more I sound like a 'hiccupping and hissing Hanoian' who's lost her Southern roots.

'Let me tell you, I'm sick to death of these Northerners. I'm sick of their stinginess and uncivilised ways. There's money and opportunities everywhere in Vietnam and yet here I am living in a city of beggars and bumpkins.'

I was glad that everyone in earshot chose to ignore her.

'You know, if it wasn't for Joe [she never neglected to mention her Canadian husband] there's no way I would be in this swamp. Of course Joe doesn't want to be here either. He says that no one really wants to do business up here; there's too much red tape and Northerners have a no-can-do attitude to everything. He doesn't trust them. Neither do I. They're never straight with you. They're polite and official to your face, but stab you in the back at the very first opportunity. Joe says that Southerners are much better to deal with because they are used to Western ways and expectations. He tells me the only reason anyone does business in the North is the government compels them to. You know, the Northerners are dragging us Southerners down and taking advantage of us. My German friend Gertrude says the same thing about the East Germans, except the difference here is we lost the war and are forced to prop up the victors!'

I didn't say anything, but tried to make apologetic eye contact with my customers and somehow convey that I did not agree with my namesake.

Mai is not the only Southerner I know who is suspicious and scathing of Northerners. Before we left for Hanoi to join my father, Gran informed me that I had no chance of selling her rice 'up there' because Northern tastebuds were poorly evolved.

'Their tongues are caked in buffalo dung', she said. 'They don't know what good food is and never will because they're so closed-minded. And I should know. After all, I married one!'

'Your grandfather was from Nghe An province, where people are wiry and proud – they're wooden carp eaters. It's true, you know, people from there were so poor and proud that they used to put a wooden fish in the middle of the table to fool passers-by and perhaps even themselves that they could afford meat!'

Gran had never been beyond Nha Trang, but was resolute that there was no one worth meeting and nothing worth doing in the North.

She compared the *cai luong* operas of the South, which we often watched on video discs at home with the *cheo* musical plays on television. The modern *cai luong* operas were filled with light, emotion and beauty, while the primitive *cheo* folktales were in her view closer to re-education than entertainment.

‘The Northerners don’t know anything about spontaneity, fun or romance; everything is a lesson for them about the nation’s 5,000-year history or the glorious Uncle Ho, blessed be his name. Give me a break! Those Northerners, they might be able to mobilise for war, but that’s all they’re good for. There’s no reason for you and your mother to move up there: I pity you for doing so.’

I like to think that that was Gran’s way of saying she would miss me.

Despite Gran’s warnings, I was optimistic about moving to Hanoi and thought I would fit in okay, or at least I would not be any more isolated than I was in my home town. I had just finished high school and was not sure what to do with myself – I’d considered opening my own sticky rice stall as a tribute to Gran, but also to get away from her. My father told me over the phone that he could put up the money to get me going and that he even had a corner in mind in front of an underpants store owned by his friend. The store didn’t open until 9 and its owner did not mind me occupying the pavement in front of it because I would draw customers.

After arriving in Hanoi, I set about establishing my little business without delay and planned to market myself and my rice as distinctively Southern: ‘Mai’s sticky rice, all the way from the parrot’s beak peninsula.’ It took me a few weeks to locate all the ingredients that I needed, and was shocked to find that the prices were much higher than they were at home. Nonetheless, I hoped that people would be willing to pay more for something a little exotic and, in my view at that time, better. My first few days of business were an utter failure. After that, I tried to lure customers in with free samples. Most people were polite enough to try it, but moved on without making a purchase. A few kind souls bought my sticky rice out of pity and no doubt discarded it soon afterwards. Others were openly critical. One woman said my Chinese sausage rice was far too oily and that by adding garlic and coriander to it I was trying to poison people rather than feed them. Another customer said my orange-coloured rice garnished with desiccated coconut made his eyes sore and his teeth fizz – eating my food reminded him of the time he accidentally swallowed a cigarette butt. Most depressing of all was the unveiling of my majestic durian-flavoured sticky rice, which cleared the pavement of pedestrians like a bomb scare.

During those early days, there were moments when I thought Gran was right about me and the North. Maybe I belonged here even less than in my home town. And maybe the Northerners were sadists, just like Gran said, only liking foods that are excessively sour, horrifically salty or numbingly bland.

My father was more constructive, suggesting that because my rice was too sweet for the Northern palate, I might have more luck selling it in the evenings as a dessert. This too, however, was unsuccessful because people in Hanoi by and large saw sticky rice as a morning food, just as vermicelli with grilled pork strips and paddies or deep-fried tofu dipped in fermented prawn paste were for lunch alone. That was simply the way things were done and, even if no one knew why, there was no good reason to do otherwise. As one fellow commented, ‘your rice is special’ – he was using this word to be kind – ‘but not so special that I want to eat it for dinner. I’m far more likely to crave sticky rice at 3 am than I am at 6 pm.’

And so I caved in and did as Hanoians do, selling just three types of simple sticky rice in the morning: corn, peanut, and pummelled mung bean.

Even then, it took some time for my business to get going. At first the only reason customers came to my stall was that it was convenient: the sticky rice was much like everyone else’s. Once I was established and making a small profit, I began to think about how to make my product more of a drawcard, not so much by introducing alien elements, but rather by enhancing what was already there.

In this regard, all my efforts to find the ingredients for my Southern-style rice were not in vain, as it meant that I knew almost all of the city’s wholesalers and markets. On Wednesday afternoons, I would catch the number seven bus to a warehouse over the river, not far from the airport, which sold 25 kilogram bags of Three Chrysanthemum brand glutinous rice at a good price. Hauling the rice home was always a challenge, particularly in the afternoon on a crowded bus. But that rice and my attention to detail have helped me to get along.

I also buy banana leaves from a woman who washes them very carefully – who understands that any customer who finds grit in their rice will not come back for at least a month and that encountering a grub is the end of the relationship altogether. For a few weeks in summer, I change from banana leaves to lotus leaves, which add a delicate nutty scent to my rice. There are other products like soy milk and eggs that I have delivered to me each morning, but even then I am demanding of my suppliers – anything substandard or late is sent back without payment, with an occasional curse that would make my Gran proud.

One of my important innovations came four years ago when, to my great fortune, an elderly cousin of the woman who runs the underpants store behind my stall came to the city for a visit. She was from the village of Phu Gia, which is famous

for its sticky rice. Because I had grown close to the underpants store owner, her cousin was happy to pass on to me a few trade secrets that had been in her family for generations. She taught me the value of steaming my rice twice: the first time until it is 80 per cent cooked – no more, no less; then it has to be sprayed with water so the grains contract and retain their freshness overnight. In the morning, I steam the rice again until the aroma is sweet but not syrupy and the grains are soft but not gooey. There are practical benefits of this technique too because, while it takes up more time, most of the cooking is done the day before and not in the early hours of the morning. Most importantly, however, the result is delicious, which my customers attest to, even if they don't know exactly why. And of course when they ask me, I do not let on.

The strange thing is that in the last two years, after mastering Northern-style sticky rice and coming to appreciate its gentle flavours and textures, I am rediscovering my Southern cooking. I think that the time might now be right for my customers to try something different. After all, if they can manage Indian, Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese food, surely they can enjoy popular dishes from their own country? And so on weekends I have begun selling stewed pork and boiled eggs cooked Southern style. And I am proud to say that it is selling well, with some customers requesting a sprinkling of sesame sugar or the occasional sprig of coriander with their meals.

Even more peculiar is that the last time I returned to my home town, Gran's sticky rice did not live up to my fond memories of it. It was a little too sweet and oily for me. Of course I never told her this. But it made me wonder, not for the first time, whether I would ever find a place to belong or, for that matter, a husband.



For a long time my mother did not want me to have anything to do with young men, who she collectively referred to as 'defilers'.

After I had my first period, Mother explained to me that my body was developing so that I could have babies, but also that I had to be very careful. Until the time was right for me to start a family, I had to protect my chastity with all my might. For her, however, the corrupting touch of boys was not the biggest problem.

'There's a voice that many women begin hearing at around your age', my mother told me. 'It tells us that we can do anything and make our own choices, that we are no better or worse than men, that our desires exist to be fulfilled, and that the world is there for us to conquer and enjoy. Don't listen to that voice, Mai. It's the voice of maniacs and floozies.'

I understood her concern, but have never once heard that voice or found it hard to avoid young men. For this reason, by the time I turned 20, mother's attitude towards me and men changed. And in recent years she's become convinced that her primary responsibility is to find me a suitable husband.

Naturally, Mother would prefer it if I left it up to her. But while I know that she has my interests at heart, I have made it clear that the thought of committing for a lifetime to someone whom I hardly know is more frightening than dying alone. My father agrees with me, largely because his first marriage resulted from an alignment of families rather than of souls and, as far as he's concerned, this was the major cause of hardship in his life. Unfortunately, he has no say in this matter.

Of course I don't want to be alone, but I've always thought that there is someone out there who has a place in his heart for me. And in the story I make up about us, we come together by good fortune and not by my mother's design. So lately, when there are no customers and I have nothing to do, instead of making up stories about strangers I find myself searching through the throngs of people for him. I guess that a fifth of the men who pass by are of an acceptable age, and that a fair proportion of them are single. And among all of those people I sense that he is out there, running an errand for his family, going to work, perhaps even studying at university. But at the same time he is searching for me as fervently as I am looking for him. Sometimes I even feel a little sorry for him and worry that his yearning might be more angst-filled than mine.

Lately, Mother has not been content for me to watch and wait.

And so, my mother has been praying to as many spirits as possible – except for the holy Catholic one – to bring forth my soul mate or indeed anyone who she considers acceptable. Most of the time I have simply followed her instructions in this regard, even when it seems pointless or embarrassing. Often I've had to remind myself that we're united in our goal even if our ideas of how to get there are different.

For a time I considered joining an internet chat site or taking up tango classes to meet people. I also made an effort to cover my birthmark with makeup. But Mother assured me that the problem was not physical.

'Look at your cousin Thao. She is as fat and sweaty as a swine, has a pock-marked face and is wildly over-educated. Yet suitors are tripping over themselves to get to her.'

By my mother's account, both the mark on my face and my un-marriageability are symptoms of the same malaise: a heart that's chained to a past life.

And so, we appealed to the ancestors for assistance, first at the altar in our home and then at my father's family's communal house, which is a three-hour bus ride from the city. These visits were tense and uncomfortable – my father's family have never really accepted us.

When this did not yield results, we turned to a diviner who my father had recommended, a one-time calligrapher who had almost died of rabies after being bitten by a monkey on Cat Ba Island. Master Zin, as he had become known, had well and truly stopped breathing and was pronounced dead, but somehow came back to life. More miraculous still was that he remained connected to the other side. Master Zin thus gave up his calligraphy to focus on soul calling, and established a highly successful consultancy specialising in finding the skeletons of long-lost soldiers. Such was his industriousness that he developed his special ability by studying Chinese astrology and numerology, which allowed him not only to tap into past lives, but also to predict the future.

Master Zin gripped my wrists and stared into my pupils with such intensity that I dared not move, even though my instinct was to squirm free. Then he wrote down my name and birthday in Chinese characters on a large piece of paper, from the corner of which he tore off a small square. Master Zin commanded me to wait until he and my mother had left the room. I then had to write one word in capital letters on the square scrap of paper before scrunching it up into a small ball. It was important, he stressed, that I drop the paper ball back on to the piece of paper exactly ten times, each time marking where it settled. Finally, I had to swallow the paper ball before calling for him to return.

I thought about what to write for some time before settling on '*DAT*' [to attain], a simple word that's milky white and granular like MSG, and which captured my heartfelt desire for companionship. The tiny ball fell off the paper twice, so I repeated the step before swallowing it as instructed. Master Zin returned with a cup of green tea and turned to the piece of paper like a surgeon examining an x-ray. He connected the dots and closed his eyes as he considered my place in the cosmos. Then he picked up the pen and began writing in a slow and deliberate fashion as if he was receiving a message by Morse code.

I watched on in awe as he wrote '*DAT*' in my handwriting. He showed me the piece of paper as if the result was never in doubt.

Master Zin then turned to my mother with his eyes downcast. 'She has a heavy debt to pay.'

'I knew it! Please tell us. What else do you see?'

'Her "spirit root" is tied to a man from a previous life, a jilted lover who seeks revenge. Under these circumstances, she has no chance of finding a husband. The solution is not yet clear to me, but I have no doubt that this is the problem.'

My mother thanked him profusely and offered him a box of dried plums and an envelope with money in it. He took the plums, but refused the money, saying that it was a favour to my father.

As we left he whispered to me, 'Good luck, young lady. And by the way, steer clear of young men named "Dat".'

With the diagnosis established, our next step was to visit the local pagoda, where my mother explained the problem to one of the senior nuns. She looked me over, all the while shaking her head with a mixture of pity and disapproval before convening with the other nuns. I was then led towards the main altar in the pagoda and instructed to sit before the statue of the Buddha in lotus position. My mother knelt beside me and, before I knew it, a red satin sheet was thrown over me. I later learned that this would make it harder for the vengeful spirit to seek me out and sabotage the procedure. 'Stay still and be silent!' I heard my mother urge as she placed a board on my head and held it steady. The board was stacked with boxes of my favourite treat, Choco-Pies.

I closed my eyes, smelt burning incense and listened to the striking of the wooden fish-shaped drum and rhythmic chanting of the nuns.

Blessed Buddha Amitabha,  
Repel the spirit of the jilted lover  
That haunts this poor girl.  
She and her mother have suffered enough  
For the sinful desires of their past lives.  
We beseech you to grant her happiness.  
We beseech you to give her mother peace of mind.  
Witness our humble offering.  
Bless us with your infinite light.

A week or so after this, an aunt from my home town sent my mother a wooden amulet that had been soaked in porcupine pheromones and blessed by a Khmer shaman. Mother instructed me to wear the amulet on the outside of my clothes to repel the evil spirit, but it looked so gruesome that I tucked it under my shirt. The only outcome of that effort was a rash that took several months and 300,000 dong worth of ointment to clear.

Finally, at great expense and effort, my mother enlisted the services of a spirit medium who was famous for his ability to remedy women's problems. This involved my taking two days off work and travelling to Nam Dinh province with my mother, where we met eight other women who would also take part in the ceremony. The medium's assistant told us he always conducted ceremonies for nine women at a time because this was a feminine and maternal number – for me nine was tan brown and feathery. Five of the women were struggling to conceive and the other three had baby girls but dearly wanted to give birth to a boy. As Mother and I spoke to them it was clear they were stressed and desperate and, while I was sorry for them, part of me was even more sorry for myself: all of them had husbands and some had young daughters to love. Who did I have?

I had read a little about spirit mediums and had even witnessed a similar ceremony in Hanoi from a distance. This medium was a dainty fellow who was about my age, perhaps a little younger. He was dressed as Princess Lieu Hanh, daughter of the Jade Emperor, who since ancient times was renowned for her power to control men. He was beautiful in a way that made women jealous and men uncomfortable. His skin was perfectly smooth and clear, his plump eyes were highlighted with mascara, and his silky black hair was tied back in a neat ponytail. The medium's lips were painted deep red, but he did not look lustful or comedic like many of the Thai ladyboys I had seen on television. I suppose he looked the way a woman ought to look: elegant and assured.

The nine of us sat in an arc with the medium standing in the middle. In front of him was an altar dedicated to the Four Palaces made up of earth, heaven, water, mountain. Then the assistant turned on a CD of traditional music and pop songs to which the medium chanted and began to sway. A few minutes later, his movements became frenzied – he began kicking his feet out and spinning around at great speed so that his red satin gown flew up in the air. The fake gold and jewels he was wearing jangled so vigorously that I worried they would come loose and hurt someone.

It was half an hour before I could relax and forget about how much the spirit medium was charging my parents and how disappointed my sticky rice customers would be that morning when they didn't find me on my corner. Not long afterwards, I was surprised to find myself having fun and clapping along with the music. Some of the other women even hollered and whooped as if they were in a nightclub.

After two hours the medium had fully transformed into the Princess Lieu Hanh. Her eyes were rolled back and her sentences were slurred and old-fashioned. She had a regal, haughty pose; occasionally she giggled and at other times she wept for no reason. Near the end of the day, the Princess stopped and knelt before

each of us. She clasped our hands in hers – despite all the physical activity, they were cool and dry – and then presented us with a small enchanted charm that would ward off the evil spirits: a cigarette holder, a comb, a candle and, for me, a yellow wooden bead from an old necklace. The entire process took five hours and by the end of it I am sure something supernatural had occurred because the medium never once looked fatigued until he broke out of his trance, collapsed in his chair, and told the assistant to fetch him some mineral water and two bottles of beer.

In the end, I'm not sure whether the charm worked or whether it somehow combined with our exertions and prayers. What I know for sure is that less than a week after encountering Princess Lieu Hanh, Dat came into my life.

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In fact, I knew of Dat before I went to see the spirit medium. He had recently joined the pack of motorbike taxi drivers who worked next to my stall. Some of the drivers had been on that corner for much longer than me, but I never spoke to them unless they were buying my rice.

There were five of them before Dat came along. As custom demanded, they parked their rear wheels to the kerb so that customers knew they were for hire. But from what I could see they did little to attract business and much to discourage it. The drivers seemed to think the best way to bring in customers was to badger and harass them, particularly women.

'Where are you headed with that nice fat arse? Hop on to my machine and I'll take you for a bumpy ride.'

'Hey little sister! What are you studying? Put your books away and I'll teach you a few lessons I picked up on the internet.'

Their crassness no longer bothered me, but I've never understood why they were surprised or even offended when their advances were ignored.

'Syphilitic whore! You'll come back begging tonight.'

When there were no customers around, which was most of the day, the drivers lay across their motorbike seats napping or reading the paper. They discussed football games with such urgency and expertise that it was as if they were coaching the national team. And they were constantly betting with bookies and each other on everything – from how many medals Vietnam would win at the ASEAN games to how long it would be until a backpacker walked by.

When it came to the intricate science that was the lottery system, the drivers were forever on the verge of a breakthrough that would allow them to predict the results and never have to work again.

Whereas I saw the street as my workplace, they treated it as their home, which meant they had no qualms about shaving or popping blackheads in their motorbike mirrors, or urinating in the gutter – sometimes in teams. Once the neighbourhood cell leader politely asked them to use the public toilet, which was only a short drive away. He tried to reason with them, explaining that this would be far more hygienic and civil for everyone and might improve their business.

One of the older drivers sardonically thanked the cell leader and responded that ‘it is natural and refreshing for a man to piss outside. That’s how our ancestors have done it ever since the Dragon Lord stuck his sword in the Alpine Princess. As a man and patriot, I consider pissing outside to be our sacred right and national pastime. If we stopped doing it then we might as well cut off our pricks and plant magnolias in the holes where they used to be.’

The two youngest drivers were heavily tattooed and assumed to have gang connections. The cell leader did not press his case.

Dat was a distant cousin to one of the young drivers. He had a rumbling voice and was never discrete, so it was hard for me not to find out about his background. Indeed, he recounted his life to the other drivers in daily instalments as if it was a soap opera. His mother had abandoned him as an infant and he grew up in the motorbike garage where his father worked. Dat could ride a motorbike before he could ride a bicycle, and by the age of 17 was competing in illegal races under the name of ‘Night Storm’. He had had many victories and by his own account was the most skilful driver in the city. But Dat was also reckless and prone to accidents, and had recently become embroiled in a race-fixing scandal that resulted in an outburst of gang warfare. For now he was lying low, but was still on the lookout for a way to return to racing. Dat lived by the motto that if he made it to the age of 30, then something had gone wrong.

I remember after he first arrived one of the older drivers sneering, ‘What sort of hotshot drives a humdrum piece of shit motorbike like that?’

Dat replied that the Honda Future was the only motorbike worth racing, and he was grateful that so many people didn’t know this because it allowed him to buy them cheaper. Apparently, the Future was perfectly balanced, ever reliable, and offered more power than other standard machines without much more weight. To be sure, the bike was made to appeal to family men, but it

could easily be stripped back and modified. Anyone who knew anything about motorbike racing could tell you that, in the right hands, a Honda Future was to be respected and even feared.

‘Much respect to you and your scooter, though, older brother’, he said to his colleague. ‘I’ve ridden a few nice automatics like that. They’re ideal if you need under-seat storage for your purse and want to keep your knees together so that people don’t see your panties. The only problem I found riding them is that it feels like your genitals are turning outside-in, so that if you don’t get off quickly you’ll end up with a vagina that gapes more than your helmet hole.’

The other drivers quickly grew fond of Dat and came to see him as both their leader and mascot. They admired him for being tough and dangerous. His collarbone was shattered when a competitor kicked him during a race, causing him to crash into a light pole. Another time he fractured his tailbone while driving home drunk from a victory with three girls on the back of his bike. A branch speared his thigh in an off-road race, and there were burns across his arms and legs from skidding along the asphalt and being pressed up against the exhaust pipes of his opponents’ bikes. He readily showed his scars to the other drivers along with anyone who was interested, taking off his shirt or pulling down his pants with pride as if he were displaying wartime wounds.

The drivers were also impressed by his tricks, which Dat was always eager to demonstrate. He drove across the street balanced on his front wheel; leapt over sleeping dogs and homeless people; and once zipped in and out of the traffic with a bowl of steaming green bean pudding balanced on his head. His favourite stunt involved placing two cups of my soy milk an inch or so apart on one of my stools and then driving towards it at high speed before screeching to a stop so that his front tyre tenderly nudged the stool and the cups clinked without falling over.

Whenever he pulled this trick off, Dat would grin at me, expecting applause and adoration. ‘Just make sure you give me four clams for the soy milk’, is the most I ever gave him.

Dat was especially admired because of his sexual conquests, which he recounted in graphic detail. Apparently, there was always a supply of groupies at the finish line of big races, most of whom Dat had hooked up with at least once. Of course he had had many girlfriends, but none of them were steady or serious. I heard him say that motorbike racers referred to these girls as mufflers because they were hot, easy to replace, and preferably silent.

He often talked about ‘couples racing’ in which scantily clad young women rode on the back.

‘Those motorbike babes are amazing, ab-so-lute-ly crazy. Some are poor sluts who need the money for their addictions or to pay back family debts. But there’s also plenty of good girls from respectable families. They spend their days studying at some big university – marketing, international business, whatever, and it makes them desperate for a thrill at night. Just last year one little number told me how fed-up she was with chasing grades, listening to her parents and taking the safe option. When she sat behind me she whipped me like a racehorse to go faster and faster. As I was pushing the bike to the limit she reached down and grabbed my tool, waving it in my pants like a windscreen wiper. Those are the girls to go for – it’s all about the four virtues and three loyalties during the day, then after dusk anything goes. No helmets or protection for them, motorbike or hotel room.’

And with this he gyrated and thrust his hips as the other drivers hollered.

As much as Dat appalled me, I couldn’t help but notice that he had a positive impact on the drivers. He suggested that during quiet times they play Chinese Chess rather than cards and split into teams so that there was always a substitute when someone was called away. This made for less gambling and bickering; as did his simple idea that they set up an informal taxi rank rather than hustle every customer – young women and tourists remained hotly contested. I knew they had tried this before, but there was no one with Dat’s charisma to make it work. And the more I watched him, the more I realised he was in some ways an exemplary taxi driver. He didn’t drink on the job, always wore his helmet – a silver full-faced one embossed with golden lightning bolts on the sides – and he carried a spare for customers. He drove very slowly with elderly clients and anyone else who asked nicely. I must admit I even considered hiring him myself.

So, eventually, I too fell for Dat. And to this day I am not sure whether I chose to yield to his charm or, like untethered sampans in a rushing stream, we were destined to crash together.



At first Dat tried to court me using phrases from *Kieu*, the epic poem about a star-crossed heroine who has to sell herself to save her family. With a yellow rose in each hand he proclaimed that we were ‘two kindred spirits tied together in a knot that could not be yanked loose’ and compared us to ‘blossoming flowers waiting for the moon to rise’.

‘Do you think I don’t know those lines?’ I told him. ‘I’m surprised they ever worked on your groupies and cheap whores. They’ve got no chance on me. Next time try reading the poem before quoting it eh? The flowers show how true

love is expressed through restraint and sacrifice – things you have no idea about. And one more thing – yellow is my least favourite colour!’ My grandmother would have approved. It was important for Dat to know I was no pushover. And I took more than a little pleasure in deflating his ego.

Dat gave up on classical poetry, but not on verse. ‘What you have to realise’, he asserted one week later, ‘is that we are like a pair of flip flops.’ Apparently, he was the right one and I was the left, but we had been imprinted by the same master and were destined to travel the same path. If one of us was broken or lost, there was no hope for the other; but if we moved together we could go as far as we wanted.

I told him I knew that poem from trashy women’s magazines and asked what he was doing reading them.

His next strategy was to assert that I, indeed both of us, had no choice in the matter: our coming together was as natural and necessary as David Beckham and Posh Spice’s; Tommy Ngo and Linda Trang Dai’s; or Lee Byung-hun and Lee Min-jung’s. It was a matter of when and not if. The earth would not spin smoothly until we two were finally one.

Dat apparently adored my lingering Southern accent and the South generally. ‘You see, we are not really coming together like most young couples; we are being reunified; like the country was in 1975, but with more amity and good will.’

I asked him what his zodiac sign was. ‘I am a horse, born at high noon in the hour of horses’, Dat said with his chest protruding.

I could have guessed as much; like so many horses he was proud, fast-talking, fun-loving, and prone to disaster.

‘Hah! I’m a cat and was born in the feline morning hours. How could someone as reserved and thoughtful as me get on with you? So much for our union being written in the stars. And I’m older than you. We’re hardly compatible at all.’

And probably because I enjoyed being on the front foot, this is when I revealed to him that I had been warned by Master Zin to beware of men named ‘Dat’.

‘That’s no problem because “Dat” is only my middle name. My full name is “Vu Dat Kim”, but I gave up the “Kim” a long time ago because it’s a girl’s name. But honestly, older sister Mai, screw all the fortune tellers, superstitions, cosmic signals and what other people think. Do what I do. Follow your heart. Go with your gut. When you are true to yourself, you’ll come up with the right answer: that we would be really good together.’

The other drivers couldn't understand Dat's persistence. 'Why waste your time with the sticky rice girl?' I overheard them asking.

'She's a frigid bitch who hasn't flashed us a nipple in all these years. There are thousands of plumper and easier birds to snare.'

'I've never seen her with a man. She's probably a dyke', another one of them said. 'One thing's for sure, she's a prawn: her body's nice enough but her face is frightful and her head's full of shit!'

I gasped with outrage and that's when Dat realised I had overheard them. In retrospect, I wonder if he had staged the whole scene.

'Shut your fuckin' noodle hole! You're talking about my future girlfriend and who knows what else?' To all who cared to listen he pronounced that it was *he* who was out of *my* league and that the mark on my face was a beauty mark that was sometimes shaped like a butterfly and at other times reminded him of a tender steaming pork bun broken open and ready to eat.

It was around then that I started to wonder whether Dat and I might after all have a future together. However, it was not long afterwards that his advances started to wane. 'Remember, Mai', he said, 'those who are coy with their suitors end up sleeping alone. Would you rather hug your pillow at night or me?' To this question I had no good answer.

So in the end I said yes to Dat because he made me feel desired, and I was worried that if I did not give him a chance I would never have that feeling again.



Dat took me to a new Vincom shopping centre for our first date. While I had gone past shopping centres many times, I had never stepped inside one. He did not have to know this of course, and so when he asked me whether I had been to the centre before I replied, 'No, but I've been to others much bigger and better.' And while admittedly I was excited as we passed through the entrance and I felt that blast of air conditioning, my excitement was easily contained and short-lived because I had seen shopping malls on the television and heard people talking about them many times. The cavernous lobby, the thoroughfares soaked with fluorescent light and aisles of merchandise did little to impress me.

It was also the first time that I ever rode on an escalator and had been in an elevator, which I also kept from Dat. He assured me that he often went to malls, but still seemed to find a boyish thrill in such expeditions. On the escalator, he

pushed his foot along the side railing as if he was on a skateboard and wanted it to go faster. And in the elevator he repeatedly pressed the button to close the door even though people were still trying to rush in.

While going to the mall was not an earth-trembling experience, it was an enjoyable enough beginning to our relationship. Dat was keenly interested in the electronics stores and waited impatiently as I examined the food prices in the supermarket. I took satisfaction in seeing that I could buy just about everything for less at the market. Some of the items on sale, however, were much cheaper, and so I was heartened when Dat offered to carry around a 10 kilogram bag of washing detergent that I had my eye on.

When I saw him shifting the bag from one arm to the other, I suggested that we take turns holding it.

‘Not on your life. No girl of mine does the heavy lifting. Just make sure you pay attention to my bulging muscles. And at some stage I’ll expect a thank you kiss.’

Dat had intended to buy us dinner at the food court, but I found both the offerings and prices unappetising. Much of it was premade and the place smelt of ammonia. ‘Let’s go somewhere else’, I suggested. ‘Take me to a favourite place of yours. That way I’ll get to know you better.’

He insisted he was no cheapskate and that he wanted to treat me with something more than just washing detergent. I suggested we share a drink at the mall and then move on. He agreed but refused to share, ordering a beer for himself and lemonade for me.

Upon leaving the mall we made our way to a workers’ outdoor buffet that opened in the evenings for young couples and families. Although he had been there before, Dat was wide-eyed at the sight of all the dishes before him. When they asked us what we wanted he greedily pointed to the crispy silkworms, deep fried egg, omelette, stewed pork and chicken drumsticks, so that he needed a separate plate for his rice. Even then he insisted on getting the complimentary crab mince and spinach soup, along with a healthy scoop of peanuts.

Both of us were a little startled by the price. ‘Are you sure that’s right, lady?’ Dat asked. ‘Didn’t cost so much last time.’

‘Inflation’, the woman responded.

‘A “rip off” is what I’d fuckin’ call it. How much did you charge that guy over there with all the prawns and liver?’

‘Share it with your girlfriend if you don’t have enough money or give it back for all I care, but decide quickly, son. There’re people waiting in line who aren’t so tight.’

I clasped Dat’s forearm to pull him back slightly. ‘It’s okay. She’s telling the truth. My prices are going up too and you’ve chosen all meat dishes so it’s bound to cost a little more.’

I ordered some steamed kohlrabi, bean sprouts and pickled cabbage and then lied to Dat that I was not eating meat that day.

‘Do you want some tofu in tomato sauce?’ he asked. ‘Tofu’s good for women, you know, dampens their desire. On second thought, maybe you’re better off without it!’ And with that he was smiling again, showing off those incandescent teeth. He even gave the woman a small tip.

He munched away at his dinner and would have finished much faster than me if he was not talking at the same time, mostly about his motorbike racing and how he wanted to win a few more titles so that he had enough money to open his own garage.

‘I thought you had a death wish. What happened to not making it to the age of 30?’ I said to him with a wry smile. He seemed surprised and embarrassed that I already knew so much about him.

‘That was just a bit of chest-thumping for the lads. I’m no different to anyone else really. I just want a little more money in my pocket so that I can save up for an apartment of my own. And you know what? I want to have a family someday, be respectable and all that. I could really make something out of myself. I just need someone to give me a chance, for the wheel of fate to turn in my favour. There’s no way I’m going to be taxiing people around all my life. But don’t make this all about me. Tell me about you, Mai, your favourite colour, singer, your dreams ...’

I couldn’t remember anyone asking me to talk about myself. And for the first time that evening, I was taken aback. When I finally started talking – about my grandmother and my home town, my talented parents and step-siblings – I was surprised to see that Dat was listening. His dark, shiny eyes were focused on my face, which made me more than a little uncomfortable at first. But by the end of our meal I was used to his gaze and even welcomed it. I felt as if I’d spent my life looking down at the ground, embarrassed about my birthmark and my past, and all of a sudden I had reason to look up and at someone.

We climbed back on his motorbike and bought some sugarcane juice on the way to Long Bien Bridge. This time I sat a little closer to him so that the inside of my thighs touched his body ever so gently. To be honest, I was giddy with elation, but did my best to ensure he did not know how glad I was to be close to him. There was no way that I was going to be just another motorbike groupie. My mother used to say that she could tell a good young woman by how she sat on a motorbike. 'A decent girl rides with her back straight and her head pinned back, like a lioness on the watch. Most girls bend forward to hug their boyfriends with their spines bowed like a dog taking a dump.'

'Lioness, lioness, be a regal lioness', I reminded myself, 'not a crapping dog.'

At the bridge we parked far from the other couples and rowdy groups of youth who were snacking on dried squid and sipping energy drinks. On the railing I could make out a few padlocks with initials scratched into them that had been fixed to the bridge by lovers. Couples marked their commitment by casting the keys into the river. Why had they bothered, I wondered, given the widely reported 'locks of love' debacle in which hundreds of youth had secured their locks to the bridge, only for the authorities to decide they were an eyesore that threatened to bring down a structure that had survived American bombs. I wondered how the bridge master felt as he did his rounds with a monstrous bolt-cutter. Did he relish breaking the bonds that held together so many young lovers? Or perhaps he was a romantic and riven with guilt? Maybe there was a special room in his house where he glumly sifted through his treasure trove of broken locks.

Dat's lips and hands were expectant. I saw how his front teeth reflected the moonlight as they moved in towards me. I suspected even then that most of his teeth were fake, the originals having probably been broken in a motorbike accident.

'I've had a magical night. Let's not risk ruining it. No kissing for now, okay?'

'What makes you think I even wanted to?' Dat said. But I could see he was wounded.

I slapped him playfully on the shoulder and let my hand linger. We hugged. Perhaps it was too forward of me – no doubt my mother would not have approved – but I am sure that I was the one who initiated the embrace. I could have stayed like that all night, but Dat grew bored just hugging and broke free to suggest that we play a game.

He took out his mobile phone. 'You said you like listening to music. Let's see who knows their songs better. I've just loaded almost 1,000 new songs onto my phone. I'll put it on shuffle and we can see who can guess the song first.'

The speaker on his phone was small, so he had to hold it up to our ears with our cheeks pressing together and my hair blowing sideways tickling his neck and shoulders. Most of his collection was made up of rap songs and grunge, with a few rock ballads and K-pop tunes that I was more familiar with. When I heard the pop singer Only C's hit 'I Don't Want My Gifts Back', I couldn't help but think of the salacious film clip in which the singer's ex-girlfriend strips down to her underwear in the street. And I was surprised to catch one of Thuy Linh's songs from her 'No Hurry' CD, which I think Dat was self-conscious about because it clashed with his tough guy image.

'No idea how that song got on there', he said, before quickly shuffling to the next one.

Despite not liking Dat's music, my special abilities allowed me to identify them after just a few seconds. At first Dat was impressed. Then his competitive spirit kicked in and he insisted I was fast, but often got the songs wrong. A quick glance at his phone proved this was not the case. Soon I was enjoying the game so much that I didn't notice his frustration until he remarked, 'Are you cheating or something? It's like there's some scary Bluetooth connection between your brain and my phone.'

I let him win a few in a row which seemed to lift his spirits. 'Smart, beautiful and talented – what else could a man ask for?' he said to me, just before his phone ran out of charge.

We sat silently for a little longer as other couples set off home, wispy clouds passed over the moon and the city lights dimmed. In the darkness and with my fringe falling over my face, I sensed that it was impossible for passers-by to identify anything distinguishing or different about me and us. They would see Dat and me sitting there and guess that we were like any other lovers. They would think we belonged together.

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A week later we ate dinner hastily and rushed to the bridge, where I kissed him. Of course, I let him think that he was making a move on me; but in truth I orchestrated the entire affair, inviting him first to place his lips on my forehead, then on my cheek and finally on my mouth. At first I was so self-conscious of whether I was doing it properly that my kisses were rigid and thirsty. It was not until I relaxed that I tasted the peanuts on his breath and felt how the salt had made his lips a little dry but still plump like the flesh of a pomelo. I think Dat was surprised by my enthusiasm, although I'm sure he had been with far more assertive girls.

I clung to his shoulders and escaped into the creases of his shirt where I put aside all my concerns about what my parents would think, especially about his background and him being younger than me. We must have kissed for two hours, only intermittently talking about music, our work and our dreams. Even today, after all that has happened, I still cherish that night.

In fact, I adore much of the nine or so months – three full seasons – that we spent together. Dat was dashing and attentive. He opened doors, helped me pack up my stall, and bought me gifts: a hairpin in the shape of a seahorse, and a necklace with a lightning bolt pendant to match his night storm helmet. On International Women’s Day, he twice gave me flowers as I sold my sticky rice. He took me out for Southern food – stir-fried beef and vermicelli and crepes filled with pork, shrimp and bean sprouts – and pretended to like the dishes even though I knew the fish sauce was too sweet for him. I remember late one night when we were eating beef noodle soup and there was only one vinegar-soaked chilli left in the jar. We both reached for it but Dat got there first. He smiled and then delicately placed it in my bowl. I bit the chilli into two and gave the larger piece to him. It was then that I knew we were a couple.

However, as the weeks and months went by it also became clear to me that Dat was the one who needed looking after. As much as he was gallant and strapping, he was also hot-headed and childish. He seemed to be driven by a conviction that the world had it in for him, so that when events did not go his way he took it personally.

This was most evident when Dat was on the road. Everyone and everything seemed to stop him from reaching an imaginary finish line. If there was a traffic jam then it had been somehow pre-programmed to ruin his day. When he was pulled over and fined, it was always the fault of the police, who had him in their crosshairs because he was young and dangerous looking. Even shards of glass had been placed on the road to cause him flat tyres at the worst possible time and place.

What bothered me most was that, in Dat’s mind, being aggrieved gave him the right to do what he pleased to others. When he was stuck in a traffic jam he reached out and grabbed the luggage racks of other bikes so that he could inch forward. If he got caught, Dat offered either an impish grin or menacing snarl depending on the mood he was in. Like everyone else, Dat knew there was a three-second gap between when a set of traffic lights turned red and the other set turned green. For him this meant that all red lights were effectively shortened by at least six seconds and all green lights were extended by the same amount of time. Sitting on the back of his bike, I was astounded by his skill at weaving through intersections and petrified by what felt like a death wish.

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One Sunday afternoon I asked Dat to take me to the supermarket where we went on our first date because I had heard they were selling extra-large bags of prawn floss. The shop was about to close and people were scurrying to get to the checkout and home to their families. We were relieved to find a register with only one person in front of us. However, just before my bag of prawn floss made its way to the front of the conveyor belt, the attendant called for assistance because she couldn't price an item. When that was resolved, we had to wait even longer as the elderly woman ahead of us rummaged through her purse in search of her loyalty card – to no avail. Added to this, she didn't have enough money because she had brought a 100,000 dong note thinking that it was 500,000.

Throughout all of this I could feel Dat's rage building and so I slipped my hand into his tightly folded arms and stood right up beside him in the hope of somehow absorbing his ire. As the old woman sorted through her groceries trying to decide what to leave behind, he broke free of me in the same way a horse might its trainer.

'Can't you see that there are people waiting, venerable grandmother?!' Then Dat turned back to me and hollered, 'She's so close to the grave you'd think she'd be in a hurry. What are we doing in this cattle yard anyway?! We're never coming back here again. No fuckin' way!'

I came up close to him again and whispered, 'Try to relax, please, it won't take much longer. We're in no rush anyway. And I thought you said you were going to stop swearing? You said you would do it for me.'

'I wouldn't be motherfuckin' swearing if we hadn't come here, come here for you and your fuckin' prawn floss!'

He grabbed the bag and with the same muscular arm that had carried my washing detergent on our first date, hurled it over my head and back into the store where it burst open on the floor.

After cleaning up the mess and paying for the floss, I eventually found him in the basement parking lot where he was lying on his motorbike looking up at the ceiling.

'Why are you always so calm?' he said without sitting up and looking at me. 'How can you put up with all of that ... that stuff, without saying a word? It's all so unfair.'

I didn't know what to say without hurting Dat's feelings and creating another scene. I wanted to tell him how ashamed I was to be with him that night. I wanted to say that back in the supermarket I had felt, not for the first time, frightened of him.

'I suppose things have never really gone my way. I've never expected to come first at anything or even beat anyone else. As I see it, the world's not meant to be fair so I don't worry about little things that go wrong. I just do my best and accept things as they are and take people as they come.'

It took a few seconds, but Dat responded with a pomelo kiss which I had no choice but to accept as his apology.

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'I can help you. In fact, you can help me too. We'll do it together.' I said to him with as much enthusiasm as I could muster.

'No way, never. I'm not going through that again. What if I fail? I couldn't live with myself. And we both know that my chances are slim. They've got my number. The whole thing's rigged against me.'

Dat had been pulled over again. He had been speeding back from a job and in addition to paying the fine he had to grease the officer's palm because he did not have a licence. Most of the other motorbike drivers were also unlicensed and managed okay. But for Dat it was a big deal, largely because of his pride, but also because he broke the rules often, which meant that the traffic police were on the lookout for him.

All of this added a sense of urgency to my quest to reform Dat's ways.

Somehow, the idea had lodged in my head that if Dat could get his licence then he would also follow the rules, if only because he would not want to lose it after going to all that trouble. And perhaps I was being too hopeful, but I also thought that once he was licenced he would see that the authorities and everyone else were not always against him and that it was better to stay in line than to be always wrecking fences.

'I'm sure we can do it', I said to him. 'It will be fun and it'll bring us closer together. I can help you study for the theory section. You said yourself you hardly read the rule book last time, so it's no wonder you didn't pass. And you can help me with the practical test. You know, I'm very unsteady on the road.' This was true, although the main reason for my lack of confidence was inexperience. I never needed to ride a motorbike.

‘Okay, but I can tell you what will happen now. You will pass and I will fail and then what will people say?’

‘Then I will become a motorbike driver and you can sell sticky rice’, I suggested.

He was not amused, but agreed to study with me that evening.

Dat was not good at written exams. It was not that he was stupid; but rather, deeply unsure of himself. ‘You should have seen the examination room’, he said with a shudder. ‘All that tension, the prowling supervisors and the ticking clock on the front wall. It was too much for me to handle. I couldn’t breathe let alone think. But you probably don’t know what I’m talking about. What do you know about being stupid?’

We caressed and kissed many times that night, hardly reviewing a single page of the traffic rule book.

I reasoned that it was probably better for him to teach me first as this would build his confidence. And so the next day he took me to a parking lot near the old citadel lined with grand old Pacific walnut trees that dropped giant leaves and tiny white flowers.

Dat sat behind me, his arms and hands stretched over mine. I had told him that I knew how to ride, but he insisted that we start with the basics – what and where are the brakes, gears and indicators? I pretended to be interested as he went into far more mechanical detail than necessary and recounted anecdotes from his workshop and racing days. When he was done we held each other for a little before he allowed me to take control of his motorbike.

We began with accelerating and braking, using clumps of leaves on the ground as markers. Admittedly, my gear changes were jagged, I often missed the leaves by a wide margin; we almost ran into the gutter at the end of the parking lot, and Dat had to put his foot down several times to ensure we did not tip over at low speed. But this was largely because I hadn’t ridden a motorbike for years. I needed some time and patience. It didn’t help that I could feel Dat growing frustrated behind me.

‘This would be much easier if you just got off the motorbike and let me try by myself’, I suggested to him. ‘I have ridden before, you know. I’m touched that you want to be right here to help me, but you’re too heavy. It’s hard for me to steer the motorbike – I’m just not as strong as you. Anyway, it’s not like you can sit the test with me, right?’

He relented, and I improved immediately, so much so that I moved on to practising my figure eights, which were the first and by far the hardest part of the examination. I thought I was going well, but Dat shook his head,

commenting that my figure eights were far too big and that I was going too slow. He demanded his motorbike back and showed me how fast he could do it, obviously expecting me to swoon over him like one of his groupies.

I tried again, but was still not up to his approval.

‘It doesn’t look like you’re going to get much better’, he said. ‘Let’s practise hugging and kissing instead.’

He couldn’t understand why I was not in the mood.

Our studying for the theory component of the examination was also strained. Dat was always fidgeting and finding excuses. We couldn’t study when the other drivers were around because he would lose face with them. My house was out of the question because I hadn’t told my parents about us, and so was Dat’s place because he did not get on with his uncle and aunt. One café was too crowded and noisy with truant students playing cards, and at another there was a waitress who Dat said unnerved him because he recognised her from his racing days and thought she might have connections with rival gangs.

The test was only a week away and Dat hadn’t learnt a single rule or regulation. It was almost fortunate that he was pulled over by the police twice in one day, as this gave him the motivation he sorely needed.

And so we studied on a park bench during the day and at a frozen yoghurt bar at night, which was all but empty because the weather was turning cold. I encouraged him to envisage the faces of the traffic policemen as encouragement – ‘Don’t let them beat you!’ And we developed a few tools and tricks to help him hold on to information. We associated series of answers with playlists of songs on his phone or the assembled parts of a motorbike. I reminded him that the licence was for life so that he never had to sit a test again provided he didn’t get into trouble. And when no one was looking, I gave him a kiss for every answer he got right.

One night once we had closed our books and all that remained of our frozen taro yoghurt was a thin layer of lilac liquid, Dat told me that he was amazed at how good I was at storing things in my head and then somehow transferring them to his and making them stick.

‘You are the smartest and most beautiful girl I have ever known’, he said. ‘No one has ever given me more.’

I raised my head, which was resting on his shoulder, and looked into his almond eyes before giving him one more gift. I told him about my special ability. I told him why I had kept it secret from him and everyone else. I told him about my mother and what had happened to her and rambled on about why it wasn’t so bad, about how it helped me to remember things, about how nowadays it gave

me more confidence than it did concern, and how it was a relief finally to tell someone. I told him that I was a synaesthete and asked him if, by any chance, he was one too.

Dat shook his head, vigorously. And of course it was silly of me to hope that he might be like me. Perhaps it was even too much to expect him to empathise with me given that I had sprung it upon him so suddenly. But I felt wounded and alone when all he said was, 'It's okay. I don't mind. If your birthmark doesn't bother me then neither should this.'

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When the day finally arrived, I was exhausted from the many late nights studying with Dat before getting up in the early morning to sell sticky rice. The night before he had declared that he was not going to sit the examination because, while he may well survive past 30 years of age, life was still short and there was no sense in wasting another second of it looking at books and taking notes. We quarrelled, negotiated, reviewed a few questions and embraced. He said he would do it for me, but as I collapsed into bed that night I was far from certain.

We drove to the test in silence. I was just about the oldest person at the examination; the vast majority of the 206 people on the list of candidates were 18 or 19 years old. Most of them were clearly nervous, but comforted by being with their friends. They all looked middle-class and well educated, used to doing well at tests. We were corralled into a common room where the national anthem was played before we were given instructions. The theory exam would take place in six smaller rooms. I knew that Dat was haunted by the memory of his first failed attempt and the shame of having to leave before he could undertake the practical examination. As we filed off to our different rooms, I was far more concerned for him than I was for me. And in that moment I loved him as much as I would ever love anyone.

I had studied so much with Dat that I was done in less than 10 minutes and was surprised to see that I got one wrong, probably because I had filled in the wrong box accidentally. No one in my room seemed to fail.

Dat took his full allotment of time, and I imagined him looking up at the roof with thought lines on his forehead as he mouthed the titles of songs from playlists on his phone.

He finally emerged with his characteristic grin framed by two deep-set dimples. 'It's almost as good as winning a race', he said as he picked me up and spun me around.

But with Dat's troubles out of the way, I realised that mine had only just begun. Having focused on the theoretical examination, we had neglected the practical side. Failing was not really my concern; after all, I didn't need my licence. What petrified me was the thought of all those *Proactiv*-skinned youth scrutinising me.

As the instructions were explained to us again, my mind swirled and my stomach churned. I had never had so many people looking at me, mocking me, pitying me. My birthmark seemed to grow darker and larger under the glare of the mid-morning sun. I wanted to quit, run away.

Dat could see that I was queasy. 'Don't worry Mai. This is the easy part. I could do it with my eyes closed, which is not such a bad idea.'

I probably would have snuck out of the gates had I not been one of the first to be tested. At least the ordeal would soon be over, I reasoned.

There were two Honda Alphas to choose from. 'Take the red one, darlin'. It's much luckier', said the elderly attendant. He could see how edgy I was. 'Relax, remember to breathe, you can do it. Keep it in fourth and you'll be fine.'

After thanking him I climbed onto the red one, but only took it up to second gear because I knew that bunny-hopping might only result in a penalty, but stalling meant an immediate fail. It was a bad mistake, because I could not manage the sensitive throttle and as I stuttered around the figure eight my front wheel crossed over the guiding lines several times. As I stared down at the dashboard display I could just make out my reflection and thought of all those people looking at me. I tried to focus on the road as Dat had mentioned to me minutes before, and totally forget about the motorbike as if I was just walking along. The number 8 was a warm, yellow-orange with the texture of coconut husks. The second time around I went up to third gear, which was far smoother, and although I was still slow and uncertain, the result was close to perfect.

After emerging from the figure eights, I had to ride along a straight line right past a panel of judges, which was nerve-racking, but when I looked up I was encouraged to see that they were barely paying attention. My arms stopped wobbling by the time I turned around and was weaving in and out of the chicanes. Finally, I passed over the series of speed bumps that led me out of the compound, around and back to the attendant. He gave me an approving nod and added, 'It would have been easier in fourth.'

I looked for Dat but couldn't see him, so I returned to the place in the gallery where we had been standing. He emerged not long afterwards from the parking lot holding his night storm helmet and immediately joined a group of girls on

the other side of the compound to take the test. Dat had taken off his jacket and his arms were out in front of him manipulating an imaginary motorbike, no doubt bragging to the girls about his racing career. He then strapped on his helmet and swaggered over to take command of the black motorbike. In case there was still someone who had not taken notice of him, Dat revved the bike with gusto. While I could not hear what the attendant said, firm words were clearly exchanged.

Dat traced the figure eights with all the grace and speed of an ice skater, relishing the opportunity to perform in front of a crowd again. As he emerged from the eights the attendant hollered at him to slow down, which he did, balancing the bike at a standstill before creeping slowly forward while ducking his head down as if he were going at great speed.

Everyone in the crowd roared with appreciation, everyone except the judges and me.

Dat negotiated the chicanes at high speed while standing up on his stirrups and then, as he turned around to complete the test, he waved at the group of whooping and cheering girls who had gathered around the finish line.

I will never know for sure, but I would like to think that there was an instant when Dat thought about what he was doing, when he considered that with some apologising he could still get his licence if he took the straight and uncomplicated path, that a lifetime of inconvenience was not worth a few seconds of glory, that he could do the right thing. I like to think that at some point he thought of me.

But there was no hesitation that I could see as Dat dropped back to first gear, revved the engine to its limit and raised the bike onto its rear wheel. He surged forward and hopped over the speed humps with one arm swinging in the air as if he was riding a bucking buffalo.

He then rode right out of the compound. I was worried that he wouldn't return and that on top of everything else he would be charged with stealing a motorbike from the motor registry. No doubt I would be found guilty as an accessory.

A few seconds later he re-entered the compound, still doing a wheelie, and completed the course again from back to front before parking the bike next to the fuming attendant.

Dat held out the key with his nose in the air, forcing the attendant to take it from him as if he were a valet at a fancy hotel.

The crowd was still hooting and cackling as I ran off, leaving my examination completion slip crumpled on the ground.

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Maybe I should have been more firm and told him flat out that it was over instead of just refusing to speak to him. But I had never been in a relationship before and had never felt so betrayed.

He apologised profusely. 'I couldn't help myself. It was those girls. They dared me to do it.'

I said nothing.

'Look. How long do you think I was going to keep my licence anyway? They would have taken it from me soon enough. Why is it such a big deal to you? I'm the one who has to pay the fines.'

Two days later, he returned to my stall to tell me that he had made some enquiries and found a crooked instructor in another district who would let him sit the examination again and could print him 10 or more licences for the right fee. 'I'll sit it again. Just to make you happy!'

Still, I said nothing.

'Tell me what I have to do then!'

A few of my customers were gathered around us, enthralled by the drama.

'Give him a second chance. Let him make it up to you', a woman in an orange tracksuit urged.

'He seems nice enough', said another fellow in a business suit. 'Don't hold so much bile in your belly. It'll make you age prematurely.'

'The customer's always right', remarked Dat with that grin of his. This time I nodded.

We went out for dinner and then out to the bridge. I didn't initiate any conversation with him and hardly responded to Dat's questions. I sat with my back straight and proud on his motorbike, my hands behind me clasping the luggage rack.

On the bridge I could see Dat's teeth: he was almost snarling. 'It's not like I killed somebody.'

'I'm sorry, I'm trying but it's different between us now', I confessed. 'I wish we could go back to the way it was, but we just can't.'

I wanted to say more. I wanted him to know that he was a child and probably always would be. He would never learn how to take care of himself, let alone me. While a part of me still cared for him, I did not love him. And I did not want to be with him, not as a wife, not as a friend.

In retrospect, I should have made this clear, but I did not want to hurt him and never thought that he would really hurt me.

Dat suddenly grabbed my hands and looked straight at me. 'I almost don't want to tell you this while you're in such a foul mood, but you have to know, I have to tell you. Something amazing has happened. I can't believe how lucky I am!'

Apparently dozens of people had filmed him doing the driving test and posted the clips online, which had immediately gone viral. This was bad in a way because the gangsters had seen it and now knew he was still in town. They'd spread the word that he was a marked man, and he knew he should leave straight away if he knew what was good for him and his family.

But this did not matter because Dat was going anyway. The manager of an amusement park outside Saigon had also seen the video clip and had gone to great efforts to contact Dat and offer him a job as a stunt driver in one of his shows.

'It's not far from your home town, Mai. We can go south together. Make a fresh start. All the mung bean crepes and sweet sticky rice that you want. I've even thought of a stage name, 'Flaming Phoenix'. What do you think? I reckon there are probably doctors in Saigon who can help you with your face too, at least make that birthmark less noticeable. With the money I'll be making we can pay whatever it takes. What do you think?'

'When are you going?' I asked and I pulled my hands away from his.

'Three days. Less if we can pool our savings to buy the tickets. I know it's very sudden. I can go first and you can meet me there in a week if you need some time to tidy up and say your goodbyes.'

As gently but firmly as possible, I told him I was settled in Hanoi. My business was going well and I had plans to expand and start selling pork rolls in the afternoons.

'My father is getting old. I have to be here to help my mother look after him. I'm sorry. I can't go.'

'Don't be silly. You just need some time to think about it.' It was as if he did not hear a word of what I had said. 'Remember, you won't find anyone better than me.'

'You don't understand. I don't need time to think about it. If I have to be lonely for the rest of my life then I'll deal with that. But I don't want to be with you anymore.'

There was a flash of angst on Dat's face as if he had momentarily registered what I was saying, as if he had finally acknowledged that I was there but was not there for him.

I braced myself for his rage. But instead he smiled, only not in the brash and boyish way that I had become accustomed to. It was something closer to a grimace.

'Okay, if that's what you want. Maybe we can see one another when you visit your grandmother every year? You can come and see me in the show.'

'That would be nice.'

'At least celebrate with me tonight, Mai. It could be our last night together.' And he was grabbing my hands again.

'I'm not sure, Dat, it's late and I have to work tomorrow morning ...'

'Don't be like that. I've even booked a room at our favourite karaoke club. A deluxe room, not like the filthy little cupboard we usually sing in.'

I agreed because I like karaoke and, again, to be nice to Dat.

He had already called ahead to book the Mufasa room at Lion King Karaoke; it had two small stages and could easily accommodate 15 people. He had even arranged for some of the snack foods that I like: Choco Pies and spicy green mango. A bouquet of yellow roses sat beside the two microphones.

Dat performed his grungy angry songs and I worked on some Trinh Cong Son classics before singing pop tunes. We did a rendition of Lam Truong and Minh Thu's 'This Very Moment', with each of us standing on our own stage and singing to the other.

I must admit I enjoyed myself. It was a befitting way for Dat and me to part.

Resting after the duet, Dat put his arm around my shoulders. As he drew close to me I could smell the Da Lat red wine on his breath. I had drunk half a glass in the time it took him to finish the bottle.

'Mai, you know I've never asked much of you. But before we part, don't you think that we should give ourselves to one another – entirely, I mean? Just once: I know you want to. And it's not like I'm going to tell anyone. I don't want us to have any regrets. Who knows, you might like it so much that you'll change your mind about coming with me.'

And with that Dat pulled at my blouse. I slipped out of his headlock and without thinking, perhaps it was the wine, I slapped him in the face. 'We shouldn't, Dat. It's not right.'

His face glazed over. More than a small part of me felt guilty that I had hurt him. And for a second, even as I was so very frightened of Dat, I wanted to comfort him.

'Do you know how many girls have dreamed of being in your position? I've had much better-looking girls than you throw themselves at me. What makes you think anyone else would want you with that horrible smear on your face and that freaky ability of yours? I told the other motorbike boys about you feeling colours or whatever it is you do, and they said that was all the more reason to stay away from you. They said you were cursed and that they wouldn't fuck you if you paid them and offered to wear a bag over your head. And yet here I am. And here you are, in "This very fuckin' moment", saying that it's not right for you and acting as if Buddha and all your piss-ant ancestors are in the room with us. Do you know how much this room cost me?'

'It's nice. Very nice. I'm sorry. Let me pay you back.'

'Yes, you will', is all he said before swooping upon me and pinning me to the sofa. My slaps and punches did little to slow his advance.

I don't remember clearly what happened after that. At some point I fell from the sofa and hit my head against the coffee table leg.

I recall screaming 'No!', 'Stop!' and 'Please!' as loud as I could but the room was insulated: nothing could escape. I told him I was still a Catholic and that it meant something. I cried out to him that he was right – he could have other girls and that he didn't need to have me. I screamed that I was a prawn and that he deserved better.

All of this made no difference. And I wonder now if I did not struggle, plead or reason with him enough. And of course, I should never have gone out with him that night, not to the karaoke bar. Maybe I should have cried out for longer and into one of the microphones so that the attendants might hear me. When they finally came in, with our two hours up, they found me cowering in the corner, with a small stream of blood running down my face and another one running down my legs.

'Not again', was what one of them said.



Yesterday I had to close my stall early. I knew something was wrong when I was preparing the rice because a waft of steam caused great offence to my nostrils. And then, while serving some customers, I suddenly felt sick and had to run off and vomit into the gutter.

My mother inquired into my condition with her snake-like tongue. 'What have you done to yourself?'

'It's a touch of food poisoning', I told her. 'Give me a day or two. I'll be okay.'

So today I am not selling sticky rice.

My head is light and spinning as I make my way to the pharmacy – not the one near my house, but the one a few blocks away, where they do not recognise me or know my family.

The test is surprisingly cheap, the same price as a serving of sticky rice and a glass of soy milk. The young girl at the counter beams, 'With any luck, there'll be happy news for you and your husband.'

As I walk home I think about how this little wand will reveal my fate, perhaps more than any diviner or soul catcher ever could. The directions on the box make it clear that no trances, dances or séances are required for it to work. And it takes less than a minute.

In the first few seconds, I figure that if one line appears – a number 1, which is red and rough like gravel – my life will proceed as it has been; no fairy tale to be sure, but with genuine prospects for me to make it better through my choices and my efforts.

If I get the other result of two lines – a number 11, which is off-white and crumbly like limestone – this will only confirm what my mother knows already, that with heaven rests all choices and that fairness and free will are not meant for people like me.

In the final seconds, the earth turns and I have no idea where my feet will land next.

Then slowly the two lines take shape and I stare at them in disbelief. They are black, both on the paper and in my mind and do not feel like anything at all.

This text is taken from *Vietnam as if... Tales of youth, love and destiny*,  
by Kim Huynh, published 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National  
University, Canberra, Australia.