

Chapter 2

The Ball Boy

There are, and I am sure of this, only two types of people in this world. The vast majority are zeros: nothings, spaces to be filled. You can find them cowering in corners, protecting their weaknesses. Zeros are rarely on the front foot or in control of the tempo; they are reactionaries in every sense of the word. For them, the game of life is carefully marked out by rules and routines according to which feats of strutting self-expression are repressed, with violence if need be.

‘Fetch me that ball, boy. Quickly!’

I swagger across the court and, feigning clumsiness, toss the ball so that it falls well short of old man Ha’s reach. ‘Fetch it yourself’, I mutter under my breath. ‘You’re the one who needs the exercise.’ I take some satisfaction in seeing him move and moan like a porpoise stranded on the shore.

As he bends down to retrieve the ball I remind him, ‘You really should have a spare ball before you serve, Mr Ha.’

He raises his voice to address not so much me but his buddies. ‘I only ever hold on to one ball because I hit so many aces! Anyway, who are you to tell me what to do, ball boy? With that rose-coloured hair, you look like the sort of fellow who likes to clasp on to a pair of balls. That’s how you keep your little boyfriends happy, isn’t it?’

Guffaw. Guffaw. It doesn't take much to amuse them.

Ha practically underarms his second serve. The sluggish ball lands in the middle of the service square and sits up. His opponent should be able to hit a winner, but is overwhelmed by the simple awareness of this fact. The ill-timed return only makes it halfway up the net.

Fifteen-love to the zeros.

This morning, as usual, I am surrounded by nothings: old man Ha's partner, Madame Dao, only hits forehands and steers clear of the umpire's chair because dogs and cats sometimes piss there. Ha's opponent, Dr Anh, never approaches the net because he is petrified of lobs and volleys. The good doctor's wife and partner will only play on the shadiest end of the most sheltered court because the sun puts her off, but she refuses to wear sunglasses because they make her look like a blowfly.

All of them are draped in what they think are the latest sporting fashions. Their shoes are gaudy with dragons and yin-yang symbols where the proper logos should be. The women wear tiny skirts and halter tops that threaten to burst apart at the seams to reveal their swollen frames. The men favour polyester shirts from which it is not uncommon to see the labels and price tags swinging. I can tell straight away they are ill-tailored fakes; they might as well be wearing plastic bags.

No doubt, these people all have jobs and families to return to when their twice-weekly session of middle-class, middle-aged flirting is over. For their sake I can only hope that sport is not a microcosm of life.

But don't get me wrong, I don't loathe all of the zeros out there. It would be pointless and unhealthy for me to do so. Such bitterness is a primary cause of dark bags and crows' feet, which would be a ghastly offence against eyes as generous as mine.

Instead I have sincere appreciation and a sliver of pity for nothings. They are the raw material: blank canvases and unfilled score sheets that figures like me need to fashion our masterpieces and claim our titles.

I am a one: solitary, singular, erect. I'm always looking to move upwards and onwards, eager to expose my weaknesses so that I can turn them into weapons. But, and this is important, it is not my intention to be a complete player or to have every shot in the book. Such ambitions are admirable for most, but not for me, for the simple reason that I will never be bound by any book.

This is contrary to the purpose of being a one, which is – in both sport and life – continually to tell one’s own story, to compose one’s own symphony, to weave one’s own tapestry, to be nothing less than exquisite and true.

Sometimes being a one is lonely, but it is surely better to be a tragic icon than another happy idiot in the crowd.

‘Get the ball, boy! I’ve already lost my rhythm and I’m close to losing my patience. You only have one thing to do all day and you can’t manage it. A stray dog has more tricks than you. How did you ever become a ball boy with that attitude? Who do you think you are?’

‘Sorry sir. I’m not myself today.’

‘And for God’s sake, why’s that cardboard box on your head? It’s not even sunny. You look ridiculous, like a chopstick with a piece of deep-fried tofu on the end of it.’

More guffawing from the flat-footed sods.

I kick the ball in Ha’s direction. My phone rings and I slide it under the box to answer. My box is ideal for protecting me from the sun’s rays without inhibiting phone reception. It is Thanh, another ball boy, who needs me to confirm the price of some skin-care products he is purchasing for me. As I hang up I see Ha with his mouth agape, astonished and enraged. I am still in the middle of court, stalling his precious fun.

‘You’re unbelievable! And where the hell did you get that phone? I’m paying you one dollar an hour. That thing must be worth a thousand or more. It’s newer and better than mine. Who do you think you are, boy?!’

I stand to mock-attention and offer Ha a kowtow that almost sends the box falling from my head. ‘A thousand pardons, Mr Ha. Please be patient with me and I will attend to your needs.’

But let me first address your questions, old man, because you have only recently arrived at my club and so your impudence is understandable. You do not know that we could play set after set without you winning a single point. You do not know the Himalayan peaks that I have ascended only to return to these Mekong plains. You do not know that this phone is more chic and cutting-edge than yours because its owner is far more chic and cutting-edge. So let me go over that script I have transcribed in my mind, the one that tells of my life to date. Rest assured – soon, by word of mouth or media blitz, you will know exactly who I am.

My mother informs me that I entered the world in total silence and with hardly a wriggle so that the midwife had to smack me on the bottom to make sure I was alive. Even then I did not cry.

As far as I can remember, I have only cried twice. The last time was during William and Kate's wedding, which I witnessed streamed live onto my phone. On that historic day I was moved by a cascade of sensations brought about by the romantic drama, the wealth of finery dotted with comic fascinators, the bridal party's taut and unblemished skin, that ever so meek kiss before a doting global audience and the magical wand that marked a line of regal elegance – from the bride's train to the profile of Prince Charles' convertible in which the happy couple left the Palace. I was cheering and all of a sudden weeping with the masses lining the streets of London. But unlike all of them I was convinced that, like William and Kate, I was destined to be a beacon of pride and class, elevating the hopes of a dour nation.

So you can see that, although I am not one for crying, this is not because I am cold-hearted. It's normal for children to bawl and for adults to sob. I don't condemn others for being vulnerable, but have decided for myself never to be a victim, never again. This resilience against all forms of pain, evident at my birth, was triggered by my first bout of crying and a sorrow so great that it demands much fortitude and a little time to recount.

The event occurred at my birthplace, which is full of zeros and nothings. It calls itself a city, but is in no way bustling, cosmopolitan or forward-looking. It is a provincial capital, with the emphasis on provincial.

My house is situated near the old market on a street that not long ago was the horse and cart depot. There's even a framed picture of me as a two-year-old sitting in a cart holding on to the reins of a bony, whip-scarred horse. On the road and sidewalk there are piles of turds, some dry, others not so dry. My father liked to look at that picture in the display cabinet and contemplate, 'I have not seen a turd – horse or human – on our street for more than a decade. Such progress.'

Just before I left he was smitten by the proliferation of electric bikes in my home town. 'I hear that everyone in Beijing has an electric bike now. Surely this is the way of the future. Thu, my boy, look at all the joy and benefit your grandfather gets out of his electric bike. It's easy for him to drive and doesn't go too fast. He can take it down to the river to do tai chi in the mornings and then to his

veterans' club in the afternoon. And in the evenings your cousin rides it to his extra mathematics and English classes. Charge the battery overnight, and it's ready to go again the next morning. Marvellous!

That is how I remember my birthplace: a haven for brittle old fools and docile adolescents, buzzing slowly from nowhere to nowhere.

In recent years, Japanese and Korean investment has set off an industrial boom in my province so that it now boasts two department stores, a strip of car dealerships, a successful soccer team, and a university specialising in finance, IT and foreign languages. The province is so rich that the authorities are constructing an entirely new city 30 kilometres to the north of the old one. I've seen the primetime advertisements encouraging people to move up into the 'Shanghai Standard' sky rises and invest in 'New Leaf' villas that back onto the American-designed golf course. Everyone seems to rejoice in their lack of originality. No one seems to comprehend that money alone cannot buy style and that the mere absence of horses on the road and shit on the pavement does not indicate development or civility.



At times I have wondered whether there was some deeper significance to my name. Maybe by calling me 'Thu' (Autumn) my parents had a deep yearning for Paris, New York, Milan or St Petersburg, where the change of seasons ignites the landscape with colour and resets everyone's sensibilities. Maybe – and I know this is wishful thinking – there is something salvageable in my family history, something I can savour.

'It wasn't my choice', replied my father when I asked him. I preferred 'Manh' (strong) or 'Son' (mountain). Your mother liked the sound of 'Thu'. And since it was October I thought it made sense.'

At times my father can be ever so simple, which would not be so bad were he not also sadistic.

He never spoke to me about his mixed parentage. I suspect my father preferred to forget that his father was half Khmer and his mother part Cham. He has always been irked by his middle name, 'Che', which he shares with the dashing Vietnamese singer Che Linh, who Father considers a traitor for leaving the country after the War. Father does everything he can to repress difference. He's always eager to assimilate.

This is why he joined the army and was eager to follow orders and march in parades. He fought in Cambodia shortly before I was born. Going to battle against his fellow Khmer no doubt alleviated his sense of self-hate and made him feel like a winner. He eventually rose to the rank of colonel and took command of the army human resources office in the province. This suited him immensely because it involved meticulously inspecting each individual's personal history for lumps and impurities. He treated his fellow soldiers, indeed everyone, as if they were pieces in a giant jigsaw puzzle, and liked nothing more than consigning them to their proper place. When a piece didn't fit, then it needed to be jammed in with force.

Although my father never pressured me to join the army, he always insisted that I fit in, follow the throng and know my place. One of his favourite sayings was, 'Mess with ink and you'll be stained; bathe in the light and your future will be bright.'

That proverb makes the millipedes writhe inside my gut. Don't let anyone tell you that it merely advises youth to steer clear of trouble and make wholesome friends. What a load of shit! It forces free spirits into submission so that old tyrants can rule. It insists, as my father insisted, that we be chameleons; blending into the background in the hope of surviving for another day. But I refuse to camouflage myself or desert at the first sign of danger. I couldn't cower even if I wanted to because of what I am: a snarling, technicoloured beast with laser-beam vision, a disco ball welded to my thrashing tongue, manicured claws and an insatiable lust for flesh – beholden to no one.

My aim is to pulverise all of the puzzles that I come across into jagged pieces and catapult them into space where they can never be solved. I disdain the flat earth, this two-dimensional world, and prefer instead to live in a nebula of colliding particles: always fighting; fucking; shameless; sublime; unique; free.

But I wasn't always like this. Most of my young life I was an insipid photocopy of my cousin Thuan. Five months and seven days my senior, Thuan and his mother lived with us because his father, who was also a soldier, had been killed in a training exercise during the War.

Thuan and I slept, ate, studied, made mischief, showered in the rain and, above all, played badminton together. We began playing at the age of six, trained by my parents, who were once provincial mixed-doubles champions. At first I partnered with my father while Thuan, who was always stronger and more aggressive than me, played with my mother. By the time we were 12 we were playing against them. I occupied the front court, picking up and pulling off drop shots, trying my best to block attacks. Thuan leapt and darted across the rear court; he was the smasher, the saver, the commander, and to me seemed more

man than boy. We did reasonably well in a number of regional competitions, but – and this is not false modesty speaking – I impeded us from going any further. I was a competent player, but lacked inspiration and grit. I was not playing for myself but rather for my parents and to be with Thuan. Both on and off the court, I was driven by that most insidious of desires: compliance.

Admittedly, if you had asked me whether I was content being Thuan's cousin, I would have responded with an emphatic 'yes'. But back then I did not know what true joy and success was because I had been conditioned to be subservient.

It was for this very reason that Thuan and I almost never played singles against one another. He was my superior in every way and I was his faithful stooge; it seemed dangerous to disturb this natural order. I remember one time when we were play-fighting with two long sticks of sugar cane. He was always the irrepressible Monkey from the *Journey to the West* TV series that we adored, while I was faltering Pigsy or the insipid Sandy. We duelled with great vigour until, according to the unwritten script, Thuan knocked the staff from my hands. I was almost ready to surrender. He lunged forward to finish me off, but this time I instinctively parried his attack and snuck around behind him. Then, again without thinking, I reached around and grabbed both ends of his cane and pulled it inwards so that Thuan's hands – still holding on to his weapon – were pinned against his chest. I squeezed as hard as I could, flexing the sugar cane to near breaking point, sandwiching us so tightly together that I could sense my cousin's panic at the prospect of unprecedented defeat. Thuan squirmed and whined to no avail. And it was then, on the precipice of triumph, that I capitulated, dropping the sugar cane and allowing Thuan to swivel and sweep my feet from under me. A second later he came crashing down, repaying my insolence with an elbow to the stomach, hollering with a victory known only to kings.

'I thought you had me there', Thuan said, puffing.

'Lucky bastard!' I feigned disappointment to feed his ego. 'The sugar cane juice made my hands slip.' At the time I did not know how to win.

My relationship with Thuan began to change with the onset of puberty. There was a night in particular when both of us could not sleep. We were restless with the uncertainty that comes with metamorphosis, our voices were mostly broken, our skin oily, our loins yearning to know the gratification reserved for adults. Thuan and I had recently started sleeping top-to-toe. I turned the right way up and switched on the bedside lamp before placing my face centimetres from his.

'What's the matter with you? Go back to sleep, we've got badminton training in the morning.'

‘Not until you show me your pubic hair.’

‘What?! Are you crazy? What for?’

‘Go on. I’ve just started to get mine and I know you’ve had yours for a year. I want to know if mine is growing the right way. I’ve never seen anyone else’s close up. Go on. Show me your hair and I’ll show you mine. There’s nothing to be shy about. It’s natural to be curious about these things. I need to know.’

‘I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately. You’re really starting to worry your parents. Do you know that?’

But Thuan could see that my eyes were wild and insistent. He sluggishly got out from under the sheets and, mirroring me, perched himself on his knees. The light from the lamp was softened through the mosquito net, which also served to shield us from the world outside.

Together, and it was the last time I could use this term to describe us, we lowered our cotton boxer shorts. In a single motion, I pulled my pants down to the crook of my knees. Thuan paused to reveal his coal-black shrubbery, which served only to build up the tension before – witnessing my self-confidence – he unveiled his timid bird. And there we knelt, naked and equal before one another, still slightly aroused by the fantasies of teenage slumber.

With the intensity of a jeweller, I examined Thuan’s manhood. His was longer to be sure, but far less beautiful. A bulbous vein meandered along the stem of his penis among hairs of varying length, whereas mine was gun-barrel smooth. His testicles hung low from the warmth of our blankets, the left one much more so than the right. I examined myself and was pleased with my coiffure, which I tended to every second night before showering. At the same time I could appreciate the untouched wilderness that Thuan had preserved, which had its own charm and allure.

With great tenderness and precision I moved my index finger, ever so slightly bent, towards my awaiting cousin. I was eager to test the integrity of his proboscis so that I might compare and contrast it with mine which, by that stage, I had become most familiar with. Now as I reflect upon that instant, I am reminded of the image of God’s hand reaching down to connect with the beseeching finger of that naked fellow painted long ago on the roof of that Italian church, and which I’ve often seen printed on fancy shopping bags. But then, as I was about to make contact, Thuan’s penis and his entire body seemed to hiccup and with the swiftness of a startled rat he retreated under the bed covers, his shorts still tangled around his knees.

The next day Thuan moved into his mother's room and announced over dinner that he had developed an 'allergy' to me. Naturally, I was wounded by this proclamation. Yet it did not take me long to realise that Thuan was right; he was drifting in one direction and I was charging towards another. I came to regard Thuan not as someone to be mourned, but rather as a skin that had to be discarded so that I might flourish and grow.

Soon afterwards Thuan gave up badminton for soccer, which provided me with an excuse to retire my racquet and shuttlecock. Oddly enough, as my cousin and I drifted apart, I grew closer to his mother. My aunt had always taken great care when it came to her clothes, physique and makeup, arguing that by preserving her appearance she was honouring her husband's memory. This was disingenuous because she was known to enjoy the attention of other men. But for someone who hardly left our district, Thuan's mother had an admirable appreciation of fashion and grooming – things for which I also demonstrated an uncommon aptitude. For hours at a time my aunt and I watched the fashion channel while snacking on watermelon seeds and dried longans. We flipped through piles of magazines rating the dress sense and shapeliness of celebrities such as Minh Hang, Jennifer Pham, Li Bing Bing, Kim Hee Soon, and Beyoncé. It was from her good example that I learnt the importance of skin care, and it was from her example that I learnt to embrace and manage change rather than resist it.

My camaraderie with Thuan's mother aggravated his resentment towards me. He made faces at me at home and either pretended not to know me or jeered at me with his troglodyte teammates when we crossed paths at school. It was from his perfidious mouth that I first heard the taunts *pansy*, *queer*, and *pe-de*. And I suspect it was Thuan who came up with the nasty nickname 'Huong Hoi', which evoked a putrid fragrance while alluding to the lampooned homosexual boss in the films *Fool for Love* and *Let Hoi Take Care of It*. Both the movies and my nickname were popular among my dim-witted classmates – which is to say the vast majority of them.

So, Mr Ha, I garnered an important lesson about how quickly love can grow into hate. And you should know that it was Thuan's final and most egregious betrayal that drove me out of my home town and eventually brought me here to be your ball boy.

But before we get to the most tragic scene in the fast-paced, self-directed movie that is my life, you must know about Ngoc and why, to this day, I still worship and long for him.



Ngoc came into my life via a measured misfortune. I was late for school – biology class if I remember correctly – and was riding at great speed. The silver and gold-coloured tassels I had attached to my handlebars were fluttering in the wind and tickling my elbows. A sudden flat tyre caused me to hit a pothole; I skidded over a layer of debris, collided with the gutter and fell onto the sidewalk. As I picked myself up, still ginger and confused, I saw up ahead a tall bicycle pump perched on the edge of the gutter with an electric-blue ribbon tied around it.

I approached the pump with a mix of adrenalin and self-pity and still remember the first words that he uttered to me: ‘Need some help?’

Ngoc was astride his white Peugeot bicycle, propped up on the rear wheel stand, slowly pedalling backwards with a toothpick hanging casually from his lips. I was struck by his superb posture, his bulky thighs which were barely contained by his faded blue jeans, and the simple sophistication of his crisp white business shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his forearms. There were no logos visible on his person, and I later learnt that Ngoc even removed the washing instructions from the inside of his clothes out of a resolve not to be branded or dragged down by dead weight. There was a touch of grease in his hair and a few smudges on his hands – just enough to give him a gritty-but-not-dirty look.

In that very first instant it was apparent that Ngoc was no common tyre repairman, that he was an outsider, and that I needed to know him. He eventually revealed that he had sprinkled shards of glass on the road as a marketing strategy, and that the ribbon was a sign to interested passers-by that he was libertine in every way. Yet I am certain that if he had told me these truths then and there, I would still have given him my business and thanked him for coming to my rescue.

Without a word, Ngoc took my bike and set about patching the rear tyre.

His office was a picture of order and efficiency. Ngoc’s tools were laid out in a long pouch, next to which was a red plastic bucket full of water. He used an adjacent concrete electricity pole with moulded square holes in it to store his wares: the bottom hole for tubes and glue; the middle for nuts and bolts; and the top one for his lubricant. Behind his bicycle there was a rolled up rattan mat propped up against a petite betel palm.

‘I haven’t seen you before’, was all I could come up with.

‘Just rode in’, and he pointed his tube lever at the antique bicycle which I now noticed had a sculpted tan leather seat. ‘I came to stay with my aunt and uncle a few weeks ago, but that didn’t work out. So here I am, on the streets again.’

‘Sucks, doesn’t it? Being stuck in such a boring and awful place I mean.’

'I've been in worse', Ngoc said with intriguing nonchalance.

He patched the rear wheel so promptly that I was afraid our chance encounter was drawing to an end. Then Ngoc turned his face up to look at me and, for the first time, we made eye contact.

'Your rear spokes are loose and the front wheel looks a little buckled. I think you should let me take care of it now. It is dangerous for you to carry on in this state. The repairs will take some time, though. Are you in a hurry?'

'Yes, thank you. I mean no, I'm in no hurry. Whatever you think is best. I feel lucky to have found you.' I was dreadfully self-conscious standing before him in my school uniform.

Ngoc told me to fetch his rattan mat and I squatted down upon it. Over the next 40 minutes I gently prodded him to recount his story.

A few nights ago he had had a fight with his uncle, who owned a purse and wallet shop at the central market. It was over whether he could come and leave the house as he pleased and the hours that he had to work at the store. His uncle sought to impose a curfew; Ngoc insisted that there be none. As for work, at first his uncle demanded six days a week, conceded five, and then four with short lunch breaks, but this remained a long way from Ngoc's baseline of 'probably never'.

'I love to work', Ngoc explained, 'but I have to love my work. And for now that means bicycles.'

His father died when he was 11, struck down by liver and lung cancer. 'Eleven years and nine months too late', Ngoc said, spitting into the gutter.

After his father's death, Ngoc and his mother moved from one relative's house to another before deciding to make it on their own in the city. He had spent most of his school years collecting litter for recycling and selling chewing gum on a restaurant strip, but assured me that he knew more than enough words and numbers to do business. Shared hardship brought Ngoc and his mother together; that is, until a year or so ago when it became clear that he could not approve of any of her lovers, who were always replicas of his abusive father. They quarrelled with the worst words and some violence. Finally, she demanded he leave the city and go live with her youngest brother in the provinces.

Ngoc acquiesced, and as he departed received from his mother a tearful kiss on the cheek and three \$US50 bills rolled up in a rubber band. He had, in any case, recently begun to yearn for country air and hoped to find some hills or even mountains to conquer. With his bicycle and little else, the young man caught a train to the city limits, where he began his long ride. Whenever possible he

detoured along unsealed roads and bumpy tracks extending through the rice paddies and villages. Ngoc bathed, sang, slept and made love outside. 'I lived like we're meant to live', he proclaimed to me with a spoke spanner raised. There was one occasion when a prostitute insisted that he hire a room, and though he agreed, he did not spend a minute longer indoors than was necessary. After three weeks, Ngoc arrived in my home town with less than \$4, which he used to buy himself a welcoming box of chocolates.

He had acquired his passion for bicycles by accident. Ngoc was on the back of a friend's motorbike swerving through the city late one night when a yellow Mercedes coupe ran a red light and cut them off. They hit the kerb and went sailing over the handlebars. Ngoc somehow escaped with only a broken toe; his friend shattered both wrists and suffered deep lacerations all over his legs. To her credit the driver stopped and, once assured that they were alive, shoved a solid gold bracelet into Ngoc's friend's bloody hands as compensation for her error and to help them forget they had ever seen her face and number plate.

That very night, Ngoc decided he would never again submit himself to the control of another human or the power of a machine. So on the day the bandage was removed from his toe, Ngoc purchased what he liked to call his 'snowy stallion'. He joined a group of young cycling enthusiasts who sought to reclaim the streets every Friday night. Their peloton was propelled by a range of desires: some of the cyclists were environmentalists seeking to reduce their carbon footprint; others were communists reconstructing the Viet Minh's iron horse cavalcades of the 1950s; a few casually paraded their expensive carbon-fibre frames; all were looking to engage in some well-mannered philandering. Of course, none of these incentives suited my Ngoc; so he left them after being given a set of unwanted panniers and learning some valuable lessons about bicycle maintenance, saddle position, and pedalling technique.

Thereafter, Ngoc set out to reclaim the city streets for and by himself. There were times when he rode in the midst of the traffic and felt like a fish in a mighty school, twisting and turning in unison with the commuters. At peak hour he would pass stationary motorbikes and cars, climbing onto the sidewalk, rushing the wrong way down one-way streets and zipping past traffic police in their peach coloured uniforms. As his legs swelled, he took to shaving them. At the same time the young man developed a lean strength in his upper body and core. According to Ngoc's ideal of human anatomy, 'Upstairs is for show, but downstairs is where all the work is done, and all the pleasure is had.'

More than anything, Ngoc liked riding at night. His favourite stretch of the city was a newly built tunnel which, due to shoddy planning and excessive compromise, was underused by day and empty at night. For Ngoc it was the perfect training facility. Upon entering he faced a powerful jet-stream that

required him to press his head down, maintain an even cadence and listen intently to his body's rhythm. With an old stopwatch that he had affixed to his handlebars, Ngoc timed how long it took before he emerged totally exhausted at the other end. And then, as a reward, he made an about-turn and re-entered the tunnel. But, not being one to take it easy, Ngoc accelerated until he was moving at precisely the same speed as the wind on his tail. And for priceless seconds he felt neither resistance nor compulsion; no friction upon his tread, no strain in his legs. It was then, in the small hours of the morning, that he would shut his eyes and let go of the handlebars.

Another U-turn and click of his stopwatch, and the young cyclist would do it over again, only faster.

After our first encounter I did not know his name, nor did he know mine. We were then, and always have been, more comfortable referring to each other in nameless, intimate terms: *anh* and *em*. Once my tyre was fixed, I rode around town in a daze. I did not bother with school, reasoning that I was incapable of learning while my heart threatened to lunge out of my ribs.



I looked for him each morning and afternoon, slowing down as soon as that electric-blue ribbon came into vision. He never seemed to change his clothes, nor was he ever filthy or dishevelled like other labourers. With an irregular flow of customers, Ngoc seemed to spend as much time tuning his own bike as he did fixing others. At every opportunity I waved to him and said hello – '*Xin chao Anh*'. He nodded. Sometimes he would give me a demure wink or hoist whatever tool he had at hand. If he was sitting on his propped-up bicycle cycling through its gears I would try to ascertain the pace of his pedalling as if it was a measure of his mood. I sensed that his cadence was picking up in anticipation of another rendezvous. That was the first month of our relationship.

When we made contact for the second time, it was I who sabotaged my bicycle. This involved a series of pin pricks to the wall of the rear tyre. I reasoned that a slow release flat would be difficult for him to detect and increase our time together, while also making it easy for him to deduce that I sought more than a repair. Again we conversed as he worked, but this time in a more easy-going way. I recounted the little there was to recount about my life: my nothing parents, my zero cousin and my defunct badminton career. I offered my name and he in turn revealed his. 'Ngoc' suited him. I savoured its androgynous chime; my ever so precious jade: smooth, hard, statuesque.

And then he extended the invitation I yearned for. 'Maybe we can go for a ride sometime? That is, if I can ever fix this puncture. I can show you around your home town.'

'When? When do you want to go?'

'Sunday mornings are quiet – meet you here at five.'

'Excellent. Just give me a whole new tube then. Wouldn't want this to happen again. What's your number and facebook name? Just in case. Don't worry though. I'm not going to pull out.'

'No phone. No keys. No wallet. No obligations.'

He was so streamlined, like the raw food eating hipsters I had seen profiled on the fashion channel. Looking back, the fact that he didn't have a phone made our relationship splendidly inconvenient. We met the way people used to meet: by pure chance or preordination. It has also meant that I do not have the slightest electronic evidence that Ngoc was ever part of my life.

For the rest of that week, I was like a small child awaiting *Tet*. I went to bed and woke up early as if this would help bring forth the gifts, frivolity and fireworks one associates with New Year. When Sunday eventually arrived, I was out the door before my parents had left for badminton. They were astounded by my enthusiasm. I was candid with them: I had a new friend, a bike rider; it was a bromance brimming with promise and adventure. Mother and Father were relieved to know I had a male comrade after having confined myself to a small group of dour emo girl classmates. Ngoc's presence in my life calmed them just as it kindled every nerve in my 17-year-old body.

We rode for almost six hours, with only two brief intermissions for breakfast and green tea. I had never been so far from my home town without my parents. Ngoc showed me streams I did not know existed, and unveiled rows of limestone karsts that I'd paid little attention to before. We listened for birds, looked out for monkeys, and were chased by stray dogs. On returning home, I was at once enlivened and exhausted. My thighs and calves had reached a state of numbness beyond pain and I was certain that no rider of bike or beast had ever known saddle soreness like mine. I would have collapsed had it not been for Ngoc's proposition.

'Come back to my place for a drink and massage. Otherwise you won't be able to walk for a month.'



Ngoc was living in an abandoned weather shelter for train crossing attendants, barely long enough to contain the plastic collapsible beach chair that was his only piece of furniture. Yet, except for the graffiti on the walls, it was clean and tidy. All of his possessions were arranged along one wall and his books and magazines were stacked under the beach chair, which lay open and waiting for me.

‘Take off your pants and lie down on your stomach’, he said with a casual confidence. I did as he commanded. With my face to the ground I peered between the chair’s plastic strips and made out the titles of his reading material: *The Mekong on Two Wheels*; *Cooking for Carbohydrates*; the popular Chinese novel *The Name of the Devil*; a couple of wuxia novellas by Jin Yong, and Vu Dinh Giang’s celebration of sex and violence, *Parallel*. Then I turned my head to the side to watch him work.

Ngoc wet his hands from the water in his drink bottle and squirted some on my legs, making me tremble. He added three droplets of bike lubricant to each hand and rubbed them together for warmth. Clearly, this was not the first massage he had given. He began to stroke my calves and hamstrings with fluidity and precision, as if he was searching my inner tube for tiny pinpricks. He kneaded the lactic acid out of my legs, which felt painful and therapeutic. Warm blood gushed back into my lower body. As the back of my legs relaxed, my manhood hardened, pressing down against the beach chair straps. No longer weary and defeated by the morning’s exertions, I was eager for more adventure. Then, with the knife-edge of each hand, Ngoc applied a rhythmical tapotement to my raw buttocks. Because I could not help it, I moaned. And that is when Ngoc kissed me on the back of my neck with an erotic motion far beyond anything my dreams could conjure. ‘You can turn over if you like.’

Again, I did as he asked. ‘I’m sorry. I’m sweaty and stink a little. I’m sorry.’

I looked down to see my member protruding from the top of my cotton underpants like a mouse poking out from its hole. ‘I’m sorry’ seemed to be the only thing I could say.

With his index finger and thumb he tenderly clasped my bell end, pausing for a few seconds at the very tip, a technique that he called micro-effleurance. Each deliberate stroke of his fingertips sent a tsunami of pleasure through my body. Although my eyes were closed, I suspect Ngoc was startled by the hastiness and fury of my climax.

‘I’m sorry. I haven’t done this before. And I’m so terribly sore from the ride. I don’t know if ...’

'That's okay, *em*. That's okay. Today was an introduction. We don't have to do anything more or go anywhere else. Move aside though, I wouldn't mind lying down for a little while.'

Ngoc helped me remove my splattered shirt. I wondered how I was going to explain it to my parents. He asked if he could remove his shirt and pants, which he said he found chafing. I agreed and stroked his bare chest a few times before sheepishly rolling to my side so that he could spoon me. And for the first time I felt his enchanted branch, straight but not stiff, snuggled in the crack between my cheeks. Before drifting off to sleep, I thought about how the two of us were a perfect fit.

The next day my legs were so stiff and sore that my mother had to bring my meals up to my room because I couldn't make it down the stairs. Even standing up was a challenge. The following day I could maintain a vertical position but not for long, so Mother had to drive me to school on her scooter. As I was driven past Ngoc I retracted my head into my shirt so that he would not see me feeble and dependent. It was not until the end of the week that I could walk with ease. By the next Sunday I proved that love can soothe any perineal pain because it was with only the slightest hesitation that I hopped back on my bike and returned to my precious jewel.

So Mr Ha, know that it was with glee that I pedalled towards the perdition awaiting me.

Ngoc was, as before, a perfect gentleman and did not impose himself on me. He was somewhat startled and most certainly titillated when I took the initiative, tearing off my clothes and then his, clawing at his tanned neck and back like a cat in the night, kissing him in any place that I could, professing that I was his without fear or compunction. Ngoc absorbed my passionate eruptions and then held me as if to say that even the most eager and talented student needs a firm teacher. So again we were spooning on that deck chair and, millimetre by careful millimetre, Ngoc completed me. It was, I admit, an awkward and even painful sensation at first, but such is the nature of progress.

And progress is exactly what ensued. Sometimes he advanced, at other times it was me; there were adjustments and even corrections, but never once did we stall or retreat.

Over the next two months I was immersed in the pleasure that was Ngoc, a pleasure that was all-consuming, but also enormous fun. That tiny concrete booth was a sacred temple and an amusement park. Once we had mastered the conventional positions, Ngoc showed me how to do 'The Buffalo Boy's Flute', and 'The Vietnamese-Vitruvian'; I twisted my ankle in the process of achieving 'Uncle Ho's Joyous Victory'. The equally satisfying contortions that I devised

were named after food cravings brought on by our exertions: 'The Extra Chilli Baguette', 'The Bursting Duck Embryo' and 'Pappa Roti's Yeasty Buns'. We were as young men should be: inventive, wanton, implacable.

Our lovemaking took place before and after school. We revelled under the pretext that we were riding in the countryside. My parents were relieved that I was out of the house and had a healthy hobby. As my father pointed out, I had never been fitter and I radiated cheer. Sometimes we did go for a ride, although never again for six hours. On occasion we left the snowy stallion locked up and set out on my bicycle. I sat on the rear-wheel rack as Ngoc pedalled and steered. With my feet on either side of his and my hands grasping his hips, we moved in complete harmony. For me it was never a strain because Ngoc insisted that he needed to keep in shape and that I should therefore relax. So he took charge while I sat back. When we whooshed down an incline I threw my arms up as if I was perched on the bow of the Titanic hollering to the world that we two were comrades, compatriots, companions.

Allow me to point out for your benefit, Mr Ha – because I know that you are inclined to abhor man-to-*nam* love – that, at the very least, we did no evil, we caused no harm. Evaluate us, for instance, against all those sobbing concubines and faithless arranged marriages. And it should go without saying that my and Ngoc's lovemaking outshines the sundry ways that men use prostitutes and rubber love dolls to avoid their lifeless wives.

Of course what I and Ngoc shared far surpasses any cloistered fornication that you, Mr Ha, have indulged in. So know that I accept neither condemnation nor pity for what I have enjoyed, especially from a perverted fuckwit such as you.

Indeed I have become convinced that if queer love is ever wrong it is because we have lived down to straight expectations, when in truth our love is right and natural. It is the love of our forefathers who ruled over great civilizations. It is worthy of celebration and esteem, something that's meant to be.



One weekend afternoon, after another blessed encounter with Ngoc, we were basking on his beach chair when, more out of necessity than design, I professed my love to him. 'When we are together I feel like I can do anything, break buffalo horns if I want to. It's as if the heavens are a saucepan lid about to burst open.'

He was silent. And his face, as usual, was inscrutable.

'I remember, *em*, the first, last and only time I uttered those words. I was a little younger than you and was screwing a guy much older than me. At the time I thought his response was callous, but I have come to understand the wisdom in his words. That's why I'm repeating them to you now.'

'This is not the time for love. Maybe there never was such an era. But the terrible mistake that pups like you make is to devote yourself to someone today in the hope that – perhaps even because of that devotion – things will get easier and better in the future. Let me make it clear: no matter how hard we try or how much we believe in ourselves and one another, tomorrow will not be brighter than today. Why do you think our gay community refers to itself as living in the Third World? It is because we are destined to be abused, excluded, discarded. This is no place and no time for love – not for us.'

'If you don't love me then say so. But don't say that. I don't believe it. Not when you've brought this much to my life. You've given me everything to look forward to. You've completed me, *anh*.'

'If you don't believe me, then consider that those like us lived freer and happier lives before, when our camaraderie was beyond the comprehension of the masses. Segregation of the sexes allowed us to be out and about: men walked the streets hand-in-hand; we comforted and kept one another warm; unabashed, we slapped and tickled our buddies. We were in the clear because we were unknown. Back then, other than their spouses, men did not mix with women. We could take wives for propriety's sake, close our eyes and screw them while dreaming of our true loves just enough times to produce a few children. It was a lie, but one that was simple to maintain. What you call "progress" has made these lies more complex and costly for us.'

'But I have never felt as free as I do now, *anh* Ngoc. Here with you.'

'Remember this: sexual freedom for others is our oppression. Their "can" is our "must not". They can embrace in public, which means we must not. They can have many partners before settling down with one, which means that we must not have any. Their light casts us into the shadows. Now they know about us, they can brand us as different. Now that we're on the map, we're targets.'

This is what my Ngoc said when I told him I loved him. And although I reject the defeatism in his words outright, it is nonetheless a message I take very seriously and have kept close to me at all times, like a memento.

And I must acknowledge to you Mr Ha that, in the short term, he was right.

Because even as we enjoyed what Ngoc refused to acknowledge as love, my grave mistake during those months of ecstasy was to think that my parents, teachers, and society were too backward and uninformed to concern themselves with us. Perhaps a part of me wanted to believe that with the proper instruction and a dose of empathy, they might become enlightened and accept that I was happy and free. But, adopting Ngoc's perspective, they were already far more modern than I had assumed, which is to say that they were malevolent, devious and vile.

Only a few days after I professed my love, modern reality formally announced itself with a mighty thump. I awoke immediately from my post-passion nap as a forceful hip and shoulder against the door of Ngoc's shelter pushed the latch screws right out of the wall; it was clear that with another light push the door would fly open. We had dedicated that week of lovemaking to the *Star Wars* movies and had reached *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*. I was completely naked and while there was probably time for me to cover up, I was too much of a braggart to bother. Ngoc was in his underpants, which he always put back on as soon as possible so as to 'keep it all warm and in the right place'. It could have been anyone: the head of the local commune, vagrants, the police, or train crossing guards. But, when the door burst open I was not surprised to see my cousin Thuan. And there too was my father's new digital camera held up above Thuan's wide, debasing grin.

'*May la gay!*' he howled, referring to me using the pronoun '*may*' more commonly reserved for dogs and servants. I felt the clenching force of every molar in his jaw as he enunciated that awful import from the English language – '*gay*' – that is so often used to defame us. Thuan's horrid shriek swathed us in a cloud of wilful ignorance, so thick with scorn that, while today thoughts of my being 'bent' or 'queer' evoke pride, the word '*gay*' still sets me ablaze as if it were a Molotov cocktail.

Just as Thuan took the photograph, beams of sunlight from around his silhouette merged with the subtle glow of the shelter's grimy window. The combination of sunshine and shadow was a tribute to our supple bodies, highlighting our velveteen muscles in their patina of sweat. No flash was necessary and so, one artificial 'click' later, Thuan was out the door.

As I lay embracing my love, I heard my cousin running back up the gravel road. I surmised that after following me from home he had parked his motorbike some distance away so that we wouldn't hear him approach. This was the last picture ever taken of me in my home town. I have not seen it, although suspect

it would not be difficult to find on the internet, and wonder how many litres of sperm have been spilt in joyous praise of it. I suppose I have never sought it out because I prefer the picture that I took in my mind's eye. Yet I like the idea of placing that final image alongside the one of me as an infant on the horse-drawn cart. For all the changes to me and my surrounds, a thread runs through my life and those images – one that holds profound lessons for humanity. When I am famous, scholars will debate the significance of these pictures over countless hours and pages:

In picture one we see the concluding days of four-legged transport in Vietnam. The faded circa 1985 image is treasured because of its capture on celluloid of the changing of worlds in a moment. The second picture, set in an abandoned train conductor's shelter, serves in one regard as a micro-museum of the industrial era. This famous picture, known as 'the True LENS' ('Love, Erotica and Neo-Sexuality'), was transmitted to the universe in a fraction of a millisecond and thus also marks the timeless and spaceless revolution of the early digital age. Most striking, in both images is the naked innocence inscribed on the face and sublime body of the subject. This innocence contrasts the hardship and debauchery that would follow in Master Thu's life, as has been recorded in several books and an HBO drama.



It was almost amusing to see my demure mother hysterical.

'What have you done to yourself? What have you done to our family? Let me see your arms. No don't show me. I don't want to see the wings of my angel scarred by needles. I've booked you into the clinic tomorrow. I can only hope to heaven that you haven't got AIDS. Of course the doctor's wife will tell everyone in town. But what does it matter? You are ruined. Everything's ruined. How will we ever purge ourselves of this sin? How are we going to cure you of this disease?'

Father was predictable and calculating, but I could see the veins on his head and arms pulsating with passive aggression.

'This depravity is a passing stage brought about by all of that foreign television and music you've consumed with your aunt. We should've seen it coming. I've read that many youth regard what you have been doing with that criminal as modern and hot – '*mot*' as you young people like to say. It is not hot or modern – it is evil. I'll be looking into the appropriate re-education measures to salvage you from this social wreckage. Know that I've informed the security police about your assailant; they'll deal with him and no doubt they'll investigate his

relatives. There's no hope for him, but you can still be reformed, someday have a wife and children, be normal. The rectification process – it'll take time, but as Uncle Ho said, "It takes 10 years to grow a tree, and 100 years to cultivate a person."

You can see, Mr Ha, why the very next morning I had to wake and leave home before my parents prepared for badminton. And perhaps you can also see why it was without hesitation or guilt that I took the money from their wallets and the tin box they kept in a ceramic urn in the courtyard. I viewed this not as stealing, but as cashing in my inheritance – early to be sure, but also at a substantial discount to my parents. My decision to leave was not driven by fear so much as an allergic reaction; I simply could not stand those people and that place anymore. So before the sun had risen, I set off from the house full of zeros on my finely tuned bicycle, leaving nothing behind.

Of course I made a detour along the train tracks. And though I knew he would not be there, I stopped at the shelter to pay homage to my Ngoc. The door was hanging open and the inside swept clean. However, in the corner of the room there was a piece of paper folded over and weighed down by a handful of gravel. The note was bordered with smudges of bike oil and what I feared was blood. I had never seen his writing before. Each word was pressed into the paper with mental and emotional strain. The simple prose was full of rage, self-learnt grammar infused with artistry.

Em,
Know that I have tasted
Your father's friends' batons.
And am no longer handsome.
I have been meaning to tell you
How bored I have become
With our furtive affair.
And that when you pedal
Your toes stick out
Too much.

Reading each line felt like a fingernail being torn from my hand, and the motif of violent rejection was a knife in my innards. It was then, for the first time in my life, that I cried. And if I never cried again, that single occasion would more than fill my quota such that if my life was captured in an epic poem the refrain would be:

With the autumn came a monsoon of tears.
With the autumn came a monsoon of tears.

Since then I have discovered a speck of reprieve from concluding that Ngoc quite possibly left unstated his love for me in order to lighten my guilt. And the evidence I have for this is that enclosed with Ngoc's note, which I have long discarded, was his electric-blue ribbon, which I still keep.

I arrived in the city as a refugee, and was willing to take shelter anywhere I could. It is lucky for you, Mr Ha, that I happened to come across An Duong Tennis Club, with its sloping, dog shit-stained courts. Lucky for you and for everyone here that my standards were so sunken from my ordeal that I agreed to become a ball boy. But in truth I don't believe in luck, dumb or otherwise. In contrast to you, Mr Ha, and just about everyone else, I believe in the fate one makes for oneself and then manipulates and betrays.

In the first months of my arrival I reverted to living as a chameleon. And, not surprisingly, my timidity was a magnet for mockery and abuse. The menopausal monster I called 'chief' refused to recompense me for the first month because I was on probation. At the same time, I was given the worst and most arduous jobs, none of which offered the prospect of tips: cleaning the toilets and showers, scrubbing the shoe marks off the baselines, and drying the courts with two broken pieces of squeegee, knowing that in a few minutes it would rain again. Often she reminded me that I was a no-good out-of-towner without any prospect of obtaining a residency permit and therefore lucky to get whatever work came my way. The players called me everything from 'darling' to 'dickhead' and only really acknowledged my existence when directing their anger at me. People castigated me because I had not delivered to them their lucky ball, because I was standing in a distracting pose, and because the water I brought out was too cold and the energy drinks too fizzy. Because of me, players lost points, games and entire matches that were critical to their self-esteem. And when they did not play well, they did not work or live well. So, as was the case back home, I was a bad omen. I ruined lives.

Mostly, I was ostracised and abused by the other ball boys and the coach. It was the coach who revived that inane nickname 'Huong Hoi' that somehow followed me across provinces. As I swept up sunflower seed husks and cigarette butts, he wet old tennis balls and smashed them at me to improve his aim and my agility. And he stirred up the usually docile guard dogs with a pair of my underpants so that they pursued me without relent.

The six other ball boys and I slept in a room above the shower block. But 'slept' is not the right word because the others had boundless energy when it came to harassing me at night. A rumour was concocted that I had a taste for waste,

such that even now when I open a used water bottle I sniff it for traces of urine. In the morning it was common for me to find a dog turd at the foot of my mat or chicken manure sprinkled over my sheets and in my shoes. One evening I awoke to see, an inch from my nose, a steaming coil of human shit on a piece of toilet paper. The other boys barked and roared as I vomited into my blanket.

All of this I endured without hope of amnesty or retribution. No punishment was too cruel for me and no excrement too foul. Always, I believed I deserved worse.

Tennis thus served up my penance, but it would also allow me to make a most miraculous comeback.

One sleepless night I decided to go down to the clubhouse and take my chances with the mosquitoes and guard dogs (some of whom I had managed to befriend with games of fetch using old tennis balls and sweatbands). As I was tiptoeing down the stairs, I noticed that the clubhouse light was still on and a handful of people were frolicking inside.

It was Mr Diep's group, which played on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday nights. They had played until midnight and then hired the clubhouse for the entire evening, bringing along a television and copious amounts of boiled chicken, duck's blood pudding and corn liquor. The men welcomed me with their faces a joyous crimson.

'You're the one with the girl's name right? Thao? Thu? That's it. Come here Thu my boy and watch Wimbledon with us.'

One of Mr Diep's friends flicked a 100,000 VND note at me and said that I should make myself useful by pouring their drinks and giving them massages. I was happy to oblige, in part because there were only four of them, but mostly because it was the closest I had come to kindness in a very long time. As I massaged their necks and shoulders, I listened to them complain about how their wives did not understand their passion for tennis: how the action on court allowed them to endure the tedium of domestic life; how the rules ensured a measure of justice now extinct in the streets and at work; and how the most profound friendships could only be forged in wartime and during tiebreaks. Only weeks earlier, someone had the idea of taking advantage of their seclusion and hired a team of whores to watch the French Open with them. But the girls' fake nails scratched their backs raw, they asked too many questions about the purpose of sport and prattled to one another during important points. Thereafter, Mr Diep

and his friends concluded that the watching and playing of tennis is properly reserved for men, and that I was a gift from the grand slam gods because I was silent, willing, and understanding.

I garnered this information over the next four hours but, as with millions of others who had joined us to watch the Wimbledon final that year, was only partly conscious of my surroundings. That match – the first and best I have ever seen – was so engrossing and inspiring that it changed my attitude to tennis: from revulsion when the coin was tossed, to indifference by the start of the second set, to mild interest minutes later. By the time the final set began, I was addicted. And all of this was because of one remarkable man.

I did not need to see other professionals to realise that Roger Federer was the best. He moved around the court with the poise and fleet-footedness of a ballroom dancer. Bolts of lightning flew from Roger's racquet to smite his opponents. He did not require a coach, properly regarding all forms of guidance as stifling.

From the start it was also clear to me that Roger was more than a tennis player. He was a symbol of style and civility. The cardigan and pants he donned as he entered the court could just as easily have turned heads at a Monaco casino. The traces of gold on his bag, headband and shorts were delicate and debonair. His personal logo was etched on his shoes in the shape of Icarus's wings. I was enraptured by how the front side of the 'R' moulded perfectly into the spine of the 'F'. 'RF' represented for me a new element on the periodic table – the rarest and most valuable substance known to humankind.

Because you are old and senile, Mr Ha, I should perhaps remind you that RF lost that day. It was as if he had met his kryptonite – a new force that I know you adore because you think Rafael Nadal is tough and inexhaustible, so very Vietnamese. But, as is the case with many men, his hyper-masculinity is a fragile mask for his repressed homoeroticism. Of course, it is not the eroticism I condemn, but rather his efforts to repress it. So too, I condemn the twisting mishits that he brings to each rally, as instructed by his uncle Toni. I condemn his lopsided arms and snarl, and his brash, ill-tailored attire – his shorts are too long and his shirts unforgivably sleeveless. And I condemn the tribal manner in which he zigzags across the court and snaps at his underpants before each point.

Roger's historic defeat confirmed what I knew only too well: that life is not meant to be just or charming. So I did *not* cry then. But Roger did, and as I watched him hold up his consolation plate – with Mr Diep and his friends cheering for the underdog and hacking away at the tall poppy – I was overwhelmed with a desire to comfort him. Roger needed my strength in the face of newfound uncertainty. What was necessary at that moment was for him to rest his head in

my lap and for me to run the back of my fingers along his gossamer soft locks. 'Don't fret. Everything will be alright, Roger', I would swear to him. 'You are still number one. Still number one.'

'Give me one of your racquets', I said to the coach with a mad man's conviction, 'and before summer's end I'll give you a lesson that you'll never forget.' It was another humid morning, a lull before the after-breakfast players arrived to humiliate me.

The pack of ball boys squatting around the coach cackled and snorted like hyenas. But when the laughing subsided, my challenge remained. The coach knew he could not refuse me without damaging his alpha-male status. And so he nodded, took from his basket one of his oldest racquets and passed it to me. I suspect that it was once purple, but there were so many chips and scratches on it that I couldn't tell for sure. The towelling grip was ragged and sweaty, like the ones I had used on badminton racquets. The diminutive head size also reminded me of my badminton days, but this racquet was far heavier.

'Remember to hold the pointy end and make sure you keep it out of your arse. I want it back after I've given you a thrashing!' The cackling resumed, and I walked away.

That lunchtime, with no one else daring to face the noon-time glare and heat, I began my training. I stalked across the road to the water treatment plant where there was an expanse of bitumen and a wall along which a wonky line had been painted at net height. The space was rarely used because the bitumen was breaking up and wet, but within the week I could play around every crack, bump and puddle. The sound of the rushing water helped to purify my thoughts and focus upon all that mattered: the ball. With each groundstroke, I concentrated on willing the ball to collide with the very centre of my racquet; I imagined the next shot being even more precisely struck, and then played that imagined shot. After a few weeks of this regimen I drew spots on the wall and tried to hit them twice in a row, then five and ten times, with alternating forehands and backhands, topspin and slice. As I improved, my drives threatened to knock bricks out of their mortar, while my drop shots were butterfly kisses from the ball to the wall. I practised in every spare moment. And when I was so tired that I could no longer run, I worked on my serve; not focusing on generating brute power, but rather on my fluidity and form, which made for speed and accuracy while also preserving my shoulder so that I could practice for yet

another hour. At first, I did it for Roger and to be more like him; but before long I was preoccupied with bettering him by becoming me, a superman untroubled by kryptonite.

Feel free, Mr Ha, to learn what you can from my training. I have no secrets and encourage spectators to record me with their cameras so they might review my technique in slow motion as many times as they please. Indeed, as people at my club and others began to do this, I came to the realisation that no one – regardless of their admiration and desire – could be like me. I was a natural talent to be sure, but my meteoric rise was also the outcome of an individual history and work ethic that simply could not be emulated by others. The badminton with which I had been well-drilled was a wellspring of hand-eye coordination. My limber upper body was able to strike with the speed and ferocity of a cobra. In line with Ngoc's cycling and anatomical philosophy, I developed powerful and fastidiously shaven thighs. Our sustained lovemaking fostered stamina and imbued me with the improvisation skills of a silver leaf monkey darting through the treetops. Superimposed on all of this was an intense anger and craving for justice, such that in every ball I saw the mangled and mashed faces of my father, cousin Thuan, and the cops who had hammered Ngoc with their batons. And then finally there was the coach who was the culmination of all these patriarchs and scoundrels. The only way to deal with him was by repeated slaps across the face until he came to his senses and accepted me, indeed revered me, for who I am.

I began challenging the other ball boys to matches. The weakest boy was no opposition, nor was his immediate superior, nor the one after that. It was as if I was playing a computer game in which each level involved new traps, dangers and henchmen with special powers. Shot by shot, I not only defeated my ball boy foes, but won them over as well. Often I played to their strengths and deliberately exposed the chinks in my armour so that I could improve and they could feel as if they had some chance of winning. And because tennis is a gentleman's game and humility is essential to greatness, I always congratulated my opponents when they took points from me or came close to doing so.

Given the dramatic rise of my tennis prowess and my reputation, it was no surprise in the last week of summer when the coach informed me that a wrist injury prevented him from playing. With a cold, steely gaze, I informed him that any time in the autumn was good for me.

It was not until the moon festival had well and truly passed and the coach had endured persistent taunting from his ball boys that he finally acquiesced and stood across the net from me. Our match was, after all that build-up, a non-event. The coach was not bad, but he was a predictable ball feeder, a textbook

follower, a counterpuncher with a safe but uninspiring double-handed backhand. He grunted, shrieked and scurried like so many female Russian players with neither art nor flair. He was not a true player.

The result was preordained, but not the ending. For as I approached the coach to clink our racquet heads as a sign of appreciation, he leapt over the net to my side of the court and grabbed my battle-scarred racquet.

‘Don’t ever lay your hands on this again!’ he announced before flinging it over the back fence so that it smashed against the gutter of a house. The coach then reversed his brand-new, top-of-the-line, freshly strung racquet, and presented the handle to me.

‘This is yours. Take it. Just tell everyone that I’m your coach.’

Would you believe he even knelt down and lowered his head, displaying all the chivalry of a samurai surrendering his sword?

And as I clenched that yielding blade, the crowd of onlookers burst into applause. They cheered for me with a gusto untainted by envy because I had reached heights that they could not possibly dream of reaching themselves, and because with all of their tiny hearts they wanted me to soar higher. And in that instant it was as if we had all been transported back to that fateful Wimbledon final, only this time grace had triumphed.



During the previous season I could not find anyone to play tennis with me, and now they queued, pleaded and even paid to do so. Players asked me to warm up with them and I was regularly challenged to games. My fee was 100,000 dong and I insisted on giving all contenders a 15-point head start in each game just to make it interesting. I would have made far more money had I agreed to play doubles, but always felt as if my side of the court was already cramped with just me in it.

On occasions when an audience gathered to watch me play, I would instruct them in good etiquette. If I was to play for them it seemed only proper that they show me the courtesy of not speaking on their phones and, better yet, switching them off. I demanded that spectators only applaud when I struck a clean winner, not when I forced my opponent into error. People in neighbouring houses with small balconies overlooking the courts were firmly advised that they should not eat hot food or cradle babies while enjoying my play because of the inherent hazards and in memory of Michael Jackson. After becoming

convinced that none of the people around me could develop into supreme tennis players, I set my goals much higher; seeking through example and instruction to cultivate them into better, more civilised people.

To be sure, most of them were stubbornly barbarous, but not all of them all of the time. And certainly not Thanh, the ball boy who arrived from the highlands not long after me and who was hard-working, loyal, decent, and as loveable as a hound. Thanh had a mighty mop of hair, which he always tried to tame with a headband. He also had a reasonably good swinging left-handed serve. He was slightly older than me but was, by all significant measures, my inferior. This he knew well, so that of all the praise I have received for my tennis and demeanour, Thanh's was the most heartfelt.

'I like to watch you play, Mr Thu. But, you know, I like to *listen* to you play even more.' Thanh closed his eyes as if he was savouring a boiled sweet. 'I listen to the thunderous crack of your serve and how you snap your wrist at the very last instant to add pace and spin; I listen intently to your feet as they slide like river stones over the court; the frightening whoosh of your topspin forehand, the engulfing silence that comes with each slice backhand, and your drop shots, which fall on crackling banyan leaves and stay there. Often I try to hear you puff, grunt or swear. But you never have, not once, because you are not like the rest of us. I hope you do not find my praise irksome, Mr Thu.'

I told Thanh that I appreciated his attention and honesty and informed him that I had been looking for a reliable man to act as my lackey.

'That is all that I could ever hope for', he replied.

His first responsibility involved helping me to undertake a metamorphosis that I had been considering for some time. Having been blessed with a gentle wave through my hair, I wanted to distinguish myself further from my surrounds while drawing closer to Roger by introducing a few brown streaks. In my home town I had on many occasions helped my aunt dye her hair, so I knew exactly what had to be done, and that I could not do it myself. I sent Thanh to get the dye and directed him in how to apply it. He performed all that was asked of him without fault, but I suspect that either the dye company or shop assistant betrayed me because I emerged from my frothy chrysalis with a red bouffant that blazed brighter than the Swiss flag. Thanh was taken aback and deeply apologetic for playing a part in this unintended result. I assured him it was not his fault and that I had a knack for righting egregious wrongs. Regardless of this, I quickly came to like my new look and so did the other ball boys; by the end of the month the heads of all the ball boys displayed the full range of piquant colour that can be found in fire and chilli.

This was one of many salubrious effects I had on those who once taunted me with faeces. My leadership also brought cleanliness and order to our cramped little studio. The ball boys began to fold their clothes and place them in boxes, or hang them on hooks behind the door. Shoes and sandals were lined up on one side of the stairs and knick-knacks secured in old tennis ball cans. I drafted a roster for sweeping and dusting, always allocating myself extra shifts so that no one could accuse me of being imperious. To my astonishment, someone even hung up a picture. It is a gaudy scene of carp leaping out of a waterfall with 'Buon Ma Thuot' emblazoned across the bottom and rectangular cut-outs that would have displayed the temperature, time and date were the contraption still working. Despite not appreciating the picture, I found the effort and the thought of it most uplifting.

Although not the most senior of the ball boys in terms of years, I came to be regarded as the wisest, and so the others would look to me for guidance. Most importantly, by exerting the softest and surest power, I taught the ball boys that masculinity does not mean brutality, but rather being confident enough to embrace the demure. Following my statements regarding the value of oral health and self-restraint, two of them made valiant attempts to quit smoking cheap cigarettes. Others had success establishing relationships with girls, thanks to my advice to 'honour them as you honour me, and buy them flowers on alternate Tuesdays'. I taught them how to dress with panache and to recognise the importance of accessories and the even greater importance of not over-accessorising. Those ball boys who previously never washed made a habit of doing so, and one even developed an appreciation for cologne.

I was insistent about skin care and how it is never too early to safeguard the elasticity of one's face. This was particularly important for those of us who toiled day after day in the sun, but who also aspired towards office or studio work in the future. And so, while I have never belonged to the 'whiter-the-better' camp – and never could, given the swarthinness I inherited from my Khmer ancestors – I saw very early on the common sense in covering up. To this end I harnessed the potential of the water bottle boxes that were regularly discarded. I took to several of them with a knife and came up with a design that would make an experienced haberdasher envious: the sides folded to sit evenly on each shoulder; the back section extended to provide full UV coverage; a series of vents in the top could be closed on cool mornings; and an adjustable visor at the front shaded the wearer's eyes.

This has, as you can see, Mr Ha, become standard issue for the ball boys at this club and is also donned by many of the players as they rest on the sidelines.

So try, Mr Ha, to come to grips with the fact that the 'ibox', as it has come to be known and which you scorn, represents the epitome of resourcefulness – the skilful integration of functionality and form.



Now that you are done playing, old man Ha, and have removed your shoes and shirt, reclining with your hands resting on your slimy belly, you may be ready to find out how I came to own this smartphone and why I deserve it.

You are, of course, too old and dim to know exactly what I achieve with this phone. But simply put, I use it to keep in touch with all the other number ones out there, digitally tethering myself to them so that none of us are set adrift in an ocean of zeros. Roger tweets me about his latest victory and how his twin daughters and sons are doing at home. There are vast networks of men from Binh Duong to Brussels who I also connect with for comfort, adventure, titillation, or to pass the time. I ask my phone what the weather is like in Rio and the price of sea cucumbers in Taipei – and it tells me. There are podcasts on Da Vinci's inventions to listen to, collections of poems by the Xuan Dieu to contemplate, Big Toe hip-hop videos to watch, and articles to digest on the hidden palaces of Emperor Khai Dinh and Angora rabbit farming in Dachau. Everything from my deepest yearning to my most fleeting desire is satisfied. It is the closest thing that I have to a home and is, in every way, superior to the one into which I was born. On occasion I even use it to call someone.

Because you asked, you should know that this modern-day lifeline was an indirect and unforeseen result of my decision to come out to the other ball boys. I told Thanh first and he reacted with trademark frankness and fidelity.

'I am not totally sure what "homosexual" means, Mr Thu. Given that I am not as far travelled and learned as you, would you mind if I asked you a few questions?'

'Feel free to inquire. I'm a curious man myself.'

'Thank you. Will you grow breasts?'

'No.'

'Do you wish to marry me? And that's not a proposal.'

'Never. You're not my type. Even if you were, the state would not permit it. And if I were the Party General Secretary, a prospect that I have not ruled out, no one – homosexual or otherwise – would be allowed to marry because I see no benefit and much harm in yoking two humans together as if they were beasts of burden and then rejoicing with excessive amounts of cognac and seafood.'

'Have you ever slept with a woman?'

'Many times', I lied, but had certainly had opportunities to do so.

'What was wrong with those women that you would reject all others?'

'Your question should really be "What's right about the men who I've made love to that I could not possibly return to women?"'

'Will I catch this homosexuality from you?'

'You were not born so blessed and would struggle to be anyone other than who you are.'

Thanh had a habit of rubbing the cleft of his chin with his index finger when he was deep in thought.

'I do not pretend to understand you, Mr Thu, and never have. But I see no reason to respect you less today than I did yesterday as our club champion and moral exemplar.'

Thereafter, it was easier and less time-consuming than I had thought to come out to the ball boys because Thanh took it upon himself to do the explaining and, where necessary, the arm-twisting. I thanked Thanh sincerely, which made him blush, and assured him that his loyalty and liberal-mindedness would soon be rewarded with a most spectacular gift.

Mr Vui played six times a week in two different groups, and on the face of it was an upstanding club man and citizen. He had the angled jaw of a Hong Kong soap star and a sprinkling of distinguished grey hair around his temples. Vui played with the latest racquets and wore designer tracksuits, which he imported from Singapore to avoid fakes. All of this was paid for by a multi-level *World of Fones* store that was owned and managed by his wife. By Vui's own account, she paid him a stipend to stay away, arguing that he and his family had only ever known bankruptcy and indigence. Mr Vui's two daughters attended an international primary school and were looked after by his mother-in-law and an *au pair* after hours, which also suited him because, by his reckoning, one of his daughters was a twerp and the other was a bitch. So while he was a man of leisure and means, there was a futility in Mr Vui's life, which he articulated to me one day during a change of ends as an inability to hit a topspin backhand.

'Not being able to hit a topspin backhand didn't stop Steffi Graf from winning a grand slam', he reasoned to me, 'but it still causes me woe.'

Apparently the coach had tried to help him to no avail. And so now his problems were mine to fix. We met at lunchtime and I drilled him with one backhand after another, insisting that he grip his racquet fiercely and drive with his legs, holding the racquet head up high, swinging down low and then rising up again and over the ball. After half an hour of drills, about four-fifths of his backhands landed in the net, while the remainder flew over the baseline.

He asked to rest and as we sat beside one another Mr Vui took out his state-of-the-art phone from his tan leather *World of Fones* holster. We played a few online games, zoomed in on ourselves from a satellite, and I swiped quickly from picture to picture of his wife and children in taffeta dresses at birthday parties and death anniversaries. Throughout all of this Mr Vui's hand was on my thigh, hunched like a cat about to leap on its prey.

'There's a European clay court tournament on the television right now, *em Thu*', he said, finally breaking the silence. 'My house is a little too far away, but I know a hotel near here with satellite television. Let's go and watch it and you can give me a few more pointers.'

Mr Vui paid for two hours. We sat on the end of the bed and I was startled when he turned on the television to see that there actually was a tennis tournament on. 'Switch it off, *anh Vui*', I said to him with an endearing whine.

I pushed him back upon the mattress and explained that he could relax in the knowledge that I had my hand on the rudder. In a matter of seconds his shorts were around his ankles and I was in control of Mr Vui. He was tall but tender at first, and was then obliging for a while before becoming stubborn to please at the very end, so that it took all of my ambidextrous attention to relieve what may well have been years of tension pent-up in his haunches. With his discharge came a carnal roar that set the sparrows flying from the hotel rooftop.

Immediately afterwards, Mr Vui dashed into the bathroom and returned with towels and toilet paper as if he was going to erase the evidence from a crime scene. I sat calm and bemused on the bed as he crouched on his knees trying to scrub away his shame – still with no pants on. And then Mr Vui began to sob, saying that he was not ashamed of me, but rather of himself.

'I'm not a gay *pe-de* and neither are you', he proclaimed. 'You are confused and just a boy. I'm oppressed. Both of us innocent. That fuckin' woman. She made me do this.'

He wept as he told me how their marriage looked good only on paper, how it was a union of families and interests but never of hearts and loins, and how their household was as fabricated as the photo album of them that they kept on the coffee table with fake backdrops of Hawaii, Sydney and Phu Quoc. His

wife was more interested in money than people and so they had only had sex three times in the past two years, on days that were designated as auspicious by a fortune teller. Even then his wife insisted that she would only ride him while she was clenching fistfuls of US dollars and wearing a necklace of jangling gold taels. Despite barely touching him, she had screwed all the love and passion out of his life. Mr Vui offered further excuses and tears, concluding with a promise that he would never again use me like that and, in turn, that I should not speak to anyone about what we had shared. As a goodwill gift, Mr Vui offered me a 200,000 dong note.

I swore that our secret was safely buried and refused his money, asking only that he let me stay in the room for the remaining hour so that I could savour the air conditioning. Mr Vui thanked me profusely. As soon as he left, I turned the fan speed up and the temperature right down. As the icy wind hit the sweat on my face, I closed my eyes and wondered how long it would be before Mr Vui returned for another lesson.

He showed more restraint than I expected, staying away from the courts altogether for four days and then avoiding my gaze for two. But exactly a week after our first encounter he requested another session, professing that even though his backhand had not substantially improved, he sensed he was on the brink of progress. We practised and then, as we sat resting, he fondled me. This time, Mr Vui had a much better idea of what he wanted. He said he abhorred judgemental hotel receptionists and was wary of their security cameras. Since his life had become unbearably sterile, again the fault of his half-android wife, Mr Vui wanted a love that was impure, like the videos he had seen on the internet, filthy but not unhygienic.

I knew just the place: a public toilet block on the road to the CBD that was much cleaner and far less frequented than the surrounding gutters and trees. 'If we leave right now the cleaners will be on their lunch break and won't disturb us. We can even avoid paying the 4,000 dong fee if we get out before their siesta ends.' Mr Vui was more than happy with my choice of cubicle and technique – 'The Colgate Clinch' as Ngoc had christened it. Afterwards, I sat on Vui's lap with my arms around his neck as he giggled and snivelled simultaneously. This time, however, he did not apologise or offer me money. Instead, Mr Vui intimated that they were clearing out some superseded phones at his wife's shop and that he could try to get his hands on one for me if I liked.

'That would make it easier for us to keep in contact', I exclaimed with wholesome enthusiasm.

To which he replied: 'I don't know what the future holds, *em* Thu, but I know I really care for you.'

'I feel exactly the same way', I professed, lying in every respect.

Our third liaison, again in that public toilet block, was foreshadowed by an assurance from me that Mr Vui would discover the delights of both giving and receiving. We began as we did before, but when Vui reached the apex of his pleasure parabola, I pulled him up, turned him around and pressed his head down upon the toilet seat before applying a few brisk slaps to his behind and proclaiming with my best Japanese accent that his passive and yielding *uke* was about to become acquainted with my most assertive *seme*. I untied my shorts and was glad to find myself excited, not so much by the ivory backside in front of me, but rather by the prospect of a game plan perfectly executed. And then I entered Mr Vui, eliciting in him an invigorating mix of pain, shame and bliss. When he yelped for the third time, I deftly flicked his phone holster under the bathroom door with my foot and then crept around in front of him, perching myself upon the cistern. I tried to look into his eyes, which were darting. I brushed his hair, tickled his ears, and then guided his mouth upon me. Mr Vui deserves some credit for his zest, but he had no idea what he was doing and was obviously inept at giving anything to anyone. So much so that in that instant I conceived of the name 'Ebenezer's Chomp' for his actions and began to see why his wife needed supplementary stimulation. Of course there was no use at this stage instructing Mr Vui, so I closed my eyes and thought of Ngoc powering through that city tunnel, of Roger in his dainty cardigan and of how close I was to a constellation of killer apps. It worked, and as I approached match point, I flushed the toilet with my heel, which was the sign for Thanh to make his entrance.

He did not let me down, slamming the door open at just the right time, but with a little too much force given that it was unlocked. There was my Sancho Panza, holding up Mr Vui's phone exactly as I had instructed him. Mr Vui turned around and it was in this instant that he made a decision. The red-eye reduction flash went off first, giving him an instant to recognise that our tryst had been a farce and that the line between abuser and abused was not clear-cut. Then the main flash took another second or so to warm up, which gave him even more time to cover his face or turn away, if he so desired. But he did not and, as much as he might deny this, I believe this was because deep down Mr Vui wanted to be unveiled; he wanted to live in truth and screw the consequences. And it is a tribute to the refinement of my reflexes that at the precise time that those tiny LED beacons unleashed their celestial beam, I made the choice to expel my sweetened soy milk all over him.

An instant later, Thanh was out of the toilet block and running down the street, pursued only by the sound of the returning attendant, who swore at him for not paying his money.

My lover and student of topspin backhands grabbed me by the collar and lifted me up with surprising force so that my bare buttocks were pressed against the wall. His right hand grabbed my throat and I would have had to kick him had I not been able to croak, 'I have your phone.'

And with that, he was Mr Vui again. Crying and apologising, this time with even more sincerity. 'What do you want? What can I give you?'

I gave Mr Vui some sheets of toilet paper to clean my man jam off his face before informing him, 'I am neither a bandit nor an extortionist and ask from you only what you can give with ease: three phones just like yours; one for me; one for our photographer; and one for a friend who you will never know and who is, as we speak, preparing to upload all of your contacts and that picture of us into the cloud for safekeeping.'

Once the phones were delivered to me along with three sim cards with propitious numbers, I went on to explain, I would return Mr Vui's phone to him. He could even have another free lesson in backhands if he so desired.

'Give me two days', agreed Mr Vui, because he knew he had no choice. 'You can keep your tennis lesson.'

After that Mr Vui was a little surly towards me, but this diminished in time. Indeed, it is an indication of my charisma and his newfound generosity of spirit that, every week since then and of his own volition, Vui has presented me with three recharge cards to top up my call and data credit. I give one to Thanh, who does not know what to do with his phone anyway, and use two myself, as our third friend was a necessary figment of my imagination.

So that is how I came upon this miraculous machine now tightly moulded to my senses. And if, Mr Ha, you still do not understand or accept me, you should at least know by now not to underestimate me.



Mr Ha, there is one more thing that you must know before you depart in your Korean sports car: I have revealed to you only a preview of the action-packed, pathos-free movie that is my life. You asked, Mr Ha, who I think I am and I have told you. But you know nothing about the more engrossing story of who I will become.

Know then that you need not ask for a practice session because I recently retired from tennis and am considering selling my racquet. Given that there has been some conjecture, let me make it clear that I did not sheath my sword because of

injury or the arrival of a new upstart ball boy. I have never harboured anxieties about protecting my record or getting out while I was on top. My best days are always ahead of me and my legacy never complete. If I am a champion at anything it is not because I have won, but rather because I am one. It is because my adventures in life and love are the full expression of me alone.

And so recently I concluded that I had achieved as much as I could in tennis, overcoming the forces of conformity and raising the standards of play and civility at my club in one swift chip-and-charge motion. Now the baseline is a border, the net is a barrier, and being on court is like being in a cage. I suppose I grew bored – which, as far as I’m concerned, is the most compelling reason to give something up.

But if my smartphone has taught me anything, it is that there are an infinite number of worlds, people and gadgets out there for me to master. And so, with the shifting of seasons I have decided to save for a laptop and a camera and answer my true calling as a photographer. Of course, I will not be just a photographer, but rather the photographer: the photographer who can capture an entire epoch in a single frame; the photographer who straddles and unites the worlds of sport and fashion; the photographer who manipulates his images so as to reveal their innermost truth; who evokes both the objectivity of the umpire and complete empathy with the contestant; the photographer whose exhibitions challenge us to be who we are and – vitally – to live as if. As if the past is no anchor. As if the future is without sacrifice. As if there is always the possibility of new beginnings.

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.