

Chapter 3

The Professional

*SMS (Samsung) from Thao:
Boss just left something on my desk. Urgent.
Sorry darling =(
Be there asap <3 <3*

Thao's always running late. Obviously out of her depth. Was never cut out for big business. Too sweet. Too homely. Unprofessional.

'Waiter! Boy! Bring me a cappuccino and a glass of mineral water.'

'Yes madam. Straight away.'

'Hold on. Don't go running off just yet. Listen carefully. Last time I was here I didn't get what I asked for. There are four things you need to remember. One, I need skim milk, not full cream and certainly not UHT. Two, it must be a weak coffee, half strength. Three, I want extra chocolate sprinkled on the top. And four, I need two of those durian wafers on the side. Write it down. Four things. Can you manage that?'

'Yes madam, but please know that our hot beverages only come with one complimentary wafer, so if you don't mind you will have to pay extra for the second ...'

'I wouldn't be here if I cared about the price of wafers. Just make sure you get it right. Four things. And the mineral water.'

Email (iPhone) from Dzung of KPMG: Hi Kieu, Heard your company won the big PIV Oil tender. Dinner on Friday to celebrate your victory and commiserate my defeat?

Poor darling. He's probably being punished for losing that contract. He'll get over it. Dzung's a decent guy. It was harder than I thought to get the details of KPMG's bid out of him. Took five dates. I even had to let him feel me up. For a while there I thought I was going to have to meet his parents. But he caved in, just like they all do. Now I've got him by the balls, but I won't twist them off. I'll keep it to myself that he was the one who scuttled their bid. After all, Dzung might be useful to me later.

Email (iPhone) to Dzung of KPMG: Busy.

Incoming Call (iPhone) from Quynh in Human Resources:

'Good morning Ms Kieu. I've got two applicants who would be suitable personal assistants for you. They can both start next week. Do you want me to arrange for you to meet them?'

'No, just send me their CVs. Make sure to include their pictures and birth dates. And you've double checked their qualifications, work history and medical reports, yes? My previous PA claimed to have a TOEFL score of 110, but I'm sure it was about 50, which was also probably her IQ. The last thing she did before I fired her was to farewell a client with, "We love you from your bottom to your heart". There's no way that she graduated from the Foreign Trade University, at least not without cheating. We have to be scrupulous when it comes to recruiting. We can't be the best without the best people.'

'Yes, Miss Kieu.'

'Good, make it so.'

Facebook (Samsung): Harry Nguyen has checked in at Singapore Bird Park.

Facebook (Samsung): Super Junior Promotion! Post a mashup of the members of your favourite band on facebook for the chance to win one of 50 backstage passes to SuJu's upcoming concert tour of Vietnam!

Twitter (Samsung): @Prada. See the new Roman Polanski short film, Ravishing, made by and for Prada www.prada.com/en/ravishing

I look up and see Thao coming through the door. She speaks to the maître d' and then sees me waving my phone in the air and rushes over. Her clothes are tidy enough, but she has a fake bag and wears a cheap belt. Worst of all, Thao still has long hair, which she ties back like a country bumpkin. She says her husband likes it that way. I'd shave my head before submitting to that bygone hairdo.

'Hello my dear. It's soooo good to see you. You look extraordinary. It's like you're getting younger with each day.' I stand up and kiss Thao on both cheeks.

'I'm awfully sorry for being late. My boss has been tormenting me nonstop.'

'Is that the boss with the fake tits? The one who hired a numerologist to calculate the circumference she'd want for her new boobs?'

'Yes, that's the one. I wish I never told you that. You keep bringing it up. You haven't told anyone, have you?'

'No, never. You know you can trust me with anything.'

How can Thao expect me to keep that to myself? She must realise that I've told everyone in the industry by now.

'Yes, of course. Sorry. And sorry again for being late, Kieu darling. The traffic today is worse than usual. I almost got hit by a taxi as I turned into this street. The driver stopped and yelled at me even though it was his fault. I know I always keep you waiting. A thousand pardons, a thousand pardons.' Thao bows like a Japanese housewife.

'No problem, dear. No problem at all. I just keep working, doesn't matter where I am.' I show her my phones. 'You know me. Always connected.'

I put my iPhone on the table and tuck my Samsung away in my Hermes purse: personal correspondence can wait. I half smile and half smirk at Thao. Who does she think she is? We may be from the same village, but that doesn't mean she can hold me up all the time. We're not like most people in Vietnam. Time is not elastic for us. It's rigid. It's worth more than money: it's respect.

'You're punctual as usual, Kieu my darling. I bet you're always early to your appointments.'

'It's not easy to fit everything in. But it helps that I've started to walk everywhere and never leave District 1 if I can avoid it.'

'But walking's so filthy, so crude.' Thao makes a face like she's holding up dirty socks.

‘Just a minute, the waiter’s coming. Another cappuccino for this dear woman. And a plate of French fries. Tell the chef to cook them for a little longer than usual – I like them crispy. And make sure you bring out ketchup, chilli and soy sauce, and mayonnaise, each in separate dishes, not spread out on the plate. Understand? French fries; extra crispy; four separate sauces.’

‘Yes madam.’

‘You watch. He’ll screw it up. Probably on purpose. Haughty little shit. Doesn’t know his place. We should’ve gone to a different restaurant. Honestly, this establishment has been backsliding ever since the cute French manager returned home. Figured he’d completed his slum service no doubt. It’s in Vietnamese hands now. A couple of managers from the sob story school that picks up street kids, feeds them with false love and then trains them to be two-star servants. Most of the waiters are from the same school. That fellow over there struggling with the armful of entrées was probably selling cigarette lighters by the highway last year. I don’t know why they bother. You can’t change people like that, not with all the bleeding heart goodwill in the world.’

‘I agree, totally.’

‘Where was I?’

‘Walking, dear Kieu, you were going to explain your walking.’

‘Yes, there are a few things worth holding onto from the countryside, and walking is one of them: keeps us lean, strong, alert. And it means I don’t depend on drivers.’

‘But the sun will burn you black. Haven’t you seen those anti-aging cream advertisements? That one for *Xinh Xuat Xac* lotion says that for every hour you spend in the sun your skin ages 30 days.’

‘What do Vietnamese know about skin? Anyone who’s spent time in the West knows that white people will do anything for a tan. They sunbake, go to solariums – I’ve seen them spray themselves with cans of orange paint so they can look more like us. All the while we’re trying our best to look like pale and sickly versions of them. Can you believe that model Phi Thanh Van becoming famous for her swarthy skin and then going to all that trouble to turn white? Perhaps it’s a publicity stunt. Maybe she was sponsored by a skin clinic to do it? Bad decision, regardless of what she was paid. Before she looked like an Amazonian queen. Now she’s as pasty and wide-eyed as every other Hello Kitty idiot. Me, I take pride in my brown skin. There’s no way I’m covering up like a Muslim woman every time I step outside.’

'But Kieu dear, it's not safe to be walking in the streets, even in the daytime. Last week a colleague of mine had her purse stolen while she was crossing ...'

I reach down and pull out my capsicum spray from my handbag to show her. She shuts up. While I'm down there I also reveal my new Dr Headlock Executive Edition headphones.

'Darling, do you know about these? They're a blessing for people on the go. Plug them into your phone and the world outside just fades away. Sometimes I don't even have any music on and just use the noise cancelling function. They kill the buzz, the banter, everything and everyone is cancelled out. Forget those in-ear things. For headphones to work properly everyone has to see you with them. Motorbike taxi drivers, hawkers, beggars and young men see me walking with these on and know to back right off. It's as if I have a "do not disturb" sign over my head.'

Thao's cappuccino arrives.

'Make sure you bring those French fries, waiter!' I remind him. 'With the sauces.'

'So no plans to get your motorbike license then?' Thao asks. 'I can give you some lessons if you like. I'm sure you'll get the hang of it this time.'

I sense the ridicule in her voice. Snide bitch. She's always trying to find fault with me.

'You know I can't. It's not for me, never will be. My palm reader told me as much. The swirls on my right pinkie fingerprints mean that I'm destined never to ride a motorcycle. And see this crease on my left hand? It means I'll never cook an edible meal. It's not like I care though. Not anymore.'

And with that I reach into my Louis Vuitton purse and retrieve the little card that will muzzle Thao once and for all about my not being able to ride a motorbike.

'Is that what I think it is? How did you get it? You never told me you were learning to drive a car!'

'I only started practising last month. A driver at my office offered to teach me.'

'Doesn't the course take six months?'

'I was speaking to one of our consultants, a Belgian guy, and he said that Human Resources got him a car license without him having to sit the exam. And so I called them up and asked them to get one for me too. I had to pay, of course, but only 700 US. Next time we go back to the village I'll drive us. I've got my eye on a BMW X6.'

‘Wow! I can see us now motoring through the main street. Get something with a sun roof. No, no, get a convertible. You’re so brave, a real twenty-first-century pioneer. You’ll be driving racing cars soon.’

Sarcastic little vixen – can’t finish a sentence without taking a swipe at me.

‘How much is it to buy a car nowadays? Expensive, isn’t it?’

‘Absolutely. We drivers are terribly persecuted. And the taxes make me wonder if Vietnam is more communist than ever. In the West, people pay less than half of what we have to dish out. When I was studying in Australia I could have bought a cute little hatch for \$15,000. The same one here is double that price. Government vultures. You know, car buyers like me are the only hope for Vietnam to be a middle-income country like Malaysia or Thailand. The fact that we have to pay so much for cars shows how far we are behind the rest of the world. It’s as if Vietnamese are not good enough to drive cars. As if success isn’t its own reward. It’s a penalty. Already the roads are congested and potholed, covered in swarms of people and filth. Car registration is on the up and every month another road in the CBD is blocked off to cars. Blood-sucking bureaucrats always bringing down giants so that everyone else doesn’t feel like a midget.’

‘But isn’t it dangerous, Kieu? My husband says he’s never going to drive a car, at least in Vietnam. He says going more than 30 kilometres an hour on our roads is a death wish. It’s not like Germany with their autobahns and rules. One of my bosses is from Stuttgart and he says Germany is 110 per cent different to Vietnam. He says in Germany even the criminals follow the rules.’

‘The speed suits me just fine. I’ve never felt more certain of myself than when I’m rocketing along in two tonnes of climate controlled comfort. I’ll admit I was a little nervous at first. But then I reasoned that it is better for me to kill a motorcyclist than for someone to kill me. I can at least pay off the family with a thousand dollars or so. They would probably thank me. I wouldn’t be like all those Chinese hit-and-run drivers. Remember that clip on the web of the van colliding with that child in the market?’

‘How could anyone forget?’

‘The driver seemed to aim for her. Afterwards he stopped, thought about it, and ran over her again before driving off. As I watched all those people stepping around her crumpled little body I almost wept. But, you know, that shocking affair confirmed an important lesson for me. The common people, they just don’t value life like we do. Life’s cheap for them. They can take it or leave it. When I think of what makes the world go round, I think of that delivery van crashing into that toddler over and over again.’

Reminder 1 hour (iPhone): 14:00 meeting with Minh Thanh. Remember to adjust the HSBC financial modelling tools.

Email (iPhone) from Sam of AB Bank: There's serious money to be made from the Vinashine restructure. Let's meet next week for a drink.

I put my phone back on the table just as Thao picks hers up. She probably doesn't even have any messages. Just wants to show off. No doubt writing an SMS to herself or her husband to keep me waiting. Again. So very pathetic. I glare at her and finally she places it back on the table.

'Careful with your phone, darling', I tell her. 'Keep it close to hand and away from the edge of the table. I wouldn't even have mine out except that I'm expecting some calls. Also, make sure you hook the strap of your purse around the leg of your chair like I have. You can't be too careful.'

'But we're in a good establishment, Kieu ...'

'That doesn't mean a thing. It's not like they can frisk everyone who comes in here. That guy over there's been sitting on his coffee for an hour waiting for just the right moment to strike. The waiter's no better. He'd happily give up his job in exchange for one of our phones or wallets. Shameless. Shameless crooks.'

'You can be a little heartless sometimes, my dear.'

'My heart's got nothing to do with it. Think about it. If you were making one US dollar a day and saw this one thousand dollar phone just centimetres away, what would you do? Would you worry about what would happen to you if – and that's a big "if" – you were caught? Would you stop to consider what your parents or teachers or Uncle Ho told you about what's wrong and what isn't? Maybe, for a millisecond, just before you grabbed it and ran. I'll tell you what's heartless. Heartless is tempting them by leaving your phone out like that.'

'But we were poor not so long ago, remember? And some of our family and friends back home are still needy, even if it's not as bad as it was before.'

'I remember all right. It's because I remember what it's like to be poor that I don't trust poor people. It's because I know them so well that I despise them so much. I remember after my father left us, how my mother had to beg for food and clothes. I'm pretty sure she had to screw at least one of our landlords. And at primary school I remember how the other kids snubbed and mocked me because I was skinny and ragged.'

‘We weren’t exactly popular, were we? Still, I’m fond of our old school. I was so sad when I found out that it was knocked down to make room for a new shopping centre. It was like all those childhood memories of ours were being cleared away.’

‘You know what I recall from that time? After the New Year holidays when our chubby friend Nhung – the one whose family owned the stationery shop – came to class with her brand-new Backstreet Boys pencil case full of felt-tip markers. I’ve never told anyone this, but on the same day that she showed off those pens to us, I stole one, a purple one. She probably didn’t even notice it was missing. But I treasured it, kept it hidden at home. I was forever frightened I would be caught. So I only ever used it once a week or so. Not to write anything, but to draw – a pair of tiny lilac shoes, a dress, a television, a house.’

‘Thanks for sharing, Kieu darling. That’s terribly sad. Sad, but also cute. I wish it had been easier for you. On the bright side, now you can buy as many purple things as you like.’

‘Haven’t you noticed that nowadays I don’t own anything lilac or purple. Clothes, makeup, nothing. For me it’s the colour of desperation. I detest it. The only exception is my Montblanc fountain pen – I sign contracts with it – here.’

I withdraw the lustrous, cigar-sized pen from the side pocket of my Hermes handbag and hold it in front of Thao’s face.

‘May I?’ Thao holds the pen and pretends to scribble on a napkin, then places it on the table near her phone so that I have to snatch it back.

‘It’s white gold’, I explain, ‘filled with the most exquisite purple ink. Every time I use it I remember where I came from and how I’ll never go back there again.’

‘Kieu darling, I know it was tough back then, especially for you. But maybe it’s best to forget about all that. Everyone’s better off now. And we’re better off than just about everyone. Let it go.’

‘How could I? How could I let go of the rage I harboured in high school knowing that our classmates were paying for extra lessons and higher grades? And yet every time I got the top mark in an exam, I was the one who was accused of cheating.’

‘Yes, I know darling. But we left our home town a long time ago. It’s better to leave some of the unpleasantness behind too.’

‘I remember leaving all right Thao. How could I forget us coming to the city for our university exams and discovering how expensive everything was and how nasty people were? I recall very clearly us, freezing and exhausted, studying

into the early morning under the street lights. Even now, when I withdraw money I'm reminded of the time our landlady evicted us because she found some students who could pay more, and how we huddled together in that ATM booth. I remember how everyone in this city looked at us as if we were dirt that had blown under their doors or mould that had suddenly appeared in their bathrooms. And, you know, I don't blame them. Because if the Kieu of back then saw the Kieu of today, I have no doubt she would bash me over the head and run off with everything that I own. Well, this Kieu has worked too hard to let that Kieu get away with it.'

'Okay, okay, I'm moving my phone. I'm putting it away from the guy in the corner with the cup of cold coffee, away from the waiter, all the common people and the Kieu who's just arrived from the countryside. Let's not talk about the past anymore. It's so depressing. Let's talk about the future. Are you getting the new iPhone?'

'I was tempted to, but I'm tired of iPhones. You?'

'I'll stand in line all day if I have to, or I'll pay someone to stand for me. Your company pays for your phones. Why not get a new one?'

'I used to love Apple. Now I'm not so sure. I still like the sleek lines and how they take a razor to everything: one button, right in the middle, no need to fiddle about. I call it the "Make It So" button. Don't you wish people were like that? Wouldn't it be great if people's noses were buttons and all we had to do was press them and command, "Make It So"?''

'I know exactly what you're talking about.'

'Anyone who's not exactly to our liking could be swiped, pinched or flicked into shape. And once we're done with them, they just go into standby. I must remember to tell this to my new PA – this is what I'll expect of her, and she of others.'

'You can thank the venerable Steve Jobs for that. He demanded that people work for him in the same way that machines did: intuitively, efficiently, obediently.'

Which is by far the smartest thing Thao has said all morning.

'Exactly. And the fact that he's gone is one of the reasons I don't have Apple cravings anymore. You can't just roll another visionary like that off the production line. Look at how he lived, doing his own thing, never afraid of failure. How he refused to pander to his underlings. He told people exactly how it is and how they should be. It was all about self-expression for him. His jeans and black skivvy were iconic, just like Audrey Hepburn's black dress.'

He even wore his cancer in an avant-garde sort of way – with authority and poise. You know, I almost didn't go to work the day he died. I grieved for all of the gadgets that we'll never know.'

'Me too. Me too. I burnt incense to him on the 49th and 100th day after his passing.'

'But he would have wanted us to move on. To be honest, I was growing tired of all those iShadows and spaghetti white earphones. And Apple stuff is so common now.'

'You're right you know. I swear I saw a street sweeper using an iPhone, or at least it was a good fake.'

'Yeah, so last month I replaced my second iPhone with a Samsung. In fact, I'll probably get another one for work and ditch Apple for good – I hardly use my iPad nowadays. And I've sworn never to own an Apple watch, unless that is they join forces with Longines, Tissot or Rolex and come up with something that's actually stylish.'

'Wow. I never thought I'd hear you or anyone say that Apple was unstylish. Uncool.'

'I'm a Samsung girl now. My only reservation is that Samsung is sourcing so many of its components from here. You just watch the quality and sales fall. Vietnamese can't be relied upon to make top-quality products. The workers don't have the discipline and the managers aren't strict or smart enough – totally unprofessional. And let's not even talk about the Vietnamese Bphone. Honestly, my advice to Vietnamese companies would be to not bother trying to keep up with others. It's embarrassing.'

'I'm not sure about that, Kieu. My father-in-law always says that if Vietnamese can be disciplined and effective soldiers, then they can be disciplined and effective workers. And you know, I hear that Samsung shares are up on the back of increased productivity from Vietnam and global demand for Korean goods.'

Thao likes to pretend she knows something about share markets.

'Well, I agree with you when it comes to the demand for everything Korean. Don't you just love Korean TV and K-Pop? It's totally fake and manufactured, which is what's so authentic about it! You know, it's better than real. It's "unreal". Do you know that English word? There's nothing unreal about all those Vietnamese rip-offs of Korean shows and music videos though. It's soooo embarrassing. We just can't match their production values. You know Thiem, the director of communications who I introduced you to last year? He says that production values are the only values that count.'

'I see what you mean.'

Email (iPhone) from Dzung, Deloittes: Can we meet next week? Most nights are doable. Let me know and I will move some other appointments around to fit you in.

The French fries arrive and Thao invites me to start eating. I pull out a small crispy chip and dip it in the ketchup, chilli and mayonnaise.

Thao follows, but favours the soy sauce.

'Remember how we used to share sheets of rice paper with dried shrimp rolled into them at school?' she says. 'How we counted the tiny shrimp and tried to tear the sheet so that we each got the same number?'

It's as if she's guilty about how far we've come and everything that we've left behind. Or should I say how far *I've* come and everything *I've* left behind?

With that idiotic wistful look on her face she states the obvious. 'For the price of this one dish, we could have bought a month's worth of rice paper rolls.'

'That's something to celebrate, not mourn. Sounds like you would prefer to eat those filthy little rolls?'

'I know this sounds crazy, but sometimes I do. Sure, we didn't have any money in the village. But we didn't have so much to worry about either. Maybe I expected less back then so I wasn't as disappointed when things didn't work out. I'm not sure. But I know sometimes I want nothing more than to dip one of those rice paper rolls in some Tay Ninh salt and munch away. When my son starts school, I'm going to find someone who sells them. And I'll get one for him and me to share, just like we used to.'

'You're hopeless, Thao. Let me put it this way. Do you want your son to eat French fries in a restaurant or rice paper rolls off the street? He wouldn't last long on the latter I can assure you. He'd be as thin and frail as a chopstick splinter. And do you really think your son's school is going to allow hawkers to sell rice paper at the front gate? It will have a proper canteen selling proper food like beef steak and French fries.'

'I suppose you're right. You're almost never wrong are you?'

'What do you mean "almost"? How's Hieu anyway? Almost old enough for school, eh?'

'Yes, he's off to pre-school next month. He's wonderful. I just adore him. You should come around to see him. I'm sure he'd love to play with his Auntie Kieu.'

'Yes, I will, of course. I'll diarise it. Are his grandparents still looking after him? You said they were causing you grief. What did you call them? The tyrant and the terrorist ...'

'No, it's not like that. I was upset when I said that. Please don't remind me. I admire them, really I do. I've come to understand that it was hard for them to accept a humble country girl for a daughter-in-law. Dai's their only son after all. You know that for a while they suspected I was a gold digger. So I tried to impress them by working hard and being successful, making just as much money as Dai. But that only made things worse because the real problem was that I didn't have the good graces and charms that they expected from their daughter-in-law. I'm just not dainty and genteel enough.'

'It's like the twentieth and twenty-first centuries never happened for them. They'll insist that Dai take on a concubine if you're not careful.'

'And you know, it's not like I haven't tried. I never once complained when we lived with them. Three years. Three years I suffered in their house even though we could have rented our own apartment. I did chores – washed the dishes every night and our clothes on the weekends – even when I had to work late and even though we had hired help. All of this so they could see I was a virtuous daughter-in-law and wife. Now we've finally moved out and they act as if I've deeply wounded them. They say they love me and miss me even more than their son. They've offered to buy a newer and bigger villa for all of us to live in. But of course it has nothing to do with me. It's all about their precious grandson and their vision of having three generations under one roof. To make it up to them we have to go back with Hieu for dinner three times a week, and then there's the lunches and family events on the weekend. You know, I'm starting to think it was a mistake to move out. I've hardly seen my new place. And all the commuting isn't good for my relationship with Dai, it puts a lot of stress on us.'

'Don't do it. Tell them to get lost. Get your husband to tell them where to go. You shouldn't have to spend another second with them.'

'I can't do that. And I can't ask Dai to do it either. He actually agrees with me about most things. And he loves me and Hieu no end. Dai would do anything for us. But he can't stand up to his parents. Dai says that everything he knows about love and caring for others, he learnt from them. There's this line of his that makes me clench my fists every time I hear it: "If I am a good husband to you and a good father to Hieu it's because of them; it's because I'm following their example of how to look after my family." I told him that if his devotion to us is based on his devotion to them, then *our* family doesn't really come first – *his* does.'

'Spineless. I'm sorry, but your husband's spineless as a jellyfish.'

‘But Dai assures me it won’t be like this for long – that it’s just a transition period. I’m not so sure. We enrolled Hieu in the school near our house. It’s an excellent school, set up by a Dutch couple who use the best of Eastern and Western methods. They have compulsory English and Chinese classes from Grade Two, and they teach five types of chess. It has a strong community, regular fairs, sports, fundraisers. I’ve met some lovely mothers there.’

‘Sounds a lot better than our school. What’s the problem?’

‘Dai’s parents said we should’ve run it past them. The thing is, we *did* mention it, but as usual they weren’t listening. Then last week when we came for dinner they were waiting for us, sitting at the table like directors of a board addressing an underperforming CEO. It’s as if Hieu is being raised by a committee and I’m not a member. They asked why we didn’t enrol him in the American School they’d recommended, the most exclusive school in the city. Apparently they’d already paid a deposit to guarantee a place for Hieu, all without saying anything to us. It was supposed to be a surprise.

“‘We know you didn’t want to hurt our feelings and that’s why you didn’t say anything before you enrolled our grandson in that school”, Dai’s father said. “That’s very commendable of you. But you have to think of what is best for Hieu. Trust us. We love him more than anything, even more than we love the both of you. You two are young. You think you know what you are doing, but you’ve never raised children before, how could you possibly know?”

‘Dai’s mother became more and more frantic. She insisted that we were sending him to the Dutch School because we didn’t have enough money for the American one. She accused Dai of losing his job and keeping it from her because he was ashamed. She’d heard from one of her friends that the Vietnamese financial markets had recently taken a turn for the worse and that big companies were firing people by the hundreds. Apparently she hadn’t slept a wink for days. Also, she had seen stories on the news of daycare workers beating and strangling children and threatening to drown them, and was petrified that this was going to be her grandson’s fate.’

‘Sounds like emotional blackmail to me.’

Thao nodded. ‘Throughout all of this I stayed quiet, not a sound. And you know I was so ... so angry, I wanted to pick up my son and storm out. Dai was holding my hand under the table and I was squeezing so hard I thought I was going to crush every little bone. I’ll give it to him though, he calmly explained to his mother that he still had his job, and in fact he was thinking of going for promotion. He explained that we had researched many schools for Hieu and that the Dutch one suited us very well because it was near our house and excellent value.

“If it’s an issue of money then let me pay”, Dai’s father told us. He said that if we were pressed for time, then he would drive Hieu personally to and from school and that Hieu’s grandmother would take care of him until we came over for dinner.

“Doesn’t that sound like the best option for everyone?” Dai’s father said. “Isn’t that the best thing for Hieu? Nothing is too good for my grandson, especially if he’s going to be a world famous maths professor like Ngo Bao Chau. But if he’s going to make the most of his gifts he needs the best education. That means sending him to the very best school; not the second best: the very best. Your Dutch school might save you some time and money now, but in the long run it will prevent him going to Harvard or Oxford.”

‘Our parents would never have had the gall to treat us like that. That’s one thing I like about our parents, they know their place and they stay there. They don’t have a clue about what we do or what’s best for us. How could they? They’ve hardly gone to school; they’re petrified by the city. They’re grateful for the money we send back every month and pleased we come home once in a while to light incense at the family altar. That’s what I call “respect”. Not your interfering in-laws.’

‘No, it’s not like that. They really do love Dai, Hieu and me. They’ve done so much for us. You know, when I need them to look after Hieu they drop everything to do it, straight away, even when it’s inconvenient for them. And Dai’s parents have given us so much: small things like flowers and fruits from their garden; and other things like the laptop that they bought Hieu for his fourth birthday and the diamond necklace they gave to me on my wedding day.’

‘Yes, I remember that necklace.’

‘But, you know, I often think I would happily never receive another gift from them and cook for them every week if they just listened to us once in a while. For heaven’s sake, Dai and I are successful financial planners and risk analysts. How can we be so in charge at work and so powerless at home? I’m tempted to let them have their way on this school thing. It’s just easier and they have a point about Hieu deserving the very best. But promise me this, Kieu. In 30 years, when we’re grandmothers, promise me you’ll never let me treat my son and daughter-in-law in the same way.’

Email (iPhone) from Matt of Techbank: Erica, Will, Carrie and I off to Da Lat on the 25th for canyoning and wine tasting. Love it if you can join us. We’re staying in the Emperor’s palace. My company will take care of everything. Say ‘yes’.

Email (iPhone) from Maria Pham: Kieu, can you get me the FVT investment figures in Cambodian forestry before noon tomorrow? And please remember to rework those ANZ calculations.

Facebook: Cathy Nguyen likes One Summer Night, by Chelsia Chan and Kenny Bee:

One summer night, the stars were shining bright
One summer dream, made with fancy whims
That summer night, my whole world tumbled down.

‘Let’s not talk about my family, it’s all too complicated. Tell me about your work, Kieu. If half of the rumours I’ve heard are true, you’re quite the business magnate – winning big tenders. And your financial models are selling like fresh prawns. Your bosses must be delighted. What’s next for you, my darling? New York? Hong Kong?’

‘It’s going well enough. I’ve nothing to complain about.’

I’m careful not to reveal anything to Thao. Beneath the bubble tea sweetness, she’s as jealous and calculating as they come.

‘And how are you getting on with your bosses?’

‘I’m still reporting to Wim Conlon and Maria Pham – did you see the “Power Couple” profile of them in *Asia Business Weekly*?’

‘No, but I heard about it. They sound amazing. In their mid-30s and already millionaires. Gave up their careers in the US to be trailblazers on the Ho Chi Minh S-Ex. I remember you saying that Wim was inspirational, but Maria was harder to deal with, that she had some Viet Kieu adjustment issues.’

‘I used to think Wim was fantastic. His father was a preacher and he has this amazing way of speaking to you as if he knows your deepest secrets and has all of the answers. Wim’s an ultra-distance runner and has these dragon-green eyes that flare up whenever he’s talking about hedge funds and hydration packs. And he makes an upturned claw with his hand when he’s deep in conversation, like he’s a conjurer or something. I’ve started doing it myself.’

‘Sounds impressive to me.’

‘He’s okay. He calls himself an aggressive ethical investor. Wim gave me all these self-help books to read. He said they were compasses in his quest for wholeness. *Outsourcing Your Business to Buddha* and *Karmic Mergers and Takeovers*. Claptrap really, all this stuff about mindfulness, webs of life, transcendent

thinking. The Orient for round-eyes. I knew I'd outgrown Wim when he told me with a straight face that he was spiritually rooted to a pack of bonobos in Central Africa.'

'How intriguing.'

'And you know Thao, while on the surface he's all new age, easy-going and in love with everything Vietnamese, in reality Wim looks down on us. I think they all do.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, he's always talking about the need for a dynamic, horizontal work structure and acts like the best-friend boss, but watch out if you bring your lunch back to your desk in Styrofoam. Once he screamed at one of the IT guys for dumping a wad of paper in the waste bin instead of the recycling bin. It was like the poor guy had committed a mass atrocity or strangled an endangered Mekong catfish.'

'How are you supposed to eat?' asks Thao. 'Out of your hands?'

'If we want to bring food back to the office we have to use stainless steel tiffins and wash them afterwards like we're housemaids. He bought a collection of them embossed with the company logo. He says it's how Asians have transported their food for a century and carries his with pride. I've seen him leave the building at lunchtime wearing a conical hat, swinging his little meal containers, grinning like a village idiot.'

'I think that's cute.'

'Wim's all for Vietnamese traditions. He thinks he knows Vietnamese better than we know ourselves. Every time he and Maria go on a trip they come back with a box of traditional goodies for all of us in the office: lavender honey from the Meo Vac highlands; five-year fermented fish sauce from Phu Quoc; rice wine from Tay Nguyen. Everyone in the office knows you can buy that stuff from the local market, probably for half of the price he paid, but no one wants to tell him. And you should see their house. Wim's got these display cabinets in the living room in which he's collecting at least one artefact from each of the 54 ethnicities in Vietnam. He's up to 23. It looks like a pile of junk to me. I'd set a match to all those knick-knacks before they put a curse on me or attracted a cockroach infestation.'

'Sounds to me like he loves Vietnam. I still think he's sweet.'

‘Well, I used to think that too. But when we went to Hanoi for a work trip last month and he saw roasted dogs stacked up in the shopfronts, suddenly Vietnam wanted to make him vomit. He actually stopped and protested. ‘Friends not food! Friends not food!’ he chanted to this butcher with his Lonely Planet Vietnamese. Luckily the store owner had no idea what he was saying. But then Wim made me translate for him. I was so embarrassed. I told the butcher I was a tour guide for terminally ill tourists and that Wim was deranged because he was in the late stages of pancreatic cancer.’

‘Nice work. Maybe you should go work for the UN?’ Thao giggled like a squirrel nibbling on a nut.

‘That’s not such a bad idea. Anything to get away from Wim for a while. You know, sometimes when I look at him I don’t know whether to laugh or retch, sitting there in shorts on his Swiss ball, the underarms of his shirt raining sweat. He’s blocked the air conditioner vents in his office because he says he doesn’t want to be responsible for some extreme climate event that will kill millions of people in the Delta.’

‘That’s bizarre.’

‘He’s harmless enough, though. I’ve pretty much figured him out. To Wim I’m the industrious little lady with thick-rimmed glasses who looks to him for advice. As long as he thinks he’s the one guiding me, I can do whatever I want.’

‘Is his wife Maria the same? How do you get on with her? I heard she looks like a younger version of Nguyen Cao Ky Duyen. I’ve never worked with overseas Vietnamese. It must be weird – them being the same as us and different at the same time. Does she speak Vietnamese?’

‘Her Vietnamese is all right. It’s a bit stuttering and old-fashioned. She uses old words for places like *Uc Dai Loi* rather than *Oxtraylia* and substitutes English words for Vietnamese ones she doesn’t know. Strangely enough, as I’ve moved further away from Wim, I’ve grown closer to Maria. I’d even go so far as saying she’s a mentor to me now.’

‘Wow. Last time we had coffee you said she was a stuck-up bitch.’

‘Yes, I did say that. She struggled returning to Saigon. She revealed this to me after work and a few glasses of cabernet. She’s been back to Vietnam before, but just a couple of times and only to see relatives. She said it was Wim’s idea for them to move here and that she hated it at first. She couldn’t deal with the heat, dirt, rats and rain. The poor people, beggars and cripples infesting the city before New Year also disturbed her. And after she arrived someone tried to rip her necklace off when she was driving her scooter through Tan Binh.’

'Pretty standard welcome to Vietnam.'

'But after a year or so she came to like it here. We even went to Ba Chua Xu temple together – we prayed for a profitable year and for the bankruptcy of our competitors. Wim was there and seemed to think everything was sacred and amazing. Maria was more focused; it was all about praying for money. She's far more genuine than him. She lives, eats and shits here while he treats the country like it's an open-air museum.'

'Sounds like they see things very differently, how did they ever get married?'

'Who knows? I don't think it will last. Lately they've been spending a lot of time apart. I've had something to do with that. A couple of months ago Wim went off to Tay Ninh by himself and so Maria and I started hitting the town after work. Been going out every Friday since then. Last weekend we went out twice. She loves flirting with men and she's a pro at getting them to buy us expensive cocktails.'

'Be careful, Kieu. You don't know the sorts of drugs they can slip in your drinks.'

'I know, I know. But it's Maria I'd worry about when it comes to potions. I crashed at her place last weekend and we woke up in the afternoon with awful hangovers. She went to her medicine cabinet and mixed some powder with mineral water for me and in a few minutes I was a new soldier.'

'What was it?'

'It took some coaxing – she admitted it was white rhino horn. She got it from a traditional medicine shop in Cholon.'

'That must've cost a fortune. Aren't they extinct?'

'She didn't tell me the price. She did say that when she and Wim bought it she told him it was a traditional herbal pick-me-up that had been blessed by a Cham matriarch, which is why it was so expensive. He would have whinged for days if he knew the truth. Maria said she had no problem with killing animals for human needs. Survival of the fittest, you know. That's exactly why she's come to adore Vietnam. It suits her entrepreneurialism. She says America's too liberal for her now. Companies can count on being bailed out and citizens are forced to buy health care.'

'Wow. I thought all Viet-Americans loved the USA and hated it here.'

'Maria does love America, but she hates the liberal disease that's infected it. She thinks it's terminal. She wants to be here in the new New World. You know, she told me her grandfather never returned to Vietnam because he didn't want

to support the communist regime. Maria says she steps out onto the street every day and has never seen a hint of communism. She thinks Vietnam is the land of opportunity.'

'I can see why you admire her. You must introduce me.'

'She's so right isn't she? Look at us, look what we've made for ourselves out of nothing. If you can't make it in Vietnam today, there's no one to blame but yourself. You can't blame the war, the Americans or the Chinese. It's just you. Either you're ambitious and talented or you're not. Maria has these great labels for people: makers and takers. Either you make something of yourself and contribute to the economic prosperity of the nation or you take from it and from everyone else. Simple as that.'

'Such insight. Inspiring. I'll remember that next time I feel sorry for myself or for others.'

'You know, Maria met the Prime Minister's daughter at a party a few weeks ago. She just loved Madame Phuong and was impressed by how in Vietnam today a 30-year-old woman can lead multi-billion dollar investment companies. It was a revelation for her. Seeing this tenacious young businesswoman claw her way to the top made her realise that the country has come of age – we've left the past where it should be. "I don't know what market socialism is. But whatever 'ism' applies here", she said to me, "I'm for it."

'Sounds like a true patriot, your boss. It's so good to know we can welcome our brothers and sisters back to Vietnam, back home.'

'You know, last week after dining with some clients Maria and I were drinking cosmopolitans at the Renaissance Riverside and she revealed to me that she never felt like she belonged in America. Sure, she did well at school and in business. She had American boyfriends and married a white man. But she never felt fully accepted. She said she suspected that even if she strived all her life she could never break through the "bamboo ceiling". It was a really touching moment. Maria told me that although she left Vietnam when she was a baby and found it difficult living here at times, she felt she was where she belonged. "Drink the water, remember the stream", Maria said to me with a tear in her eye. She got that idiom wrong – it's not "stream" but "source" of course – but I didn't correct her.'

SMS (Samsung) from Chi Ba: Little sister, can you spare 10 million dong? It's a long story. I'll pay you back. Promise.

The waiter brings our bill and we make our way to the door to pay it.

'Allow me.' I say to Thao.

'No, no, my dear, I will pay', she says. 'I was the one who asked you out, remember?'

'But I was the one who chose this restaurant. Let me pay. It's nothing, really. Use your money to buy Hieu a new outfit.'

'But it's nothing for me either. OK, let's not fight. Let's be like Westerners and split the bill. How does that sound?'

'Okay, but I'm paying next time.'

Thao's such a stingy bitch. I paid last time and now she wants me to dish out again. She's never going to change.

'Don't work too hard – send my regards to your parents next time you speak to them,' Thao says. 'We'll do lunch again soon.'

'Yes, we must. Big hugs and lots of kisses to you and to little Hieu. Take care. Wait, wait. Hold on. Where's my iPhone?'

This text is taken from *Vietnam as if... Tales of youth, love and destiny*,
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