

Chapter 4

The Goalkeeper

Usually I fall asleep in an instant and wake up just as quickly without an alarm. I see no good reason to be restless and don't care to dream.

But tonight I'm not myself. And this was no ordinary day. Today I suffered three grave disappointments, the memory of which traumatises me. So that, as much as I crave slumber, I find myself lying awake, hypersensitive to my surroundings.

The night air sits wet and heavy on my neck. Grime from this afternoon's soccer match clings to my chest and legs. I stare up into a void.

Although I pledged to shun air conditioning in solidarity with my peasant compatriots who have no desire for such luxuries, I fumble for the remote control in my bedside drawer and turn on the fan function in the hope that the hum will calm my mind.

Indulgence begets indulgence. Suddenly, I'm painfully aware of the grey river stone that I started using as a pillow a few months ago after hearing that Ho Chi Minh had rested his head on just such a stone while leading the anti-French resistance from Pac Bo Cave. When I first used my revolutionary cushion, I was amazed at how perfectly it moulded to my skull, as if my physical development had somehow been in step with the forces of nature that had contoured this

unbecoming stone over the ages. I slept even more soundly than usual, at least until tonight. Tonight, the pillow pounds against my temple as I try to rest on my side. I push the stone away and lie flat on my back.

At the base of the bed is the coriander-coloured body pillow, embroidered with daisies, part of a set my mother bought to tempt me away from what she called 'that savage rock'. After thanking my mother for the gift, I informed her that I would never use it because it embodied the comfort-seeking pursuits of the bourgeoisie. Further, it was from China and so contributed to Vietnam's dependency on our foes to the north. I likened her present to the toxic apples and carcinogenic bras that had been 'Made in China' for Vietnamese to consume.

'The Chinks would like nothing more than for us to nestle our heads in their fluffy pillows', I told her, 'so we don't hear them marching across the border to smother us in our sleep.'

Now I reach over, grab the pillow and hug it with all my might. No one will know.

It occurs to me that maybe I fell asleep and that it is almost daylight. But I cannot hear any vendors or motorbikes outside my window. Nor can I make out the sound of my father's snoring upstairs. He's still out at an official function. The morning remains a long way away.

Unable to bury the disappointments, I turn my full attention to them and to those who have betrayed me. I try to put the three treacheries of the day into some manageable order, puzzling over which is most wrenching. Perhaps I should tackle the greatest disappointment first so that I can then confidently face the lesser instances. But, then again, maybe I should begin by confronting the smallest betrayal and then work my way up, conditioning myself like a professional athlete.

There's no use measuring them against one other. These disappointments have cascaded from one into the next to form a morass of confusion and anger. Together they challenge everything I know and treasure. How many of my 17 years as a nominal child of Uncle Ho have been a lie? What does it mean to be loyal to my beloved Vietnam? In what can I believe? Who can I trust? Perhaps it's not so much falling asleep that I fear, but rather the choices to be made when I wake.

I leap out of bed and log on to my computer. If I cannot rest then I will work. Work to turn this night into day. There is a long chain of unread emails in my inbox; some of them are flagged important. They can wait. I compose a message adding to the recipient list the general secretary of the local People's Committee

along with the head of the Public Security Office. I cc the presidents of the Hue City Youth Union, Women's Union and Ho Chi Minh Scouts. All of them must know.

Dear comrades,

I write to you as a citizen and true believer in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to report three egregious crimes against the state. They have all, I am ashamed to say, been committed by Party members. The crimes include but are not limited to corruption and treason, prolonged consumption of a noxious foreign culture and behaviour unbecoming of a Party member. My objective in reporting these crimes is to assist the Communist Party of Vietnam in its constant mission to manage, serve and lead the people of Vietnam. A detailed account of the offences and profiles of the perpetrators will be forwarded to you by the end of the week. Rest assured that my assessments have been carried out with diligence and impartiality, especially because the offences were committed by my father, my ex-boyfriend and me.

For independence, freedom and happiness,
Comrade Vo Thi Kim Lien.

Just as I am about to click 'send', I feel a surge of doubt; not so much over whether this is the right thing to do, but whether it is the right way and time to do it. No one is working at the moment anyway. Better to wait until the morning when my head is clear. It will give me a chance to proofread my message. Moreover, experience tells me that such emails need to be accompanied by a phone call or meeting. Too often the authorities – for all their conscientious efforts – have informed me that they have lost or failed to receive my correspondence.

Logic prevails and I make my way back to bed. Once again, I find myself recalling the events of the day, wondering how I could have been so wrong and whether – with the guidance of the Party – I can rectify my life.



My father's betrayal of the state is the only crime that I could have anticipated. Therefore I rebuke myself because, looking back, I should have examined him more critically and reported his errant behaviour when I first grew suspicious two years ago. Some might say I was right to give him the benefit of the doubt or that I was too young and naïve to do anything until now. But this strikes me as false reasoning. A revolutionary has an acute awareness of injustice and wrongdoing and is ready for combat as soon as she is 87 centimetres tall; that is,

the length of an AK-47. The truth is that my misplaced loyalty to my father blinded me to his infidelities against the fatherland. Upon sorrowful reflection, I can now see how this once courageous and patriotic man became so decadent and corrupt.

I seize my green body pillow and picture the sitting room of my home where I witnessed my father's criminal activity this morning.

The wall behind the wooden settee is covered with commendations and prizes. In the very middle is placed the first one we received as a family. It is one of several certificates acknowledging us as a culturally progressive family. I remember my father holding me up under my arms so that I could hang it on the nail, and how we stood back and gazed at it together with delight. I was five years old then and our house had only three rooms, with the squat toilet outside. Now four additional storeys have been added and there's a bed of sunflowers standing shoulder-high growing on the roof along with a small strip of grass where my father practices his putting. All of this success has been built on that humble commendation. The plastic gold frame and the emblem of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam have faded. Nonetheless I treasure it now more than ever because, under the layers of false consciousness that have settled upon my household, it represents a time when we were at one with communism and in step with Marx, Lenin and Ho Chi Minh.

As the commendations amassed, the number of employees and petitioners queuing outside our sitting room grew, particularly in the weeks before New Year. At first they brought small gifts: a half tray of premium mandarins wrapped in red cellophane; green glutinous rice cakes purchased on a business trip to Hanoi; calendars with pictures of orchid arrangements, football stars and cityscapes. Father always received them graciously, but we could only eat so many mandarins and rice cakes, and a room only ever needs one calendar. My parents began passing the gifts on to relatives; even then some of the fruit went rotten and the cakes were left stacked up and stale in the corner. The exception was the fermented pork – *tre* – that my father's office cleaner always made for him; it never made it to the second day of the year.

Last year I stopped eating the *tre* because I could no longer ignore the feudal bitterness that flavoured it. On several occasions I reminded my father that Uncle Ho was not one for extravagance, particularly when it came at the cost of his underlings and the nation. 'As President he lived as simply as when he was a guerrilla warrior, ship hand, pastry chef. Remember when we went to Hanoi and saw the splendid austerity of his hut? And the rubber tyre sandals he wore for 20 years until the day he died. Remember what he said about benevolence

being a pillar of a revolutionary's morality? A benevolent Party member is the first to endure hardship and the last to enjoy happiness. Surely your employees and their families need these gifts more than we do, Father.'

Father replied that because of the Party's sound economic management, the needy did not need as much as they used to.

'My meetings often run late into the night and over weekends. Everyone at the Public Works Department knows that I am one of the hardest working people in Hue. And just like Uncle Ho, I nurture my employees like saplings so that they grow straight and tall. Sometimes they want to thank me for my efforts and guidance with these gifts. It would be rude for me not to accept them.'

But his subordinates at the Public Works Department are not the only gift givers. The companies Father deals with bestow on him far more lavish offerings. Three months ago, we received an electric recliner in which he likes to sit and read weekend editions of *The Worker*, *Security Police*, and *Vietnam Golfer*. The chair is still wrapped in plastic because Father doesn't want to stain the suede, which is too warm for Hue anyway. Only a week after the chair arrived he received a small box made of walnut in which there was a delicate bundle of sparrow saliva that must have been worth at least US\$1,000. His personal assistant had to find a Chinese chef to prepare it for him and his associates as an entrée of bird's nest soup.

When I interrogated Father about these gifts, he said that he was overseeing the development of an apartment complex and the chair was from one of the furniture suppliers. 'It's from a foreign company, my daughter. Consider it a transfer of private wealth to public goods since I am a devoted servant of the people. And don't start lecturing me about foreign account deficits or how a Vietnamese chair is twice as good as any foreign one. You just can't get chairs like this in Vietnam. These companies pay import taxes on everything they bring into the country. They're contributing to Vietnam's development, not its dependency. As for the sparrow saliva, it was not even related to my work. He's a friend in the industry who I play golf with. I gave him some tips to improve his putting. What do you want me to do? Sell these things and give the money to the poor? If you're worried about corruption, why don't you turn your attention to those international charities rather than harass your hard-working father?'

'What about all of those bottles of cognac and whisky, Father? You used to be happy with a small gourd of rice or corn wine. Now you have a cabinet full of crystal bottles with fancy labels on them.'

Father's salt and pepper moustache curled whenever he was angry. 'Trust me, my daughter. I have been a Party member and cadre since before you were born. I know what is right and wrong and how to serve my country. Everything I have

done I have done for the Socialist Republic. Everything I have earned, I have earned for you. I am a civilised man who does not like to strong-arm anyone, especially my own child. You're welcome to sit in the armchair if you want to. In fact, if I was sitting in it and you told me to move, then I would defer to your precious behind. But if you want to sit on the ground, if that makes you comfortable, then that's your choice. I won't tell you how to sit or what to eat and drink. You're old enough to decide those things for yourself. In return please don't tell me how to do my job and serve my country. Is that understood, comrade Kim Lien?'

'Yes, Father. Can I ask just one more thing of you? I notice that you have been playing a lot of golf lately. Not just in Hue and Danang, but also in Thailand and Hong Kong. I have thought about this a great deal and even done some research. I have come to some very strong views about golf that I need to discuss with you.'

'Quickly, Daughter, get it off your chest.'

'My first concern is for the nation's natural resources. These golf courses are taking up prime land and vast amounts of water that should be dedicated to our food security and economic advancement. Even though Vietnam is a lower-middle income country and developing rapidly, we cannot afford to squander our resources. The needs of the many must take precedence over the leisure of the few.'

'Yes. And number two?'

'The caddies. You'll remember our last family holiday to that resort in Nha Trang. I saw them lugging your bag full of golf sticks and running to fetch you iced tea between holes. They'd bow to the golfers and respond using "*thua*" like servants. Allow me to be straightforward with you, Father. I am in total solidarity with the caddies, and totally opposed to you as a golfer. No fee or tip can compensate these coolies for the exploitation and indignity that they suffer. Every muscle, bone and organ in me wants to take up their proletarian burden and lead them to rise up against the golfers who seem more like feudal lords to me than sportsmen.'

I was happy with myself when I modified the title of Lenin's famous essay to assert, 'Father, the imperialism of the golf course is surely a most advanced and sordid form of capitalism.'

My father was not so happy. I could hear the sole of one of his Italian shoes tapping under the table. Father did not ask me to articulate my third concern, but I forged ahead, convinced that I would win him over with the might and urgency of my reasoning.

‘Thirdly, there are significant costs and risks for *you*, Father. I note that you put aside a full day for each game of golf. And then there’s all the practising that you do at the range and on the strip of synthetic grass on our rooftop. Imagine how much you could achieve if you spent more time focusing on the development of the city and less on that little white ball? No doubt you are aware that golf’s gaining a bad reputation in some Party circles. No doubt the people you play with are beyond reproach, but there are also many unscrupulous characters on the fairways. And then there are all the pricey restaurants, karaoke bars and hotels that are frequented afterwards. That’s exactly why the Transportation Minister banned all of his employees from playing golf. And when people criticised his initiative as an infringement against their rights he correctly pointed out that no one has the right to be corrupt and misuse our resources. Therefore no one has the right to play golf. It is only a matter of time until the Party in all its wisdom implements the Minister’s ban more broadly. This is why you have to be careful, Father. Is your golf worth being officially censured? Imagine how ashamed, as a culturally progressive family, we would be.’

With this my father stood up, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he leapt up because his chair fell backwards onto the ground. And as he glared down at me, for the first time since I was very small, I felt afraid of him.

‘What did you say? Me? Ashamed? I am not going to listen to this anymore. But you will listen to me, Kim Lien. Listen to me carefully. Every game of golf that I play is for the nation and the Party. If I am not discussing business and forging profitable relationships on the golf course, then I’m resting and recuperating so that I can better serve Vietnam. Our leaders know this, and so should you. You have no place judging me. Look at how many golf courses there are in China, Thailand and Singapore. There are even decent courses in Cambodia and Laos. And you want to deny us our place in the sun? You want to deny me my place on the fairway? I should not have to justify myself to my own daughter, but know this, I am proud of myself today teeing off on the tenth as I was launching missiles into columns of Chinese troops 35 years ago. And know that I’m ashamed, but not of me. I’m ashamed of you, Kim Lien, for treating me with such disrespect, with so little filial piety.’

I did not sleep much that night. It was wrong, I thought, for me to doubt and question him. Father was a highly decorated soldier and cadre. He had served with honour as an artillery man in the 1979 war against the Chinese. When I was young I used to always ask him to recount his death-defying adventures. ‘The Chink aggressors like to say that they taught us a lesson in that war, but from what I saw on the frontline it was us Vietnamese who were dishing out the punishment. The only people the Chinese regime knows how to massacre are their own!’ Somewhere along the way either he stopped wanting to tell me those stories or I stopped wanting to hear them.

The morning after that argument, which took place seven months ago, I apologised to Father for lacking filial piety. Since that time I have not raised my concerns with him, despite the fact that more largesse has arrived at our door.

So I had good reason to be suspicious last night when Father informed me that I had to be out of the house in the morning because an overseas associate was coming to discuss important business. And I had good reason to tell my father at breakfast this morning that I had to rest at home because I had been up late at a Woman's Union meeting and also because my period was due. All of this was true, but my queasiness and fatigue were feigned. Indeed, I had no intention of fulfilling my promise to stay in my room and, upon reflection, do not regret deceiving my father because it was the only way to learn the truth.

'Fine', he relented. 'But these negotiations are very sensitive, business in confidence. You have to let me work in private, Kim Lien. No interruptions. It's good that you want to learn how the public sector functions so that you can help run the country in the future. That time will come, but not yet. Do you understand?'

'Yes Father, absolutely.' And it was like he was inviting me to eavesdrop.

My mission was made easy by the fact that there was no one in the house to catch me. Mother, who was also at the Public Works Department (my father found her a job in accounts), left after breakfast. Then our two maids departed for the market. When the doorbell rang, I was seated at my desk with the Women's Union documents neatly stacked in front of me. As anxious as I was to know what was going on downstairs, I waited for the opportune moment. If it was a formal meeting they would be busy bowing to one another for some time and there was no use in me risking being discovered before anything of substance transpired.

At that stage I can honestly say that I did not know what I would discover. Of course, there was clearly something suspicious going on. Perhaps my father was receiving an especially indulgent gift. I even considered whether he was bringing home a mistress. Part of me was simply eager to catch my father out, to get one up on him. It was an impish but innocent game. Maybe I cannot help but snoop.

I emerged from my bedroom with my socks still on which allowed me to glide over the hallway tiles like a ghost. As I sat at the top of our spiral staircase, 95 per cent of me still believed that my father was a righteous man who loved his country and was committed to socialist revolution, but who on occasion lost

his way. After all, Father and Uncle Ho were the most influential role models in my life. In fact it was Father who introduced me to Uncle Ho and who encouraged me to learn about his life and ideology. Father told me all about how Uncle Ho was one of the greatest figures not only in Vietnam's 5,000-year history, but in all of human history. He had taught the Vietnamese to read, reclaimed our pride and independence against France, repelled the neocolonial Yankees and authored timeless texts that adapted Marxism-Leninism for the Vietnamese and oppressed people all over the world. If Chairman Mao had spurred the Chinese to stand up then Uncle Ho had inspired the Vietnamese to fly.

Father taught me that, 'Whenever you don't know what to do just ask yourself: "What would Uncle Ho do?"' The answer was simple. 'Uncle Ho would do what is right, emphatically so!'

For an instant, as I was perched on that step, I considered whether it was wrong to deceive my father. But all of my doubts dissipated, as they had at other crossroads in my life, with the conviction that Uncle Ho would have approved of my actions. Indeed, it was as if his spirit had possessed me and was propelling me forward.

At first all I could hear was my father talking about how Hue had a rich cultural heritage but was also seeking to become a twenty-first-century city. He offered his associates green tea and mung bean cakes. And then I heard the most frightening and outrageous response. Not so much because of the content, which I understood as simply 'Thank you, thank you very much', but rather the language in which it was conveyed: Chinese. I heard it again and then again in another voice. There was no mistake. Chinese men had infiltrated my house; not the variety who had lived in Vietnam for generations, but Mandarin-speaking outsiders.

Then there was a pause before I heard a Vietnamese voice that was not my father's. And I realised that one of the Mandarin speakers was a Vietnamese interpreter.

'Mr Kuang asks you to forgive him for being so direct', the interpreter explained. 'But he knows that you're a very busy man and does not want to waste your time. He appreciates that the relationship between our central governments at the moment is delicate. But Mr Kuang is convinced that the best way to improve relations between the People's Republic of China and the Annamese is to put politics aside wherever possible and to build stronger business ties. Such mutually profitable relationships will facilitate greater peace and understanding across our borders, which are historically meaningless anyway. The Chinese and Vietnamese are one family. And the best thing for the family is for the Vietnamese prodigal son to return home. With this in mind,

Mr Kuang wants to, as far as possible, avoid the red tape and obstacles put up by Beijing and Hanoi and focus on strengthening the bond between Dragon Lord Enterprises and the good people of Hue.'

'I am glad to say that your views are also mine Mr Kuang, 100 per cent.' And the deference in Father's voice was so pronounced that I imagined him kowtowing as he spoke.

Then the Chinese started again. Of course I did not know what he was saying, but my toes clenched with revulsion at the sound of it. It was not tonal in the sense that it undulated gently like Vietnamese, but rather sunk to guttural lows, rose to raspy heights and levelled out with long drawn whines. It was the language of invasion and pillage. And so I imagined the Chinese man's tongue flapping like an obscene cow's tongue, a replica of the U-shaped line they had slung over Vietnam's Eastern Ocean, what they shamelessly referred to as the South China Sea.

'Commander Quoc, you understand far better than me the need for world class urban developments in your city', the interpreter explained on Kuang's behalf. 'I appreciate that you have approached my company, Dragon Lord Enterprises, for its expertise. We are very keen to extend our business ventures into Vietnam and view this development as a natural fit and perfect opportunity. Rest assured, our projects are renowned all over the world for finishing on time and within budget. But to achieve this level of certainty and cost effectiveness, we simply cannot employ any Vietnamese workers, at least not right now. Our Chinese workforce has a wealth of experience with these buildings. They know exactly what to do and when to do it. In time, with proper training and acculturation, Vietnamese will take over from them. But not right now, not for this project. It's just too important, too important for both of us.'

'I understand Mr Kuang and once again I am with you 100 per cent. Admittedly, I was uncertain before, but now I fully appreciate the need to import your skilled personnel and give your company various concessions. And while they're here, I know your employees will contribute to the economy and it will be a wholly positive move for Chinese–Vietnamese relations. But, as you know, there are forces both at the highest levels of my administration and out in the streets and rice fields that oppose these measures. These people refuse to see the big picture and plan for the long term.'

'Mr Kuang says that he is confident that those in the halls of power have come to understand the situation, but is far from confident about the peasants. In his last correspondence with you he made it clear that the peasants could not

be reasoned with, that they did not know the value of money and could not see beyond their tiny horizons. He stressed that they had to be made to bend, as Confucius said, like reeds in the wind.'

My father's response was nothing less than treasonous. 'Your patience with respect to the farmers is most appreciated, Mr Kuang. A thousand more pardons for the delay. We failed to factor in the extent of their backwardness and the impact of anti-patriotic forces outside of Vietnam who spread lies and incite revolt via the internet. Why else would the peasants challenge the government's ownership and wise use of the land? Where else would the farmers get these misguided notions of human rights and democracy? What do they know of such things? In any case, my people have made the remaining peasants a final offer, more than fair compensation. We will ensure that they leave without further disruption.'

After a pause for the interpreting, Chinese words again spewed into my house.

'We routinely encounter similar obstructions in China and regard them as frustrating but manageable. One cannot move up and forward without others trying to keep one down and drag one back. Perhaps you know of that English story about the man Gulliver and how he is tied down by those tiny people who he wants only to help and educate. Often I think that story is also the story of Dragon Lord Enterprises. Of course, it is never pleasant for anyone to leave the land of their ancestors. But the past cannot put a brake on the future. And those at the bottom cannot anchor those at the top. My company is not in the business of treating anyone unfairly. We do not take without compensating and in this case, as you say, we have been generous. But our good will is not as vast as the South China Sea. As we speak, our engineers and construction workers are kissing their wives and children goodbye. We cannot have them sitting idle. Any delay on this project would mean delaying others in Uruguay and Uganda. We have extremely tight deadlines. The line between profit and loss is, I'm sure you understand Commander, precariously thin.'

By this stage I had removed my phone from my pocket and started the voice recording app, pointing the microphone down into the stairwell, trusting that the incriminating statements would waft upwards like toxic fumes.

'Yes, yes. I know exactly what you're saying', my father replied. 'Once again, please accept my apologies for any uncertainty and stress that you have had to endure. I will urge everyone in the Public Works Office to strive with greater purpose and use my connections in the Party and the government to ensure that we move resolutely on this matter. I am entirely attuned to your needs and know what is at stake for Hue, for Vietnam and for all of us.'

Again the Chinese man spoke, this time at a slower pace and in a more formal manner such that there was no pause between what he said and the interpreting.

'Your efforts on this matter are appreciated by everyone at Dragon Lord Enterprises. Please, Commander Quoc, accept this honorarium in recognition of everything you have done to date and know that, as agreed, you will be compensated as each milestone is reached. I want to thank you for serving my company and your country.'

Again my toes clenched with antipathy as I envisioned the waxy red envelope sliding from one man's clammy palm into the other's. No doubt that envelope was crammed full of American bills or perhaps even taels of gold. The man who had introduced me to revolutionary morality was taking a bribe. I could not deny it. And this was surely not the first time Father had betrayed Vietnam and everything I stood for.

All of a sudden I found myself hurtling down the stairs, driven by a potent mixture of rage and righteousness. Thinking back, I like to imagine that I acted with the boldness of martyrs like Kim Dong who at the age of 14 chose to give up his life rather than give up on his cause. I like to imagine that I was doing what Uncle Ho would have done, emphatically so.

'Halt! Halt!' I commanded. And I was moving so fast that when I hollered 'Halt' for a third time at the base of the stairwell my feet almost slipped out from under me. 'As leader of the K45 cell of the Ho Chi Minh scouts, youth traffic control officer for Phu Hoi Ward and incoming deputy secretary of the students' union at Hue University, I command you to stand down.'

My father did not look at me. He was staring into his tea and rubbing his forehead.

'I have reason to believe that both of you have conspired to siphon wealth from the workers of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, that you, Commander Quoc, have contravened the cadre code of conduct and you, Mr Chink, have violated the conditions of your visa.'

With this final accusation I turned directly to my Chinese foe. He was younger than I had thought, only in his early 30s. I was struck by how unstriking he was. His face was long and his cheeks angular and slightly sunken. There was no facial hair, no pockmarks, dimples or distinguishing features. The Chink's hair was neatly trimmed on the back and sides. He did not wear glasses. His suit was navy blue and his shoes were plain black. His government had no doubt trained him to go about his business in an inconspicuous fashion. In fact, I would have mistaken Mr Kuang for the interpreter had he not been sitting directly across from my father. For some reason I was drawn to the Chinese

man's sleeves, bejewelled with white gold cufflinks in the shape of dragons. I envisaged him sweeping the hard-earned wealth of my compatriots into those sleeves as if he was performing a dastardly magic trick.

The interpreter conversed with the businessman. Then the Chinese goon turned directly to my father and revealed his limited grasp of Vietnamese.

'Your daughter?'

My father nodded solemnly. 'I cannot apologise enough, Mr Kuang. She doesn't know what she's talking about. Kim Lien hasn't started university yet. And she is at home this morning, sick, obviously delusional.'

Mr Kuang calmly offered his hand and my father clasped it with both of his. Kuang spoke at some length to the interpreter who grinned as he said, 'Mr Kuang understands that families can be complicated. He wishes your daughter well in her studies. He thinks your daughter is nice ... cute.'

And then they made their way out the door. I stepped in front of him and proclaimed, 'Halt! Halt! I cannot allow you to leave Mr Kuang. I am hereby detaining you until such a time that the authorities arrive. Rest assured, if you are innocent, then you need not fear Vietnamese justice. While for the past 2,000 years China has never been fair to Vietnam, we will be fair to you. If you are innocent then you will be set free to continue with your business. If you're guilty then your punishment will be well-measured and your re-education thorough.'

With that I removed my phone from the front pocket of my pyjama top and held down the speed dial for the local security police.

That's when my father hit me. It was the first time he has ever done so, my mother and grandparents being far more hands-on in my upbringing than my father ever was. The blow came from his hand to mine and sent my phone flying across the room where it ploughed into our commendations wall. As I turned to face my father, he struck me again, this time across my face and with such force that I fell across one of our wooden recliners and then on to the floor. With the piercing pain came a jolt of adrenalin. And time seemed to slow so that as I landed I felt every shudder of the display cabinet and all those crystal goblets and bottles of liquor.

'Kim Lien! I made it absolutely clear! You were to stay in your room. This is not the time or place for your games. A thousand pardons. A thousand pardons Mr Kuang. My daughter doesn't know what she is doing. She is young and does

not know her place. She's sick and is not thinking properly. I trust this incident won't get in the way of our business? Be assured that I will reprimand her and she will be sorry, *duì-bu-qǐ, duì-bu-qǐ*. Please forgive me.'

'Commander Quoc, do not be concerned.' Kuang was composed and spoke even slower and more assuredly than before so that the interpreter worked almost instantaneously. 'This is of no consequence. No one need lose face. We are both family men. I know that even when a father's efforts stand as tall as Thai Son Mountain, he receives but a pebble of respect from his children. Children do not always, as Confucius said, love what their parents love and respect what their parents respect.'

'Yes, that's very gracious of you Mr Kuang. We Vietnamese are also familiar with those proverbs.'

As I lay dazed more from shock than pain, Mr Kuang and his interpreter bowed again and departed, the interpreter quietly shutting the door behind them.

There was a tense silence as I crouched on the floor with my father standing over me. I could sense him breathing, slowly and deeply, using the tai chi techniques that he had started practising in the early mornings to address his high blood pressure. Father sat down again on the dark wood salon, his head leaning back upon the mother of pearl inlay depicting cherry blossoms.

'Get up and sit here with me, my daughter.'

But I insisted on standing tall and defiant, as if I was Thai Son Mountain.

'This could take some time. It's easier if you sit.'

'No, Father.'

'As you please. Is there anything I could say that would make a difference? That would help you feel better about this whole affair?'

'Can I speak? Without you striking me?'

'I'm not going to hit you again. Don't worry. But don't expect me to apologise either.' He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and his head in his cupped hands.

'I feel like King An Duong Vuong', I said.

'What's that?'

'You know from the legend of Princess My Chau that you told me when I was small. We analysed it in my political history reading group. The Vietnamese King An Duong Vuong is betrayed by his beloved Princess My Chau after she

is courted by the Chinese Prince Trong Thuy. The Prince tricks his bride into revealing her father's military secret, a crossbow that shoots 10,000 arrows made from a magical turtle claw. Maybe, like My Chau, you think that you are doing the right thing, Father, but you have betrayed us: me and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.'

'What? Of course I know that story, Kim Lien. I taught it to you. It's just a fairy tale, my daughter. It's for children. And the message that you have to take from it is that children and daughters in particular have to honour their fathers; in doing so they protect the family and the nation. It is you Kim Lien who are Princess My Chau, not me. You have been courted by politics. Your head is shrouded in a cloud of ideology. You can't see what's real anymore. Me, our family, the Party and the country do not exist in a fable. The real world is much more complicated. In this world we have to make choices, choices that involve many variables and unknowns, where the outcomes are not black and white. So now you have a choice between me and your principles. I trust you will make the right choice, Kim Lien.'

'Father, I *am* a respectful daughter and a loyal Party member. As far as I'm concerned, there's no conflict in these duties. You can confess to me as a Party member. Tell me what you have done, everything, every dollar that you have pilfered. Consider it the start of a purging process. And I will dutifully report it in the knowledge that if you are contrite, the Party will show you clemency, especially given your service to the defence of the country. And as your daughter I will support you during your re-education, however long it takes.'

'Listen to yourself, my daughter. Do you have any idea what you're saying? I wish I was filming this conversation. You know what I would do? I would play it back to you in 10 or 20 years, after you have your own children and established your career. You would surely realise how foolish you were today, how wrong you were to judge your father so harshly.'

Father paused and then looked up at me still standing.

'Maybe this is my fault. Your mother and grandparents have always said that I have been too liberal with you. I never hit you, even when you were small and mischievous. I have always listened to you and taken your wishes into account, even when they were outlandish.'

Then he spoke intimately, as if he was letting me in on a secret that everyone else knew but me.

'Listen, please listen, my precious daughter. It is important that you forsake these childish ways and grow up. I should have burst the bubble in which you live a long time ago. But something stopped me. Maybe I wanted to live in

that bubble with you and all those slogans, pamphlets, text books, philosophies and fairy tales. Where you pull a lever, press the right buttons or wave a wand and people act accordingly.'

'I *do* live in the real world, Father, the dialectical world in which capitalism will collapse under the weight of its contradictions and bring forth a proletarian dictatorship and then a classless communist society. Look at what's going on around us. Look at the global financial crisis, the demise of the European colonists and the American neocolonialists. Look at the pink tide sweeping across Latin America. And all those young backpackers who visit Hue, wearing t-shirts printed with Che Guevara or our radiant flag. Capitalism is unravelling and communism is blossoming! Marx and Engels saw this! The death of imperialism may be drawn out and no doubt capitalists will cling onto the means of production. We have to be wary, but we must also be assertive. We are on the winning side, Father; it's just as you taught me.'

'What you say is right, Kim Lien, but is it real? Does it matter? You see historical epochs, abstract ideas and global dynamics, but you're blind to what is going on around you. Go out to Dong Ba market or down to the river and look at your compatriots eagerly competing against one another without the slightest concern for class oppression. Go ahead and ask them what they think about the profit motive, surplus labour or commodity fetishism. They won't have any idea what you're talking about. No one cares about the contradictions of capitalism anymore. What the hell do you think a socialist-oriented market economy is if it's not a contradiction? More and more I have become convinced that being Vietnamese is all about living with contradictions: between the mountains and the sea; the East and the West; life and death – all are mixed together. Contradictions are the most consistent thing in our culture and our politics. That's why you're different, Kim Lien. There's no one like you, except for maybe that boyfriend of yours, but even he's not as dogmatic. That's why you're unique and special, but also why you never fit in. Everything's straightforward for you. You're so unyielding.'

'I've only ever done what you said you wanted me to do, Father – what Uncle Ho would do.'

'I know, I know, it is my fault. I was the one who introduced you to the Party's teachings at a young age. Your mother was always against it. She said it was unnatural for a young girl to be obsessed with politics and war. She wanted to take down your pictures of General Giap and replace them with flowers and ballerinas. She wanted you to embroider rather than study the regulation of state-owned enterprises. But you were enthusiastic and I was glad there was something to bring us closer together. However I always knew it was odd. Do you remember how you never cared for children's songs like

“Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” but instead sang the Communist Internationale and recited “The Beautiful Bulgarian Rose”? And how you always insisted on hanging up the flag outside our house at least a week before national days? I certainly do. And I remember the glee on your face when we went to those tedious military parades and your eagerness to listen to Party proclamations on the loudspeakers in the street. My point is, you’re still like that, nothing’s changed. You still go to parades and listen to proclamations as if they were soap operas. I assured your mother that this was just a stage, but if anything your fervour has intensified.’

‘I only do what any loyal citizen would do. Exactly what the Party dictates.’

‘That’s what I’m trying to get at, my child. There’s no need to be so faithful. It’s hard to explain, but everyone else in Vietnam seems to understand. What I mean to say is that I know the Party says you should obey its commands at all times, but in truth it only hopes you will comply with most of what it asks and probably expects far less than that. Your problem is that you not only follow what the Party commands, you exceed compliance. To make matters worse, you expect the same from everyone else, especially me. But non-compliance is factored into the Party’s equations. The Party expects it but cannot admit it. In most cases it doesn’t have to. Without a little fence-wrecking there can be no true independence, freedom or happiness; there would only be the Party, the Party, the Party. Basically, the Party wants you to get on with whatever you’re doing and let it get on with whatever it’s doing. The only thing it really demands is that you don’t rock the boat. It’s like my marriage to your mother. Our relationship was once full of passion and promise, but at some stage – I’m not sure when and don’t care to think why – all of that faded. You’re old enough to know we’re not in love anymore. Of course this is not ideal; but nor is it a problem because there’s no prospect of us separating. We stay together to maintain appearances, which are important to both of us and because there’s no easy or better alternative. The message for you, Kim Lien, is to lower your expectations of both yourself and others. Otherwise you’ll only ever be disappointed.’

‘You underestimate me, Father. You’re not telling me anything I’m not already aware of. I have no desire to be like other young people. I want to be part of a vanguard. I want to push others to become what they should be, what they want to be without always knowing it. And I *have* made concessions for your infidelities before, far too many. But this is different, this is corruption of the highest order. I can’t look in the other direction. Not this time. So I’m asking you, as your devoted daughter and comrade, if you truly love me and are committed to the Party, then confess. Turn yourself and Mr Kuang in to the authorities. That would make all of this easier and would go a long way to relieving my disappointment in you. Take the decision and responsibility out of my hands as a good father should. The thought of having to report your

corruption, and of having to face mother and all our family afterwards is most disturbing. But I'll do it if I have to. You know what Uncle Ho said: "Nothing is too hard; just set your mind to it, and it will surely be done."

For a moment I thought he had come to a fuller realisation of himself and taken the first step towards becoming a new person. But as he spoke it was clear that he remained fixed to his old ways of thinking.

'Kim Lien, please, I am not corrupt, at least not compared to others who have the sort of opportunities that I have. Take a look at even the official news. It's all about scandals and rip-offs: Vinashin; Texaco; Securency; Vinalines; bauxite mines in the Central Highlands; plans to chop down Hanoi's ancient trees; corruption and misuse of public money in the order of hundreds of millions of dollars. Compared to other officials I'm as pure and innocent as a Buddhist monk. You probably don't believe me, but that's exactly what some of my colleagues have called me ever since I wore an orange shirt to golf one day: "the saffron-robed commander." And I can assure you that it's not a compliment. How many times have you seen me come home drunk? Hardly ever. I avoid massage parlours and have never been unfaithful to your mother, never. This is despite frequent goading from my associates to join them. It's a critical part of sealing the deal and building trust. You're old enough to know that these things go on all of the time. It's a routine part of business and government.'

'Go ahead and fool yourself, Father. But I won't be misled. What I heard this morning was no ordinary business deal.'

'And yet that is what it was. I'm not sure what you think you heard, but you should know that my dealings with Mr Kuang are harmless and in many ways constructive. The protesting peasants, they will be compensated, probably with more money than they deserve or ever dreamt of. They were never going to keep their land, Kim Lien. It's not even theirs to keep. The development is going ahead. It's for the good of the city and the country. Mr Kuang's company is good for the city and the country.'

I sat down, not next to Father, but in the seat the Chinese man had occupied, tilting my head so that he could see the crimson mark that he had left on my face, the sting of which evoked in me righteous satisfaction.

'And what about that?' I asked, pointing to the envelope that was so thick that it bulged out of Father's trouser pocket.

'Sometimes, my daughter, I don't have a choice.'

‘What do you mean? You’re one of the most powerful people in Hue! If you can’t live according to revolutionary morals then who can? In fact, if you repent and stand up against corruption then that will encourage others to follow. You must be like Uncle Ho, who made it clear in his life and teachings that private interests are subordinate to party interests, group interests to collective interests, and temporary interests to long term ones.’

‘My daughter, I wish I could always live up to your and Uncle Ho’s morals. I really do. But life does not unravel in a simple dialectical process, with opposing forces evolving into better syntheses. I’m not saying that Marx was wrong; only that even if that is how the history of the world progresses, it doesn’t work that way in the life of one man. There are many more factors and forces to take into account. And there are situations, like the one you have just witnessed, that are grey and murky. In such situations I cannot afford to be as pure as you want to me to be; no one can. Maybe you’re too young to know what I’m talking about. Perhaps I have sheltered you for too long.’

‘I don’t accept that I am too young for anything, Father. By my age Uncle Ho was agitating for the peasants of this region to rise up against the French; he was engaged with the plight of workers and the oppressed, those he saw in his travels around the globe. But I don’t need to travel overseas to know that stealing from the people is wrong. They place their trust in you, Father, and you have betrayed them. That’s far more important than your betrayal of me and why I cannot let you continue like this.’

‘Maybe that is the case. But this is much bigger than me. I wish the system was otherwise, but it’s not and I can’t change it. Let me put it this way. Imagine what would happen if I did not accept this envelope. If I rejected Mr Kuang’s honorarium do you think he would leave it at that? No, he would get what he needs for his company some other way. He would have no problem finding someone else to help him. And, then, Mr Kuang, whoever is working with him, and all of their associates, would know that I am not a team player, that I do not know what is good for myself and for business. Moreover, I would have nothing to share with my comrades, both above and below me. And soon they would turn on me. Do you really think that anyone would admire me for rejecting a bribe and follow my example? This system of patronage engulfs us all. Resisting the system wouldn’t make me a hero; it’d mark me as a threat. Everyone would suspect that I was keeping everything for myself. Or they would think that I was going to blow the whistle on them. And I can assure you they wouldn’t take any chances; there would be severe consequences, for me and for our family.’

Father sat straight in his chair and stared unflinchingly into my eyes. ‘Look at me and listen carefully, Kim Lien’, he said.

And for the first time this morning, I did.

‘Try to appreciate how much is at stake here and why my situation is difficult. I can’t shield you from this any longer. If you want to be successful in the Party and in the public service, you have to know how things work in Vietnam, the real Vietnam, not the one in your fairy tales and philosophy books.’

‘But what about communism and revolution? What about Marx, Lenin, Truong Chinh and Ho Chi Minh? What about the red dawn that you always told me was rising?’

‘Vietnam is red, my daughter, but it’s the red of this envelope in my pocket, an envelope in which all of us are trapped. Of course our family’s trappings are better than others. Look around you. Has it ever occurred to you how we can afford any of this on my official salary of 5 million dong a month? That’s not enough to pay one of the maids, for heaven’s sake. This house, your food, your allowance, our vacations to Dien Bien Phu, Con Dao Island, the Cu Chi tunnels, and to Hanoi to see Ho Chi Minh’s body, have in one way or another come out of those envelopes.’

Father was right, I had been willingly blind, not only to his corruption but to my complicity as his dependant. ‘Are you saying that I’m no better than all the brats who get everything they want because of their family connections and power?’ And that’s when it occurred to me. ‘Did I earn my offer to the Political Academy, or did you buy it for me?’

‘It’s not like that, my dear. You earned your place as much as anyone. And this money, this house, our other houses that will be yours someday, you will have earned them too. As I said, I have shown great restraint and virtue compared to others, and I have always worked hard. But I don’t want you or my grandchildren to have to go through what I have gone through. That’s what drives me to do what I’m doing; not greed or status, but my love for you.’

‘I will not have it, Father. We should not have any of this. We should give it back to the people. Everything belongs to them. I’m sure you know the saying: “The Party leads, the state governs, the people own.” We can live simply like Uncle Ho did in his hut, with a rattan mat for a bed and a single desk from which we can work and dine. We can eat rice flavoured with salt and maybe a bit of fish sauce. Otherwise we’re no better than the comprador capitalists and puppets who repressed and stole from our own people during French and American Wars. I don’t know how you can live with yourself, Father. Don’t you feel guilty at all?’

'You would sit there, in this house, and talk of guilt and compare me to them? I deserve everything that we have. I didn't think I would ever have to remind you of this, but I was the one who went north to fight the Chinese in 1979, my parents' only son. And while I was away my father died without me at his side. If that wasn't bad enough I wasn't there to support your mother through her first pregnancy and then after her miscarriage. Where was I? I was on the battlefield. And it was there that I witnessed the death of my friends. For what? A lesson? What lesson? What can you teach a corpse? Maybe we fought for land or Vietnam's honour? A dead man doesn't care where he's buried. And as for honour, how many bodies have you seen, Kim Lien? How many people have you seen with a chunk of their head blown off and the skin on their back melting? How many comrades have you carried as they cried out for you to save them, and then pleaded for you to kill them? Men do not cry with valour as you have read in your books. They are hysterical children who have soiled themselves with fear. It's the sort of sound that returns to you in quiet moments and seeps into your dreams. It teaches you there's no honour, emphatically so. My father never told me what it was like fighting against the Americans. And I suspect his father never told him what it was to fight the French and the Japanese. They did me a great disservice. So now I'm telling you. I'm telling you that the most compromised peace is a thousand times better than the most glorious war. So even if you want nothing that I have earned over the years, take this message. We have sacrificed enough blood for this country, for the Party. The only way that I would give more is if somehow I could reverse time and make it so that I didn't see what I have seen or do what I have done. But that's not going to happen. Is it? So I'll take what little remains. If I don't, someone less deserving and more crooked will.'

It was like he had struck me again, this time with far greater force.

'Let me be clear, my child. If you are going to be disappointed and angry at me for the rest of your life, then so be it. But you will not report me, Kim Lien. I won't let you do that to our family and, most importantly, I'm not going to let you throw away your future.'

'Remember, we named you Kim Lien not just because that's the name of Ho Chi Minh's childhood village. It means golden lotus. You, Kim Lien, are the flower, pure white and dazzling gold, that rises from the soil which, while no doubt putrid, feeds and secures you.'

With that Father left for work. Not long afterwards I left the house after retrieving my phone from the floor. Dejected and confused as I was, I was grateful that it was undamaged and that the voice recorder was still running.

Staggering through the streets towards Comrade Tuan's villa estate, I felt as if I was in one of those inflatable jumping castles with the wobbling floor, collapsing walls, and other people all conspiring to knock me off balance. I was so out of sorts that I marched right past Comrade Tuan's most unusual house and had to double back.

His house is a perfect cube with nine windows on each face and two orange marble pillars at the entrance. A frosted glass balcony runs around the upper two storeys, and in the middle of the structure is an atrium in which Comrade Tuan's father maintains his succulent collection. The architect's intention was to reinvent the 200-year-old Hue Citadel for the twenty-first century. Inside every room there is a control panel that lets off a gentle amber glow as you approach it, inviting you to adjust the temperature, lighting and music. Comrade Tuan's father is an information security expert who returned to Hue after retiring from the Ministry of Public Security in Hanoi. I have only met him a handful of times though because he spends most of the year travelling as a consultant.

After a fingerprint swipe I was able to pass through the outer gate and proceed to the front door. No one responded to the doorbell, so I knocked. Because my phone had run out of batteries I couldn't call Comrade Tuan, but we had shared our calendars, so I knew that he would be at home working on an assignment. I tried to turn the doorknob. It was locked, and so I knocked again, louder. Still, no one answered.

More than ever I needed Comrade Tuan to remind me of what is right and real. As I waited, I thought of how, from the day we first met almost a year ago, we were perfectly matched.

We were brought together by traffic duty. Of all their responsibilities, my fellow Ho Chi Minh scouts dreaded traffic duty the most. Many questioned whether it is even necessary given that the roads are rarely congested in Hue. They grumbled about having to wake up early and about being exposed to the pollution, dust and sun.

So as to be a positive example, I committed to extra shifts and to doing traffic duty even after I was technically too old to be a Ho Chi Minh scout. The problem however was that I was never good at it. In fact, until Tuan came along, I didn't know anyone who was. This was because road users refused to respect the authority of scouts who could not impose fines or penalties. But, as I explained

to my fellow troop members, the greater the non-compliance, the sterner the enforcement. Excusing small transgressions will only encourage people to commit greater ones and, before long, society will be ruined.

Comrade Tuan shared my zero tolerance outlook; or at least I thought he did. The first time I saw him it was not long after I had returned from a vacation to Phu Quoc Island with my parents. The stint away had invigorated my spirit of volunteerism. So I was particularly eager to take on the stampede of motorbikes that morning. On the way, I saw him at an intersection not far from mine, already at work despite the fact that our shifts did not begin for another 20 minutes. He had a baby face and pudgy cheeks, but was obviously older than the average red scarf-wearing Ho Chi Minh scout, perhaps even older than me. The more I scrutinised him the more impressed I became. Comrade Tuan had no trouble stopping motorbike and bicycle riders from going down the wrong side of the street and deftly shepherded pedestrians towards designated crossing zones. He performed flag and arm gestures with a maestro's vigour and precision. And he employed not only the standard issue flag, but also a stainless steel whistle. Once I even witnessed him grab the back of a scooter that was about to make an illegal turn and direct it towards the righteous path. During rain storms, Comrade Tuan donned a thick tan poncho such that when he put his two arms out, he appeared to be a brick wall. As a result of his vigilance and dedication, Comrade Tuan's intersection was a pocket of blissful order. I suspected that many road users went out of their way just to be directed by his steadfast will. I know that I did.

'My name is Comrade Vo Thi Kim Lien, long-serving member of the Ho Chi Minh Scouts, student 392001 of Nguyen Ai Quoc Secondary School graduating in last year's K45 class, and youth representative on the Standing Committee of Thua Thien-Hue Province's Women's Union.' I put my fist up in air as a gesture of solidarity.

He did likewise, but in a more perfunctory manner. 'Comrade Pham Minh Tuan, Student 353256, Chu Van An High School in Hanoi, founding President of the Function over Form Architecture Club of Hue Polytechnic. I have just transferred to this city. What do you want? Can't you see that I'm in the middle of something?'

'Yes, I'm sorry. It's just that I couldn't help but be impressed by your directing. Despite my dedication, I'm ashamed to say that the traffic often defeats me.'

'Try directing our comrades in the Capital's Ba Dinh District during peak hour. This is a breeze compared to that; in fact I'm sure I could do it with my eyes shut and my ears blocked.'

'I have no doubt about that, none at all. If I could achieve but 60 per cent of your proficiency, I would be satisfied.' All along my intention was to tell him exactly what he wanted to hear so that he would say to me what I wanted to hear. And he did.

'If you are willing to learn then I am willing to teach you.'

'That's generous of you Comrade Tuan. Thank you very much.'

'No thanks necessary Comrade Lien. Any citizen would do the same.'

'"Kim Lien". Call me "Kim Lien". You know, like Uncle Ho's childhood village. But there are so few good citizens nowadays, Comrade Tuan, especially among our fellow youth.'

'Be wary of defeatism, Comrade Kim Lien. We must never lose faith in our fellow Vietnamese. Uncle Ho never did, even when the French had ruled over the country with an iron fist for more than a century, and even when the Yankees invested their vast resources into corrupting the hearts and minds of Southerners. The Vietnamese people are proud and irrepressible. It's in our genes. Perhaps a small minority of our compatriots have lost their way, but with benevolent leadership and firm re-education, they will surely join us on the revolutionary path.'

As it turned out, there was some space in his schedule that morning. And so I stayed on at my intersection well after my shift had finished in order for Comrade Tuan to watch me work. He scrutinised my intersection from afar as a surveyor gauges the land and then stood by my side examining my gestures with the attention to detail of a carpenter assessing the grain of a piece of timber. Throughout this time I was both nervous and reassured by his presence.

Afterwards we retired to a nearby tea house to discuss my performance. Comrade Tuan liked the bitterness of Vietnamese green tea. He flatly refused to drink coffee, soft drinks or bubble tea, regarding them as toxins that were as destructive to Vietnamese tastebuds as Agent Orange was to the natural environment.

He gave my traffic directing a score of 4.5 out of 10 but assured me that I could improve with some guidance and much effort. Apparently, my enthusiasm was commendable, but my directions were wild and imprecise, which fostered confusion and dissent among road users.

'It becomes easier and more effective when you realise that pedestrians, cyclists, bikers, all road users, are no different to ducks or sheep. It's easier to control many of them than it is to control an individual. Once they become part of the herd, they cannot bear to leave it.'

For him, speeding, not wearing helmets, riding a motorbike with more than one passenger and rule breaking in general, contravened the compliant instinct of Vietnamese. Such illegal practices grew out of phantom desires that were conjured up by foreign forces.

Even at that early stage, I felt as if we were so synchronised in our thinking that I could finish some of his sentences for him: 'The true will of each Vietnamese is to advance the collective will of Vietnam as expressed and championed by the Party.'

On more technical matters, according to Comrade Tuan, my flag work was flaccid. 'The flag is an extension of your hand. However, you don't so much wave but salute with it, taking the longest arc down with your elbow tucked into your side and then the shortest path up, resting the top of the handle near the bridge of your nose.' And, of course, I needed to get a whistle.

We refilled the tiny teapot with hot water no less than five times until it was hard for me to detect any flavour or colour in the final brew. When I called for a new pot, Comrade Tuan promptly cancelled my order and instead requested more hot water. This was not just to be frugal. As far as Comrade Tuan was concerned, each new pouring had its own character that had to be appraised in all its subtlety and complexity.

Having just arrived from Hanoi, Comrade Tuan missed being close to the seat of power, but had not left behind a close circle of friends or significant other. In moving to Hue, he was eager to help liberate the city from the last vestiges of its feudal and Diemist past. Comrade Tuan had no interest in sport, regarding the playing of it as 'the enslavement of the body' and the viewing of it as 'the annulment of the mind'. He was studying architecture at the Technical College and venerated the vision and grandeur of Le Corbusier who, he said, not only planned buildings but entire cities and worlds.

Comrade Tuan's vision for urban planning in Hue was to keep the Ancient Citadel, but to level just about everything else and replace it with a grid of high rise buildings. 'The past is a launch pad for the future,' he said with his nose pointed in the air, 'the present is what gets in the way.'

That morning we recited a few memorable stanzas from the work of Party laureate poet To Huu, considered how the strategies devised by Vo Nguyen Giap to defeat the French could be applied in the war against rampant inflation, and questioned the virtue of joining ASEAN given that its founding members had disdained Vietnam for so many years.

The sun was high in the sky when we were finally compelled to leave one another. I was impressed when Comrade Tuan produced a small plastic container into which he transferred the tea leaves for further consumption. And although our expenses were minimal, Comrade Tuan insisted that we split the bill out of recognition that as a woman I held up half the sky.

‘Thank you, Comrade Tuan, for your time and insight. I am glad that fate has brought us together this morning.’

‘There is no such thing as fate, Comrade Kim Lien. For true revolutionaries there is only individual will, human reason and the Party, all of which must be tightly integrated.’

In the following weeks we crossed paths at Party and community gatherings, and he gave me additional traffic directing lessons over tea. Our relationship developed progressively so that we met twice in the second week, three times in the third week, four times in the fourth week and then every weekday. On the Friday of that fifth week, with our tea delicate and pale, Comrade Tuan said that he had something significant to tell me and something important to ask.

He hesitated, only for a second or two, but long enough for me to identify it as a peculiar hiccup in the otherwise steady cadence of our conversations. My entire body was tingling with anticipation, much like I had felt leading up to the National Assembly elections.

‘Well, the good news is that I’ve been selected by the People’s Committee to attend the Vietnam–Laos Amity and Development Conference in Vientiane. It will be a valuable opportunity for me to connect with our comrades beyond the Western Border.’

‘Congratulations Comrade Tuan!’ I said shaking his hand. In so doing I suppressed my disappointment, firstly because I thought I was the best candidate for the honour, and secondly because I was hoping he was going to reveal something more heartfelt. ‘The People’s Committee has made a wise decision. When is the Convention Comrade?’

‘Not for another six weeks, but the thing is, I’ll be leaving next Thursday. The Committee has decided that the younger members of the Vietnamese delegation should trek to the Convention. On the way we will be touring parts of Interzones IV and V with veterans of the American War and staying with highland tribes to assist them with their literacy and civility. After a historic rendezvous with youth from the Laos delegation on the Truong Son range, we’ll retrace sections of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, re-enacting manoeuvres that were pivotal to the defeat of the American neocolonists and their Vietnamese puppets. ‘It will be an enlightening and uplifting experience and, just as importantly,

I intend to lose all of this fat that I have gained since I completed military service. I promise to return taugth and true, more akin in appearance to Lenin and Trotsky than Stalin and Mao.'

The thought of not seeing him for six weeks was like a savage blow to my gut. To my credit, I was able to hide my pain and sentimentalism.

'Excellent, Comrade Tuan. I wish you all the best on your adventure and have every confidence that you will represent our province and people with distinction.'

'Thank you. Thank you Comrade Kim Lien. Your support means a great a deal to me. However, I want you to know that while this trip has many positives, there is one significant drawback.'

'What do you mean Comrade? There is surely no downside to such an honour?'

'No, you don't understand. I am most honoured. The trip itself has no downsides to speak of. I am referring to a drawback of being so far away for such a long time, away from you, Comrade Kim Lien.'

And with this he hesitated again, but this time for longer, scanning me for a reaction. I was sure he could sense the tingling which had once again come over me, this time with greater intensity.

'This brings me to my request. It occurs to me that I would be aided in my marching over the coming weeks if I knew I had someone to return to, someone to whom I could sing a song to lighten the burden of my pack, someone I could think about when not immersed in my duties, someone whose heart I could always connect with though we might be beyond cellular networks. I was wondering if you would be that person Comrade Kim Lien? What I mean to say is that I was hoping we could be more than comrades, which is not to say that we would not still be comrades. In fact, I'm sure our dedication to the Party would, if anything, be strengthened if we committed to one another in a more intimate fashion. Please accept my apologies. I know I should be more direct, less wishy-washy. But, you can probably tell that I have no experience in matters of the heart. What I mean to say is ...'

'You need not search for words, Comrade Tuan. I have for some time deemed us to be compatible. So my answer to your proposition is "yes". Emphatically, "yes".'

Comrade Tuan's beaming face displayed a mixture of joy and relief. And when he grinned I saw a tiny dimple on his left cheek that I had not noticed before and found most endearing.

Along with a small band of supporters, I walked the first 5 kilometres with Tuan's expedition, keeping my distance from him at first because I did not want to advertise our relationship just yet. But when it came time for him to finally go, I threw myself into his arms and nestled my head in his chest. It was our first-ever embrace and as much as I wanted to hold on, after a few seconds I pulled back from his portly frame and threw my fist up into the air. He did likewise, and with our arms like bolts of lightning piercing through a stormy sky, I am sure that everyone around us was in awe of our righteousness.

As I walked home and on countless occasions over the weeks that followed, I hummed the classic song that tells of two guerrilla soldiers on the Ho Chi Minh Trail making their way down either side of the Truong Son range. The lovers are separated by mountain peaks yet in total harmony when it comes to ridding the country of American invaders and laying the foundation for global communism.

Truong Son East, Truong Son West
Together consigned to the Truong Son jungle,
Together yet so far apart,
The road to battle exquisite this season,
From Truong Son East to Truong Son West.
From Truong Son East, I love you West,
Descend from the alps into the light,
From that mysterious land that intoxicates the soul,
And those roads littered with enemy bombs.
From where I am to where you are,
As our forces unite on the frontline,
We are united by unflagging love,
Truong Son East with Truong Son West.

The delegation leaders had determined that the re-enactment should be as faithful as possible, which meant that the young trekkers had to live off what they could forage from the jungle and the generosity of the hill tribes. Just as importantly, it meant that Comrade Tuan had to leave his phone and tablet at home. And I must admit that, because we had come together with meteoric force only to be torn asunder so soon afterwards, there were some dark moments when I resented him for leaving me and wished most fervently that it was I who was journeying westward, if not with Comrade Tuan, then in his place. But to my credit, I was quick to extinguish these unbecoming sentiments and direct my energies to more constructive tasks.

In particular, I realised that we had been reckless, elevating our personal desires over the objectivity and far-sightedness of our leaders. It was not for us alone to determine our compatibility as boyfriend and girlfriend; we needed the Party's blessing.

This involved compiling personal histories that detailed our relatives and ancestors back at least three generations, noting their occupations and any activities that might be judged as either pro- or counter-revolutionary. Father had a contact at the public records office, so I had little trouble accessing the information that I required. My side was straightforward. After reviewing the personal histories that my parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, great uncles and great aunts had compiled over the decades, I proudly confirmed that my bloodline was impeccably red. There was not a hint of jaundiced yellow republicanism, enemy collaboration or class betrayal. In fact, I believe that the health of my ancestral roots can be traced back at least 30 generations, all the way back to the Great March South when we liberated what is now Central Vietnam from the Cham.

With that accomplished, I turned to Tuan's personal history, which was far more difficult to put together, particularly because his father had worked for the Public Security Office, so details of his background and life were confidential. However, relying on the personal histories of other relatives, I pieced together that Comrade Tuan's mother (who he never mentioned) had suddenly left Vietnam when Tuan was small and was now thought to be in New Zealand. This would usually be a stain on both their records, but to my relief there was an explanatory note from the Public Security Office exonerating Tuan's father of his wife's treachery. An investigation deemed her departure to be 'spontaneous, mad and incongruous. It was impossible to predict by even the most vigilant of cadres and impossible to prevent by even the most attentive of husbands.' Otherwise, from what I could find, Comrade Tuan's history was unblemished. I even confirmed that, as he had once boasted to me, he was a descendent of one-time Prime Minister Pham Van Dong. Just as prestigious was his working class and revolutionary pedigree. Comrade Tuan had an uncle who farmed pigs near Cam Ranh Bay, a second cousin once removed who was a union official for a state-owned tobacco company and his great grandmother had participated in a rubber plantation uprising in the 1930s.

My scrupulous research helped me to cope with Comrade Tuan's absence. It was as if I was becoming more familiar with him one official document at a time. And by the end of the process, I was sure that I knew him better than he knew himself and that I could trust him with my affections.

At that stage, there was also little doubt in my mind that the Party would approve my application. However, because I could not find the appropriate form, I compiled a spreadsheet with accompanying coloured bar graphs that clearly indicated how the agrarian, industrial and activist components of our personal histories lined up almost perfectly together. When I showed this to Comrade Tuan after his return from Laos, he said it was like a game of Tetris in which all of the components of our lives had been brought together to achieve the highest possible score.

Unfortunately, both the Secretary of the District People's Committee and the regional head of the Youth League showed little interest in appraising my application. The former asserted that Party approval for such unions had not been necessary since the American War. The latter was flippant and lewd, suggesting that he knew of only one way to consummate a relationship and that if Comrade Tuan and I wanted his assistance in this regard then he would happily watch to see if we were doing it right. To both I stipulated that if they had any doubts, then Comrade Tuan and I could begin our relationship on a probationary basis with monthly reviews. After only glimpsing at the documentation and data that I had spent so much time compiling, they proceeded to sign and stamp my application. Comrade Tuan and I were officially a couple.

Comrade Tuan's return, this time by bus, was delayed by two days because of a landslide. He was still recovering from a bout of malaria, but was otherwise healthy and high spirited when we were finally reunited. The trek had indeed left him sinewy and square-jawed. I was pleased to see that the weight loss had accentuated his dimple. When we embraced for the second time, my head fit neatly into the cavity of his chest and my arms reached easily around his bony waist. Never have I known a more tender moment.

Finally, Comrade Tuan's housekeeper, Sister Bay, answered the door.

'Have you been waiting long? I was up on the roof putting a load of washing on the line. Can't hear a thing from up there.'

Sister Bay was Tuan's second cousin and had helped raise him, which is why we referred to her affectionately as 'Older Sister'. She was the sixth of nine children and had left her village just outside of Hoi An as a teenager to go work for Tuan's father in Hanoi. Despite having lived in the city for half her life, Sister Bay retained her salt-of-the-earth candour along with a heavy country accent that is at times hard for me to understand.

'You look like you've seen a ghost. Is there something up?'

'Hello, Sister Bay', and after removing my shoes I kept my eyes downcast so that she did not see the mark from my father's assault. 'Is Comrade Tuan at home, I have to see him, as a matter of urgency.'

'Is there anything that's not urgent with you two?'

'Is Tuan upstairs in his room?'

'I think so. I was out at the market and then down here for most of the morning. I went up to see if he needed any laundry done, but he didn't answer his door and I dare not disturb him. He told me that when he's working on a design he often gets into "the zone". Apparently, he can't hear or see anything except for what he's concentrating on. "Don't come in, even if it's an emergency", he told me, "It will break my train of thought". Anyway, you just head up there and go right on in. He won't mind you breaking his train of thought and busting into his zone.'

'Thank you, Sister Bay.' Although I had more pressing matters on my mind, I made a mental note to convey my disappointment to Comrade Tuan about closing his door. He was surely aware of the dangers of drawing a distinction between the private and the commons. Closing his door was the first step to him locking himself up in his room for years like so many young Japanese Hikikomori hermits. It would rightfully attract suspicion.

On the occasions when we had worked in his room composing socialist realist poetry and organising events, we always kept the door wide open so that everyone would know that we were upstanding and had nothing to hide. Although lately it was not unusual for our legs to be touching under his desk and, once a task was completed, for us to kiss.

So again I was gliding along the tiles in my socks, but whereas this morning I almost expected my father to betray me, there was no reason for me to suspect Comrade Tuan of anything untoward. In fact, it would be accurate to say that since coming into my life, Comrade Tuan had amply filled the role of socialist exemplar that my father had vacated. And so, as I thrust open the door and stormed into his spacious bedroom I did not know what I craved most: his political acumen or rock-hard embrace.

It was then that I saw him as I never thought I would, slovenly reclined in his chair. His head was cocked back, almost as if he was in pain. But the expression on his face reminded me of pictures that I had seen of opium addicts lying on their sides smoking pipes. His eyes were slightly shut and his mouth softly open, in contrast with his tightly wound right fist, which was not poised in the air, but rather pointing downwards with the butt of his palm rubbing vigorously at his crotch.

All of these sights, as unusual and disturbing as they were, retreated into the background when I saw what was on the computer screen. As I recollect those images, I am again overcome by a sickening sensation. There were four separate windows open on his monitor. In the top left there was a picture of the famous-and-good-for-nothing-other-than-her-bust Elly Tran, as she emerged from a swimming pool in a bikini. In the top right was a video of a voluptuous black woman with a platinum blond wig bent over a piano. Her gargantuan breasts dangled so low that they bashed upon the keys. A scrawny white man with a moustache wearing only a bow tie defiled her from behind. Next was a database of some sort with rows of dates and times and columns that I later discovered were headed, 'duration', 'filth rating', 'excitement', 'copulation' and 'notes'. In the final window there was what I initially thought was a benign Doraemon cartoon, but the blue cat had a grotesquely large penis which he had inserted through a fish. The end was being bitten by a pink cat on all fours with a balloon tied on her tail that had the number '18' on it.

With his earphones firmly on, Comrade Tuan did not hear me enter the room. But when I gasped, he swivelled around and swore, and then he saw me and he knew that I had seen him. I could not help but witness the shameful shaft emerging from his pants. Comrade Tuan almost fell backwards as he swivelled away from my gaze and reached to his laptop to close all those windows, 'Ah, Comrade Kim Lien, I was not expecting ...'

In clumsy desperation he yanked the earphones out of the socket, the audio suddenly blasting out from the household speaker system: a cacophony of grunting and squealing; the smashing of piano keys; and electronic simulation of howling cats. I made a move to the flashing control panel to turn the sound off, but Comrade Tuan collected himself enough to press the mute button on his laptop, and then he turned off his monitor.

Comrade Tuan sat upright. There was silence. I turned away from him and heard him zipping up his pants. Silence again, but I could still make out the faint hum of the fan from his hard drive and I knew that all the portals to those depraved universes were still very much open. After a few deep breaths, I turned around to face him.

'Comrade Tuan. What are you doing? Whatever it is, you must desist immediately. I need to speak to you about something of grave importance. Something ...' and I was struggling to hold back the tears.

'Yes, ah, Comrade Kim Lien. I wasn't expecting you. I was just doing some work. There's a ground-breaking project that I'm assisting the Cultural Office with. It involves gauging the impact and *modi operandi* of toxic foreign culture on the minds of our young compatriots. Let me explain ...'

He could see the tears falling down my cheeks just before I turned away from him again.

He rolled his chair forward and took hold of my elbow, urging me to turn around, but I dared not, worried that he wanted me to sit on his lap. His touch made me squirm.

'I don't know what to say. I don't want to deceive you. There's no point anyway. You are as familiar with my work program and calendar as I am. I'm sorry, so very sorry.'

'What for, Comrade Tuan? Are you sorry that you have been caught? Sorry that I know? That I know what you do when you're alone? I trusted you, Comrade. I compiled and examined your personal history. I thought I knew you. I thought ...'

'I have let you down. I'm sorry. But I am still Pham Minh Tuan, Student 353256 of Chu Van An High School. Believe me, Comrade Kim Lien. Nothing has changed between us. All I need is a little re-education. That's all.'

'What about all those speeches and articles that you wrote for the Youth League newsletter? The ones about the Western cultural invasion of Vietnam being as threatening as the American invasion of the 1960s? What about the article on the perils of Hollywood escapism and the need for us to engage with the real world, the socialist realist world, the world the Party in all its benevolence and wisdom has constructed for us? I relished those articles, Comrade Tuan. I believed in them, and in you.'

I faced him again as he moved back to his desk and was staring into the blank monitor.

'Have you done that sort of thing, those sorts of things in real life? Is that what you want to do to me?'

'No. Of course not. Never.'

'What were you thinking of when we kissed in this room, Comrade Tuan? Were you thinking about that sort of thing? What about that time we kissed on your scooter as the sun rose over the Hai Van Pass? What about when we kissed after eating guava at the base of Minh Mang's palace? Or last month when we were listening to our favourite folk song "Saigonese Girls Carry Ammunition for Liberation Forces"? Or last week when we were watching the Vietnam Sea in My Heart concert? Or when we went to watch the *Like Living with History* documentary about the 60th Anniversary of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu?'

What did those kisses mean to you Comrade? What am I to make of them now? Now that you have cheated on me and Vietnam? Is there anything else or anyone else I should know about?’

‘No, no, never. I have never been with anyone. You know you are my first and only girlfriend. You know that. You must believe me. You’re everything I’ve ever wished for, Kim Lien.’

‘Then why? Why do this? Tell me Comrade. You must be honest. Tell me everything. For the sake of the Party, for us.’

‘I really don’t know. I know that this is another universe, Comrade’, and he flung an accusing finger at his laptop. ‘A universe in which I am not myself. Please, believe me when I tell you that I always mean what I say and write. It’s just that sometimes I don’t have the strength to live up to my words. But from now on, I will. I will because I want to be with you, but not like this. Not in a disgusting, foreign and demeaning sort of way. Believe me.’

‘Why? Why should I?’

Comrade Tuan stood again and walked to the far side of the room. Facing out the window, holding his hands behind his back, his chin upwards. He took a little while to respond.

‘There are weaknesses and contradictions in all of us, Comrade. I’m not sure what yours are, but I know they’re there, perhaps lying dormant just under the surface. But that doesn’t matter to me. What’s important is that we help one another scrutinise and work through our contradictions so that we can progress. I know I have hurt you Kim Lien, but I am begging you now to help me.’

We sat in preparation for criticism–self-criticism, not in Comrade Tuan’s bedroom, but downstairs in the sitting room with the French doors wide open and the mid-morning sunshine flooding in. Neither Comrade Tuan nor I had ever participated in the criticism–self-criticism process, but we had studied it in communist texts and I had once written an essay on how Stalin’s criticism–self-criticism or *samokritika* helped to unite and renew the Soviet Central Committee. Although I was not sure of the mechanics, I knew from news reports that criticism–self-criticism was a public process that allowed cadres who had made mistakes to correct them, while encouraging others to avoid committing the same errors. Both Comrade Tuan and I were well aware of Uncle Ho’s proclamation that it is only when ‘a party has the courage to clearly

identify, admit and address its mistakes, that it can make steady progress'. And so we started in good faith, confident that with sufficient candour, guidance and determination, Comrade Tuan would make steady progress.

Sister Bay was less enthusiastic about the process but, after sustained lobbying from me, agreed to oversee it as a representative of the proletarian and agrarian classes. She also prepared the tea and biscuits.

Once I had reported to Sister Bay the facts and showed her the laptop with the incriminating images, we were ready to proceed with Comrade Tuan's admission and self-evaluation.

'I don't know where to begin', said Comrade Tuan. 'It's complicated, and there are many shameful details that I find hard to recount, let alone disclose.'

'You must try, Comrade Tuan', I said. 'You must combat the conspiracies and distortions that you have contrived to justify your waywardness.'

'I know, I know that this is for the best, that it is for my own good, and for the good of the fatherland. And I know that I have not thought clearly and acted righteously for some time now. I suppose I have confused what is good with what feels good and sacrificed the Party's principles for my pleasure. Saying this out loud, before both of you, helps. But it's also painful. It makes me wonder whether I am no better than all of the young people who I have castigated for being easily misled.'

'This is positive', I said with stern encouragement, 'a move in the right direction. It should be painful, Comrade, arduous like your march to Laos, but ultimately salutary.'

'Excellent, so let's leave it there', Sister Bay chimed in. 'It's not all that complicated is it? Basically, your girlfriend caught you wanking over some naughty videos. Terribly embarrassing. You'll try not to do it again. And we'll try our best not to think about it. So there's no need to discuss it any further. Now, we can all get on with our day. If you two will excuse me, I have more laundry to do.'

'Wait, please Sister Bay!' I pleaded to her as she got up to leave. 'I know this seems trifling to you, but if criticism—self-criticism is to be successful, we have to do it properly. We need your wisdom as a worker and one-time peasant. Comrade Tuan and I have lived in towns and cities for almost all of our lives. Despite our best efforts, we do not have the moral compass and insight that you developed from a young age cultivating rice and looking after animals. Please be patient and give this a little more time.'

'You can have until the end of the spin cycle.'

‘Thank you, thank you again Sister. Now, Comrade Tuan you’re aware that you have violated a number of laws, most notably, the Decree on the Management, Provision and Use of Internet Service, and the Ministry of Culture and Information’s regulation prohibiting the use of the internet to destabilise social order and impair cultural values. You have accessed sites that, if they’re not blacklisted, certainly should be. I assume that you’re aware of this Comrade Tuan?’

‘Yes, but I am grateful to you for reminding me.’

Sister Bay interjected again but was more forgiving of Comrade Tuan than I had expected. Indeed, at that stage she openly defended him.

‘The only problem I can see here is that young Tuan has got his satisfaction from his computer when he should have got it from you, Kim Lien.’ She was still holding a feather duster that she pointed at both Comrade Tuan and me accusingly.

‘Now, it’s only natural that *you* would feel hurt, but remember that he hasn’t cheated on you, at least not with a person. You’re acting like those pictures are somehow real, but they’re just fantasies, strange and sick perhaps, but harmless. And, since you’re keeping me here against my will, perhaps you will let me be as frank as possible. Is that okay with your honour?’

‘Yes, always. We appreciate it.’ I said to her.

‘If you want him to stop doing what he’s doing then why don’t you satisfy him a little more? Unless there’s laws against that too now? Mind you, I’m not talking about anything indecent or kinky, just a bit of rubbing in the right places and a spit and polish where it’s needed. Given that you admire life in the rice paddies so much, I can assure you that I was doing that sort of thing behind the pandanus palms when I was much younger than you. It’s just a bit of fun. It’s natural. Animals do it all the time.’

Seeing my discomfort, Comrade Tuan intervened, ‘Please, Sister, the fault lies wholly with me. It is I who have been weak and misguided. I am the one to blame. I mean, I have been doing this to myself since before I met Comrade Kim Lien. It has nothing to do with her.’

But Comrade Tuan’s attempts to shield me from Sister Bay’s criticism had little effect. It dawned on me that I too was being scrutinised and exposed in the process of criticism—self-criticism. The question at hand was not just whether Comrade Tuan had failed in his duties as a revolutionary boyfriend, but whether I had failed in mine as a revolutionary girlfriend.

Suddenly I was weeping again, ever so softly, but weeping nonetheless.

And then Comrade Tuan was beside me on the divan, his hand resting on my shoulder.

'I am sorry Comrade Kim Lien. Sister Bay is well-meaning but totally wrong. You have done more than enough to satisfy me. Please know that there is nothing that you could have done to stop me from watching those videos.'

Without looking at him, I wept some more, and wondered, 'What would Uncle Ho do in my situation?' I envisaged him, foot outstretched, flying through the air and kicking the bulbous nose of a French Legionnaire. And then I saw him standing by a pond serenely stroking his wispy beard as B52s dropped bombs all around him.

I removed Tuan's hand from my arm.

'I am fine. Please do not concern yourself. Sister Bay is right. Every question must be asked, every action scrutinised and every solution considered. No one is exempt from criticism in the same way that every plant in the field must be treated if the crop is to flourish. Please continue with the process. I would prefer it if you did so from your own chair.'

'Yes, certainly', said Comrade Tuan as he retreated. 'As I was saying. It started before we were officially boyfriend and girlfriend. Before we even knew one another.'

'Exactly when, Comrade? What was it that made you want to defy the Party and defile yourself? When did you first lose control of your senses?'

'Believe me when I say that I have asked myself this question many times over. My answers have never been wholly satisfying, but perhaps with the benefit of criticism—self-criticism they will improve. Well, there have been times when I believed this irrepressible urge, this fire in my loins, my carnal recklessness, was natural. Perhaps I was pre-programmed to start masturbating on a particular day, do it a few thousand times, and then stop. But as a committed Party member and socialist, I knew that I could not adopt such a fatalistic outlook. I had to believe the will, properly motivated and directed, has no limits. Look at Uncle Ho who was so wedded to the nation that he had no need for a wife or family of his own.'

'Get to the point, boy!' said Sister Bay. 'She wants to know when did you first jerk your bird?'

'Yes, I was getting to that. I can trace the problem, my problem, back to *Suddenly I Wanna Cry*.'

This was not the answer that I had expected.

‘But how can that be? We saw a few re-run episodes together and agreed that, while not being strictly socialist realist, the soap opera makes a positive contribution to the national spirit. We had mutual admiration for the street vendor Truc. We agreed that it was popular culture of the highest order and deserved all its accolades. How could you possibly twist something so virtuous into something so, so dirty?’

‘You’ve got me stumped too.’ Sister Bay admitted. ‘From what I remember, there’s a few bikini scenes and half a bra is flashed in the whole series. Hardly anything to get excited about nowadays.’

‘These are incisive lines of inquiry. I will do my best to address them. Let me stress, *Suddenly I Wanna Cry* itself is harmless, or at least I think it is. But, because I was not alert, it served as a Trojan horse for debauched cultural forces to infiltrate my consciousness and overrun my entire being. The first time I watched the show, my passions were stirred by messages of virtue; but by the end of the re-run season, something had changed. I started to lust after the heroine, Truc, and then the actress that played her, Tang Ha. And let me confess to you Comrade Kim Lien that after we discussed the show – its plot, production values and social outcomes – I proceeded in quiet moments to stain the cultural analysis with many strokes of my palm.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean, Comrade Tuan.’

‘I’m afraid that I do’, said the ever prescient Sister Bay.

‘Possibly, I do not understand myself. But with you and Sister Bay here to guide me, I can start by recalling the progression of events that brought me here, down to where I am now. As I said, when the show first aired, I was enraptured by it and by Truc: her independent spirit, incorruptibility and penny pinching. But somewhere along the way, I’m guessing around the 25th episode, I developed an erotic desire for Truc. The way that she flared her nostrils at injustice, the vigour with which she performed her morning backbends and the tiny triangle of exposed flesh above the waistline of her pants and between the slit in her long tunic, sparked a flame in me that all my reasoning could not extinguish. I told myself that she was good and pure, and so if I wanted to see more of her, then that too was good and pure.’

‘Where are you going with this?’ I asked.

‘Please bear with me. And know that it was with much anticipation that I awaited the release of Tang Ha’s first feature film, *Beautiful by the Centimetre*. It took all of my will power to not see it at the cinema after it was released. Somewhere deep down – and this is crazy I know – I was convinced that I had a one-on-one relationship with Tang Ha, and watching her with others in the

room would be like I was sharing her with them. I read the online reviews, all of them scathing. It was base, uncivilised and worse than pornographic. Yet this was not enough to stop me, part of me hoping that all the critics were wrong, another part fervently wanting to discover how right they were. Finally, I found a bootlegged version online. And I remember waiting for it to download with immense excitement and titillation.'

'That was a goddamn awful film', asserted Sister Bay. 'I watched the first 30 minutes confused, swore for the second 30 minutes, and then changed the channel without seeing the end.'

'Your response was spot-on, Sister. And the critics and popular reviews were right too. The amazing thing is that I agreed. The film was senseless and obscene. In online forums, Tang Ha was accused of being a no-good tart who had forgotten where she came from. Once-devoted fans proclaimed that they would never again watch anything she was in or buy anything that she promoted. One even expressed her intent to commit suicide because *Suddenly I Wanna Cry* had given her a reason to live and this film had taken that away. Of course, it was not long before Tang Ha apologised for her rash misadventure. Apparently, she had never really liked the role, but had been badgered by her agent into taking it on, and in so doing had lost touch with her true self and her fans.'

'But Comrade Tuan, this is neither interesting nor related to what you are being criticised for.'

'I don't mean to digress, Comrade Kim Lien. The point is this. Even after enduring the film and agreeing with every scathing comment, I watched *Beautiful by the Centimetre* again, taking note along the way of the most offensive and pornographic scenes. And then, with a click of the mouse, I revisited those scenes: the one from the opening credits when Tang Ha is getting dressed while a white rabbit sits on her bed; the bikini shoot in which she is arched over rocks with ocean suds rolling over her; and the infamous up-the-skirt soccer match in which she continually falls over while playing with neighbourhood ruffians. Over and over I viewed those excerpts so that even now I can trace the curvaceous line of her panties. I knew that what I was doing was depraved, but I couldn't help it. Each time, I promised that this was the last time, then just once more. Before I knew it the sun was breaking through my curtains, and the stark morning light informed me that I had not only wasted the night, but also spilled my previously untapped semen at least four times over. After meticulously cleaning the shame from my work station, I deleted the video with a decisive click.'

'Well done Brother Tuan', said Sister Bay, 'especially on the cleaning.'

'But the next night, as much as I needed sleep, I downloaded *Beautiful by the Centimetre* again and went directly to the scenes that I knew so well. Not long afterwards, I was searching through the night for more pictures of Tang Ha: Tang Ha at the Vietnam Television Awards; Tang Ha driving Vietnam's first-ever Audi A6; studying hotel management at a Singaporean University; as a lesbian lady assassin; and as a judge on Masterchef. I suppose I was compiling a personal history of sorts, but I had little interest in her past and there was no direction or purpose to my research; I was trying to get an instant fix. Many times over I deleted my internet browser history so as to cover my tracks from myself, but I always found my way back to those websites and was on the lookout for others. It was as if I was in a dream in which I could see myself the whole time, I could see that in my rapacious consumption of that young woman, I too was becoming consumed, by the insidious forces of advanced capitalism, and by my own sordid subconscious. But I could not stop. I could not break free.'

'This is progress', I said, trying to encourage him. 'I believe I am just starting to understand your malaise, Comrade Tuan. But I do not see any pictures of Tang Ha on your computer.'

'That was some time ago, Comrade. You see these images and the urges that they excite are like a drug: if you want to maintain the effect, you have to increase the dose. Nowadays I am more nostalgic about Tang Ha than aroused. Her bras and bunny rabbits don't do much for me anymore. Now it's all ...'

'You don't need to go into details, Tuan', urged Sister Bay. 'I really wish I had put the washing machine on a quick cycle because this is getting more and more screwed up.'

'Rest assured, Sister Bay and Comrade Kim Lien, never have I been drawn to anything that harms animals or children. And I'm not into violence. My depravity has boundaries, or at least I think it does. You can see from this database that I have compiled to keep track of my viewings.'

As I scanned the database I could not help but gasp and balk. There was an abundance of material from the US – *Stop or my MILF will Shoot* and *Forrest Hump* – and many references to videos made by one-time fascist powers: *Japanese Mangabang* and *Fritz and Franjo's Argentinian Escapade*.

That was when Comrade Tuan started to shake and sniffle.

'I know that your stomach is churning with disgust. No doubt you think I'm a freak. So very often, I've thought that about myself. But surely I am not alone in suffering from this malaise. Maybe there is a fifth column in all of us, constantly conspiring to take hold of our bodies and minds. I've done my best to suppress it. And I have tried to be perfectly clean in public life, perhaps in part to make up

for the filthiness of my private hours. I wish I could be pure like you, Comrade Kim Lien and Sister Bay, you who have the same face in all places and live by the same set of principles at all times.'

'Don't drag me into this', insisted Sister Bay.

'But I still don't comprehend why, if you knew what you were doing was wrong, why you didn't just stop. Cut your internet connection or something?'

'I tried, I tried, I swear to the spirits of my ancestors and all the founders of the Vietnamese Communist Party that I tried. But once this noxious culture has taken hold of you, it is not easy to break away. Particularly now that there are so many access points. Now that the smartphone and tablet are always there, awake and attentive to your every whim in an instant, with millions of colluding little pixels that can take you to anywhere that you want to go and do anything imaginable. How can our reasoned selves possibly intervene against such access, such permissiveness? Nothing can fasten down our urges as they leap from one fantastic world to another. I can't count the number of times that I have sat down to work on something that's meaningful to me and urgent for the nation, but have been lured away by those senseless little gif pics and video snippets. Five minutes of reprieve from everyday life turns so quickly into 40, and then 140, until suddenly there's no reprieve from your reprieve.'

'You are making excuses Comrade Tuan. There's no sign of effort in what you recount, only weakness.'

'But I *have* tried. Last year I decided to log my wantonness in this database. There's a separate database for each month. You can see from the graphs that I've made progress, albeit jagged. During times of stress, exams and what not, I tend to be more decadent. But overall, my perversion has clearly declined in both frequency and offensiveness, particularly since you came into my life, Comrade Kim Lien.'

And it was then that I started to fathom the extent of Comrade Tuan's condition. There were more databases. I was only seeing the tail of the beast.

'That's what you've been doing this whole time up there?' exclaimed Sister Bay. 'I should have realised from all the tissues you were using. Kim Lien is right, this has to stop. At the very least, you can do your own washing from now on.'

'As you are my witnesses, I promise that it will, I swear to 18 generations of Hung Vuong Kings. No more. We will find a better filter for my computer. Comrade Kim Lien, you can set the password and keep it from me. I'll buy a new phone,

an old phone, without high-speed data. It will be just like when I was on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, when I was losing weight and sleeping soundly. Sister Bay can sleep in my room to keep watch if need be.'

'No chance of that', she said with both her feather duster and head shaking vigorously.

'Both of you can see what I'm willing to do. I will rectify myself, become a new person. And not just because you have caught me out. Comrade Kim Lien, you have witnessed already how I have started to address my sickness. When you stormed into my room I was not using my tender palm to defile myself but rather my unforgiving fist. I have found this technique dampens my arousal and helps me to retain my energy and focus for revolutionary ends. Look here at this week's records, I have not ejaculated for over two days.'

'These are positive signs, Comrade Tuan, and bode well for your reform. They'll all be taken into account when our superiors at the People's Committee, Ho Chi Minh Scouts and Youth League review your case.'

'What do you mean, Comrade Kim Lien? We are now undertaking criticism—self-criticism. The process has been proper and thorough. Sister Bay is here to attest to that fact. I have repented, without reservation, and am beginning to see myself in a new light. What reason is there to take this any further? Why inconvenience others? Comrade, I was hoping we could go back to the way things were.'

'I agree', said Sister Bay. 'Be reasonable, Kim Lien. The boy's suffered enough. He's sorry. Let it go and I'll keep an eye on him.'

'That's very generous of you, Sister Bay, but this is only a preliminary hearing, the first informal stage in a long process. We cannot leave it here. Above all, we must elevate collective need over individual expediency. Social evils must be reported in full to the Party. How else can it register and regulate what is going on in the nation? How will others learn from Comrade Tuan's mistakes if they are not made public? How will Comrade Tuan learn? How can he control traffic when he cannot control himself?'

'I will control myself, I guarantee it. And I will be an even better Party member, more committed, more sacrificing and more proactive. I have had this condition, this weakness, for some time now and still performed my traffic duties perfectly well. For heaven's sake, Kim Lien, I was the one who taught you.'

'Everything that you have achieved to date as a Party member must be reassessed. In any case, the rules are clear: there can be no exceptions, especially for Party members. I have not been able to raise this with you both, but I have

reason to believe that my father is deeply involved in corrupt dealings with a foreign company. He too makes exceptions for himself; that's the problem: everyone wants to be the exception. Well, not anymore. Not here. Not when I'm concerned. I have noted the facts of this case and your confession which I can forward to you both for confirmation before sending them to our superiors. I will, of course, enclose as evidence all of your databases. As for your computer, I ask that you pass it on to me or possibly to your father, as he will be able to dig up your browser history from your hard drive so that we can determine whether you are telling the whole truth, particularly with respect to children and animals.'

With this Comrade Tuan became defiant. 'I've told you everything, Comrade Kim Lien. There's no need for this to go beyond this room. It would be useless, counterproductive even. Sister Bay, tell her, please tell her.'

'Okay. Okay. You don't have to worry about me. I'm never mentioning this to anyone. Even if I did say something, no one would listen. You two are the only ones who give a stuff about what I think, which is touching, I suppose, but also very odd. So listen to me Kim Lien, no one cares about what I think as a proletarian-peasant or whatever you reckon I am. And no one cares that Tuan here gives himself a polish every now and then. So just leave it be. He's not the exception. He's probably just a normal guy. Sure, you deserve better than normal. But if we all lived by your laws, Kim Lien, we'd have to turn every school into a courthouse and every other building into a prison. There'd hardly be a man left in the street. So if you want my advice, let off some steam if you have to, but the best thing to do after that is kiss and make up.'

'With respect, Sister Bay, I cannot follow your advice and still call myself a patriotic Party member. And to be frank, there's nothing for Comrade Tuan to fear, at least from the Party. The Vietnamese state does not threaten anyone and no one threatens the state. The law is there to direct and protect us, and it is a most benevolent master, even to those who flout it like Comrade Tuan. He has set his own rules for a long time now, and to what effect? Self-mastery has made him a slave, a slave to temptation. The law will rectify and liberate him. It is the only way. Remember what Uncle Ho said about criticism-self-criticism? He said that we should not be concerned with losing prestige? "Faults are like a disease", he said. "Failure to acknowledge your faults is like not taking your medicine. Failure to criticise another cadre's faults is like refraining from giving him his medicine."'

‘But Kim Lien, I thought you cared for me’, said Comrade Tuan. ‘We’re a couple, a unit. We have to look out for one another. You must realise what this would do to me? I would lose all of the respect that I have worked so hard to foster since coming here. I would be ridiculed. It would ruin my career, my entire life. How could you do this to me?’

‘I do care for you, Comrade Tuan, like no one before. But these are revolutionary times and so our personal whims cannot come before and above the needs of the Party. You’re right about how much you have progressed in terms of self-awareness, just in this last hour. Imagine what you can achieve after re-education under the guidance and support of expert cadres? You will be a new person. Whatever you risk losing, you will surely gain tenfold afterwards. And who knows, the Party in all its wisdom, may well approve our relationship once you’re reformed; in which case I’ll be waiting for you.’

‘Listen to yourself, Kim Lien!’ And suddenly Comrade Tuan was like a caged beast lashing out at its captor. ‘I opened up to you and Sister Bay. I told you all of this in confidence because I trusted you. So that you could help me. Because I thought you would understand. Do you think that anyone else would? How could the Party geriatrics possibly pass judgment on something like this? They don’t understand the pressures that we young people are under, to be new and old, left and right, to always be looking forward to our bright future while also venerating the past. They don’t understand what the internet and social media has done for us, to us, for that matter. But, if you insist on telling anyone, tell my father first. He will put a stop to your scheme, more for his sake than mine. And do you really think I should go to a re-education camp for this? I visited one of those camps on my trek to Laos and I can assure you that nothing good – new or reformed – comes out of them. You want me to waste away in the highlands with drug addicts, paedophiles, violent criminals and traitors? I haven’t harmed a soul. What’s fair or just about that?’

With some of his composure regained, Comrade Tuan asked Sister Bay to leave so that we could speak privately.

‘Listen, Kim Lien, I’ve betrayed you; I’m sorry for what I’ve done – that you found out in this way. You are proud and it hurts. And believe me that there is no stronger motivation for me to change than to see you suffering like this. But don’t betray me just so that you can have your revenge. And that’s exactly what you would be doing by reporting this business – betraying me. The choice is simple. If you do this for me, I’ll be forever grateful. My already considerable camaraderie and admiration for you will grow. And together we can achieve anything, become the Defence Minister and General Secretary, even. But if you continue down this path, I will never forgive you, and you’ll discover exactly how thin and fragile the line is between love and hate. I will turn all of my

energy to refuting your accusations and ruining your reputation, just as you seek to ruin mine. I will say that you are a jilted, crazy girlfriend and that it is you who is in need of re-education. My father will support me and even your father will not be able to protect you. I'm sorry if I sound threatening. Know that this is not my preference, and it is not my choice to make, it's yours. You say we have no choice as cadres. Maybe you're right, but we're not just comrades, we're also people, who care for one another. Or at least that's what I hope. I'm not going to pressure you – take some time to think about this – but don't just think about what's right according to the rules. Listen to your heart, or at least take it into consideration, along with what Uncle Ho would do.'

Ordinarily, as I ride the bus to the soccer fields, I am totally focused on the game I am about to play and how I want to play it. It doesn't matter whether I am surrounded by people jostling to buy tickets, bickering over seats, eager to get home for the night. Always, I am calm. I like to stand with my soccer bag secure between my legs and my feet firmly planted on the straps to protect it from thieves. The more intense and uncomfortable the setting becomes, the more conscious I am of the need to be composed. I visualise the ball coming at me from every angle and see myself scrambling and soaring to reach it. The ball lands with a thud into my padded gloves or flies into my chest, where it is immediately wrapped up. Sometimes I can only get a finger on it, but that is enough to deflect it from the goalmouth. Before the game has even begun, I anticipate the wave of relief that comes over me as the final whistle blows and I look up to see a glorious '0' beside the opposition team's name on the scoreboard. Sometimes I imagine there is no one else on my side, that I'm a team of one, the indispensable goalkeeper.

But this afternoon was out of the ordinary. This afternoon I dashed to get a seat at the back of the bus. Feeling the rupture of each stop, start and bump, I clutched on to my bag. For the entire journey I brooded over the choices forced onto me this morning by my father and then by Comrade Tuan. Self-doubt and loathing – of them and the world at large – had consumed my revolutionary spirit. So much so that when I reached the fields, I struggled to get off the bus. For the first time that I can remember, I did not want to play football, the pride and passion of my life, second only to the Party.

It was still well before kick-off when I lumbered into the change room but, because I am usually the first one there, my arrival was noted and deemed worthy of condemnation.

‘What happened to Mother Superior Goalkeeper?’ asked our flanker in her usual snide manner. ‘What did you say to us after the last training session? On and off the pitch, we have to be timely, efficient, disciplined. ‘Rust-free screws’ – that was it – ‘rust-free screws in a finely tuned machine. Who’s out of tune now, Goalkeeper?’

I apologised to her, curtly so, before making my way to my locker. Unlike other lockers that were plastered with pictures of pop stars and celebrities, mine was adorned with only three icons: the national flag, a photo of the Vietnamese team goalkeeper and a picture of the Head of the Defence Forces with his fist thumping down on the table during a maritime dispute with China. Usually these images would give me a final inspiring jolt before the game, but today I hardly noticed them. Instead I was drawn to the bareness of my locker, both inside and out. And I returned to the sour and gut-wrenching sentiments that had engulfed me on the bus. Despite everything that I had done to honour my father, Comrade Tuan and my team, no one took me seriously. For all my calls for ‘Solidarity, solidarity, more solidarity!’, I remained on the outside.

I thought of how Trung Sisters United had all but collapsed when I joined them three seasons ago. Back then, a marginal loss was a victory. The Trung Sisters were mocked as unworthy opposition, striking practice for the rest of the league. We had no uniform or logical formation on the pitch. Training was haphazard and any ferocity was directed inwards. Symptomatic of the team’s plight was that no one wanted to keep goal. Most of the team tried to avoid playing up front too because they hardly saw the ball, but anything was better than being subjected to wave after wave of merciless attack, only to be held responsible for yet another defeat.

And so I announced at a training session that I was giving up my natural and well-earned position on the left wing to become the full-time goalkeeper. This was received with general applause, but I did not take this as a vote of confidence. Some of them were simply relieved that the goalkeeping duties would no longer be rotated and others were eager to see me fail.

‘It will take time, but I am determined to act as a vanguard from the backline and show how, both as individuals and as a team, we can make ourselves anew. My aim is for Trung Sisters United to be not only competitive in this league, but dominant. I ask that you too make this your unwavering objective, not because it is easy, but rather, because it is gruelling. As Uncle Ho said, ‘Nothing is too hard; just set your mind to it, and it will surely be done.’

During that first season I dedicated my body, mind and soul to the science of goalkeeping. Staying up late into the night, I read instruction manuals and biographies, and dissected videos of all the great keepers like Schmeichel,

Seaman, Kahn and Hong Son. Before I went to bed, I visualised my goal zone as if it was the Chi Lang Pass through which China had for centuries tried to invade Vietnam only to be driven back by patriotic heroes. The midway line on the pitch was the 17th Parallel, which we were determined to transgress at all costs. And the enemy half was the Dien Bien Phu Valley into which our haughty foes had become besieged.

In my dreams, my small stature was no impediment to me rising to the heights of national and even global adulation. Heartened by the fact that goalkeepers do not peak until late in life, I fantasised that the national goalie position would soon be mine to have and that I would hold on to it forever.

In my favourite dream, I lead Vietnam to victory in the World Cup finals, becoming the first ever goalkeeper to do so with a clean sheet. The final comes down to a penalty shootout that is so finely balanced that the goalkeepers are called upon to face one another. The hulking Chinese villain – carefully chosen from a billion other candidates and then cunningly engineered for the singular task of goalkeeping – shoots first. She launches a twirling and conniving ball towards the edge of the goalmouth, where my hands are already waiting. Then it is my turn to approach the 11-metre line. After sensing that she has committed to the right, I kick the ball hard and straight. Despite her best efforts, the Chinese goalie can do little more than watch it fly into the back of the net. And then the crowd that has filled the makeshift stadium in Ba Dinh Square at the base of Uncle Ho's mausoleum rises up in unison with the nation to cheer Vietnam, the host team, and its first-ever World Cup victory. Amidst this adulation, I resist the temptation to impersonate aeroplanes or dance around the corner flag. And my teammates know not to leap on top of me. Instead, with my fist raised high, I stand like Fansipan Mountain, singular and tall, just as Ho Chi Minh had done when he declared national independence. Vietnam's time has finally come, no longer just a slayer of great powers, now a great power in its own right.

Of course my efforts and dedication did not yield immediate results, but with each match, I improved. By ignoring the extravagant boot scooting antics of strikers and concentrating on their minute hip movements, I could predict with great accuracy what they were going to do. Increasingly, I pressured my opponents into kicking the ball too early and missing the mark. Before long I was known and even feared for my aggressive defence, my propensity to move forward and attack those who sought to attack me. And, after a time, I could feel my hands expanding and mutating so that they came to perfectly fit the gloves into which the fate of our team rested.

As I improved and transformed, so did my team. They were driven first, by the satisfaction of avoiding defeat, and then by the thrill of triumphing over others. Our training sessions picked up in intensity with the vainglorious forwards eager

to test their goalscoring skills against me. My defenders united in the knowledge that they were building their walls on a firm foundation. Yet, astonishingly, I could still not develop a rapport with my teammates. There was never a ready-made place for me in huddles. And whenever we faced a set play, they resented my shouting at them to get into position. This did not bother me as I reasoned that for a team to succeed, obedience is more important than affection. And after intense consideration, it struck me that in soccer the goalkeeper is the essential outcast, that she is part of the team, but also separate from it. She wears a different uniform, lives by different rules and moves in smaller circles. When she saves everyone from falling, the most she gets is a pat on the shoulder: 'Good work, goalkeeper.' Despite putting her body on the line every time she laces up her boots and straps on her armour, the goalkeeper is almost never invited to celebrations and outings. At some stage, I decided that this suited me just fine.

There was an especially memorable moment in our second season when our opponents, the Con Dao Convicts, strategised that, while my leap was impressive, I could not come even close to reaching the crossbar. And so every Convict shot at goal was either lobbed over my head or directed into the upper edges of the goalmouth. We conceded one goal in the first 20 minutes and at half-time were fortunate not to be further behind. After the break, the Convicts came out beaming with confidence, while we had fallen back on our heels. It was clear that not only this match, but the entire season was at stake. If we lost in this manner, the message would soon spread that there was a chink in my armour and therefore a sure-fire way to beat the Trung Sisters. I had to send a different message, make it known to all that there were no heights that we could not reach and that we would do whatever it took to win.

My opportunity came when one of my defenders was caught out of position, leaving the Convicts' number nine open. On receiving the ball she sent it soaring up towards the corner of my goal with the force of a North Korean rocket. I propped back, then took a run-up and planted the front end of my boot into the lower back of one of my defenders who was loitering on the goal line. It was as close as I have ever come to flying. I soared so high that I hardly had to stretch my arms to catch the ball, and while I could have hung on to it, I decided to push the ball over the top of the goal. This meant conceding a corner, but it allowed me to hang on to the crossbar so that all could witness the indomitable grimace on my face. After daintily descending to the ground, I brushed off the protests from both the Convict forwards and my crying defender: 'Whose side do you think you're on, goalkeeper?' Evidently, she did not know the value of sacrifice.

By the end of my first season, I had been knocked unconscious three times and the Trung Sisters United finished in third last place, which was a creditable result given where we had come from. Last year we failed to reach the semi-

finals, but only barely. Particularly impressive was our performance in the last match of the regular season against the eventual champions, the Au Co Angels, who we defeated 1–0.

For us to improve further, I knew it was necessary for me to control more than just the goal line. And so I approached our manager with a detailed proposal outlining why I should take on the responsibilities of captain. As always, he was frightfully relaxed about the affair (the manager was only really doing the job because he was courting two of our midfielders). ‘Fine. As long as you sort it out yourself’, was all he said.

With his approval, I contacted the flanker, who was our existing captain, and whose father happened to work with mine. In my text message, I pointed out that she had done a reasonable job but, from my tally, had missed over a quarter of the training sessions, and so it would be best for the team if she stepped down in favour of someone who could set a better example. The flanker asserted that she had ‘seen this coup coming’, but acquiesced with, ‘Whatever your father and his Princess want, they get.’ When I offered her the vice-captaincy, she answered, ‘Never, and don’t bother asking anyone else.’ Again, this suited me, because now the red armband was mine alone.

During the off season I introduced a mandatory attendance at training and incorporated fitness, skills and formation work into every session. These sessions became progressively harder throughout the season, which led some of my sisters to protest that they needed to rest and taper off before a match if they were to perform at their peak. My response was that pacifism and weakness had no place in sport-as-war-as-life.

On the field, my plays were commonly criticised for being overly defensive, relying on disciplined ball retention and striking only at opportune moments when the enemy was fatigued and ill-focused. The flanker said that my style of football was so boring that it made the Italians look like Brazilians. But I was vindicated by success, and the realisation midway through the season that we were premiership favourites.

Our run of victories brought newfound challenges and conflicts. Most controversially, despite my team spirit, I had never sung the team song nor participated in post-goal celebrations because they were derived from Psy’s ‘Gangnam Style’. In fact, I tried to outlaw both as they reflected an affinity with cultural surrender rather than sporting triumph. But I simply could not get my teammates to comprehend this. Nor could I get them to see the virtue of singing the national anthem, ‘The Song of the Advancing Soldiers’, both before and after each game. One night, kept awake by my frustration, I got up and sent my sisters an email.

To: Trung Sisters United Division 2
CC: the Manager

Comrades,

Of late I am pleased to see that we are winning, but what concerns me as captain is our team culture, which is in many ways impoverished and feeble. It is not a winning culture. This is because it is based on the shifting and slippery stones of individual desire. Often I have witnessed your obsessions with passing fads from distant lands. Often I have overheard you profess that you are training not for the team's glory, but to trim your thighs or to firm your buttocks so that you can fill your jeans in a way that draws improper attention. This behaviour will lead to vice, not victory.

Both on and off the field, we must be motivated to achieve real victory. A real victory emerges from a real culture. This culture is close and familiar to all of us. It is the culture that has fought off Chinese imperialism for millennia. It is the culture that resisted against, and finally triumphed over, French colonialism. It is the culture that reunified the nation in 1975, curing it of Republicanism. It is the culture that acted when the rest of the world was too timid, liberating the Kampuchians from Pol Pot's murderous grip. Since 1986 it is the culture that has renovated our economy and society for a post-industrial world. Continually dynamic and yet always secure, it is the culture of a rising dragon. It is the Vietnamese Communist Party's culture, which the heroic, intellectual Truong Chinh described as 'national, scientific, and mass-based'. My sisters, I ask you, why has this eternal culture, this winning culture, this culture of patriots, gone out of fashion? And, just as important, what must we do about this?

We must identify and defeat the contemporary enemies of this winning culture. In the past century, the three enemies that were identified and defeated by the Party were illiteracy, poverty and invaders. Now the nation faces three new enemies. They have infiltrated every team in this league, ours being no exception. And it is because of the pervasiveness of these enemies that we must be vigilant and ever conscious that together, and only together, can we prevail.

The first enemy is not the blindness that comes from illiteracy, but the blindness of indifference. Too many youth are indifferent to our glorious past, indifferent to the dire challenges of today, and indifferent to our glorious collective future. They are trees without roots, duckweed floating aimlessly, not knowing which direction to take. This leads them to be callous towards themselves and everyone else. Ultimately, it leads to oblivion. Surely, you know of youth who are so indifferent to the world that they resort to mutilating themselves, purportedly in order to feel. And there are other youth who lash out at society, like the 17-year-old from Bac Giang who remorselessly slaughtered a family for their jewellery. How long before we are like those Chinese who have no qualms about

manufacturing poisonous baby formula? In times past, when our enemies were at our gates, we always had the courage to drive them away. Now that our enemies are within us, they are far more difficult to face.

The second enemy, rampant individualism, is a close cousin of the first. I know many of you think that being an individual is the same as being free. Maybe you want to be liberated from the expectations of old people, the pressures of your community or even the guidance of the state. But you should know that this sort of individualism is contrary to correct thought and proper action. It breeds anxiety and anomie, rather than independence and liberty. You must remember that liberty is not the same as license. True liberty does not give us license to squander the inheritance that our ancestors have fought and died for. It does not stand by as people do damage to others and themselves. The Party understands this and it understands that no individual or living thing can prosper in a vacuum. And so the Party is dedicated to making Vietnam 10 times more beautiful, within our lifetimes, for our benefit, and for those who come after us. It is only in this context and in this Way – the Party’s Way – that as individuals we can flourish and be free.

False idols are the third enemy that keeps us from becoming new people. I hope all of you remember Nguyen Trai’s famous assertion that Vietnam has never lacked heroes, but has also never been short of enemies. This remains true today. What has changed is that our enemies are far more familiar and attractive to us than our heroes. All of you, I know, are drawn to pop stars, models, actors, athletes and figures who have no value or status other than that based on their celebrity. I urge you to recognise that they are more deserving of caution than admiration. They are the enemy. Many of you who sat the university entrance examinations would have addressed the pressing question: ‘Deference to real cultural idols is a wondrous duty, but going mad over false idols is a national tragedy. Discuss.’ I am proud to say that I achieved perfect marks for this question (and can email to you my essay upon request). But I was disappointed to discover that many of you were offended by this question and felt as if you were being forced to lie about your deep affection for K-pop and J-pop in order to get into university.

False idols are key elements of the poisonous foreign cultures that have invaded our country. These cultures are like hallucinogens that lure and then trap young people into nightmarish states of semi-consciousness. The action films from Hong Kong crammed full of special effects; the senseless frivolity of Bollywood extravaganzas; the inane romanticism peddled by so many Korean chick flicks. They are not grounded. They have no foundation in our reality. They offer us no better knowledge of our material condition or how to improve it. Instead we are left with a yearning for greater spectacle and ever more falseness. They make us passive and compliant to foreign forces that want to keep us down and run us over.

So I want to promote a movement that starts with us, the Trung Sisters United, standing up and emphatically returning to the source. We must esteem and imitate those who are truly worthy of esteem and imitation, the idols that have made Vietnam an exemplary nation and its people so proud and strong.

If you agree with me, and I know you will, it is not enough to sit by your computers and nod your heads. We must confront falseness with truth. We must respond to this cultural invasion by going on a cultural offensive, an offensive in which every blog, tweet, SMS, like, instant message, avatar, mash up, gif, Snapchat and email is a bullet directed straight to the heart of our foes.

Most immediately, we must praise the everlasting artistry of the national anthem and reject Psy's 'Gangnam Style', which will be blown away by the next gust of wind.

For independence, freedom and happiness, The Goalkeeper.

After several more emails and an extended team meeting we formally decided to keep the Gangnam celebratory dance, but replaced the song with a modified version of, 'It is as if Uncle Ho was here on this day of great and joyous victory'. It was tolerable compromise, at least for a season or so. Out of good faith, I even learnt how to do the dance, which helped me to grow a little closer to my teammates. And so, we sang and danced our way through the regular season, finishing on top of the ladder, sweeping through the semi-final with a 3–0 win, and coming into the Grand Final against our rivals, the Au Co Angels, as raging favourites. The tragedy, of course, is that this game was scheduled for the same day that I would discover my father and Tuan's crimes. My crime relates not so much to the fact that we lost, but rather to the fact that I willed it.

My usual pre-match pep talk takes around 15 minutes, but this afternoon it boiled down to, 'Let's get this over with'. We lost the toss, which I took some satisfaction in such was my impulse for self-destruction. As I took my position in goal, it was as if I was watching the game on a big screen and had no interest in it whatsoever. The teams were unfamiliar to me and the stakes were measly. Football itself seemed utterly futile and absurd. I mulled over my father ingratiating himself to foreign businesspeople, selling hectare after hectare of my homeland, sipping champagne while overseeing peasants being forced from their farms, speaking Mandarin as if he were a Chinese agent. And I envisaged Comrade Tuan in all manner of compromising positions: wedged between Elly Tran's colossal breasts or chasing a pink cartoon cat with his zipper open and his fist rubbing his crotch.

It was fortunate in a way that for most of the first half, my goal line was not threatened. But invariably the Angels counterattacked. Their number ten delicately received a pass on her chest and brought it down to her feet. She pivoted as if about to dash out to the flank, but then turned inwards to get past my defender. The centre forward stormed down the corridor directly at me, the last line of defence. Like a startled buffalo, I started to sprint at her. Having left my goal line far too early with no eye for the ball whatsoever, the striker could have scored by simply lobbing the ball over me. In retrospect, I wish she had done so. Instead she kept coming, which allowed us to get close enough for her to see the unbridled madness in my eyes and for me to be invigorated by the scent of her fright. As it turned out, she sprayed the ball sideways; however, this was of no significance to me. Something in me had snapped. I was convinced that she wanted to do more than just score a goal in a game of soccer. She aspired to humiliate me and upset everything that I believed in. And so, with a steel-hard hip and shoulder, I barged into my enemy. She was slightly taller and broader than me, but it would not have mattered if she was the size of an elephant or as loveable as a baby bird, such was my intent to destroy.

What lingers in my mind is the sensation of feeling her ribs shudder and hearing the wind escape from her lungs, just before she flew back and fell to the ground. In the still and silent moment that followed, I had a monstrous grin on my face.

Then I heard the referee's whistle and the crowd jeering. Ten Angels were screaming. I could sense the pounding of their boots against the turf as they stormed towards me. Looking down at the wheezing striker, I noticed that I had somehow come to rest my foot on her pony tail. She caught my eye again and tried to roll away in fear, but my studs had dug into her hair. She let out a piercing screech with the air that was left in her lungs. The barrage of Angels crashed into me and forced me to the ground, threatening to stomp my body to a pulp and kick my head to the other side of the Perfume River. Throughout all of this, my teammates remained huddled together on the other side of the pitch.

When the referee finally dispersed my opponents, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a yellow card before pointing to the spot for a penalty kick. This evoked further howls of protest from the Angels, who were convinced I should have been sent off.

As I returned to the goal box the umpire whispered to me, 'What's gotten into you? You wouldn't be on the pitch if I didn't hold your father in such high regard.'

The number ten eventually recovered and insisted on taking the penalty kick. As she lined up for the shot I felt truly guilty for assaulting her. However, I was also still enraged, confused and full of self-pity.

She elected to drive the ball straight at my head and must have had been both exultant and terrified to see that the only force acting upon me was inertia. At the last millisecond I moved my head, more out of instinct than any desire for self-preservation. At the same time my gloves went up and I caught the ball. However, because there was no body mass or spirit behind this effort, the ball emerged from my grip and fell down behind me before dribbling into the goal. Again, I heard gasps of horror, this time from my team. The Angels and their supporters hooted and cheered. Their number ten sprinted past me to grab the ball and as she made her way back to the centre line sneered, 'Eat shit, bitch. That won't be the last.'

She was right. I let in three more goals before the half was over and, like the first goal, they were largely self-inflicted. In the change rooms at half-time I sat slumped against my locker. The manager and my teammates tried everything to revive me; screaming abuse at first, then feigning sympathy, asking what had caused my spiritual implosion and promising to help me. They asserted that we were on the verge of glorious victory and that we would rise up from the depths like a golden phoenix. 'Nothing is too hard', one of my defenders reminded me, 'just set your mind to it, and it'll happen!' The flanker was more honest. She whispered to me that everything I'd invested in the team would amount to nothing if we didn't win the match. 'Everyone will know that you've played the cruellest prank on us – getting our hopes up and dashing them at the last minute.'

I was not stirred by their efforts. Instead, I removed my captain's armband and flicked it to the flanker. The manager commanded me to hand over my gloves and jersey, which I did without protest. We conceded four more goals in the second half as I sat at the end of the substitute bench, enduring abuse from both my teammates and the opposition. It struck me that the people who I had tried so hard to unite around me were so eager to unite against me.

With five minutes to go, as the Angels were randomly passing the ball around, I left. I stumbled through the alleyways to a shabby café on the banks of the Perfume River, with beach chairs outside and prowling bar girls within. I nursed a black iced coffee until I was certain everyone had left the soccer fields, then made my way back to the main road for the last bus home.

As I staggered into my street, more out of habit than will, I ran my eyes over the two banners that hung over the entrance to my street: 'The citizens of Vy Da Hamlet strive to maintain cleanliness and order', and one of Ho Chi Minh's sayings, 'Love other human beings, as you would love yourself'. Some time ago I promised myself I would meditate upon the Party's banners every time I passed under them and do my best to carry them out to the fullest. My crime is that tonight I have no love for other human beings or for myself.

Overcome with both fatigue and frustration, I drag myself out of bed again and sit at my computer. I attach to the email Comrade Tuan's offending spreadsheets and enclose a link to the recording of my father and Mr Kuang's dealings in my cloud account. A cursory look at my inbox reveals several invective-filled messages from the Trung Sisters. I include one from the flanker and one from our manager as evidence of my defeatism.

The only thing left to do is to press 'send'.

I cannot do it. Not right now. Perhaps protocol demands that I present a hard copy to the authorities. Have I included all the necessary recipients? Should I cc my father and Comrade Tuan? Have I made a mistake?

So once more, I am in bed holding on to that dreadful green body pillow, wearier than before, yet unable to sleep. In frustration, I fling the pillow aside and lie flat on my back with my palms facing up, making every possible effort to relax.

It occurs to me that I still have my soccer socks on, pulled up over my shins. Using the big toe from one foot, I hook on to the top of the sock on the other leg and drag it off. It's then that I feel it; the titillation of my toenail rubbing against the inside of my leg. The sensation lingers. I do it again, this time with the underside of my toe, but find that this is not as effective. I return to using the tip of my toenail, sliding it up the inside of my calves, knees and thighs.

Before I know it, my hand is reaching into my shorts, furtively searching for a way to get back at Comrade Tuan for his thousands of sordid misadventures, my fingers are driven by the need to prove I am not, as my father believes, a naïve little girl. Unsure as to whether the Party approves of masturbation, I have previously refrained from doing it. Now, however, a wet, pleasing sensation tells me that everything is permitted. I consider whether auto-stimulation is counterproductive to sleep, but trust that my rousing apex will be followed by a slumber-inducing trough. After a promising start, I begin to lose rhythm and direction. And so I try imagining the Party General Secretary; not as he is now, but back when he was a young and slender soldier. I envisage him standing on the shores of one of the Paracel Islands, his shirt half open and pants rolled up, whistling a valiant folk song. This has no appreciable impact.

And so I turn my thoughts to a recent documentary in which a startlingly handsome young actor plays Le Van Tam, the boy martyr who doused himself with petrol before charging into a cavalcade of French legionnaires and striking a match. Visualising this heroic explosion will surely set me off. However,

I am less enthused with him than with the General Secretary. In desperation, I conjure up memories of Tuan after he had returned from Laos when he was as thin as an egret, but this only makes me feel bitter and frustrated.

I resolve to try again later. For now, I remain alert but not aroused, both hands palm-up on the mattress, totally unsatisfied.

From the city lights creeping under the window blind, I can make out the silhouette of a gecko on the ceiling in the corner of my room. It is the same gecko that has skirted around my bedroom for the last few days. I warm to it. That lizard seems like one of the most stable things in my life, as it was here with me before the ruptures of today and is more likely than any teammate, friend or relative to be with me tomorrow. Both of us are somehow stuck in the corner of a vast and uncertain universe. I wonder if our destinies are tethered. Maybe the gecko can guide me. Perhaps we can be comrades.

And so I designate the horizontal edge of my ceiling the 'People Axis', along which my loyalty to my father, Comrade Tuan and my teammates can be measured. The vertical edge is the 'Principle Axis', indicating my dedication to Party values, which are tightly bound to my own. The idea of reducing this day and my life to two dimensions and relying on a reptile to determine my fate makes me cackle like a mad scientist.

I will go wherever Comrade Gecko takes me.

As I wait for my steadfast friend to move, I encounter another unexpected turn: I find myself praying. I pray earnestly and vigorously but, as was the case with masturbating, this is my first time and so I do it with reckless abandon. Clamping my eyes shut and my palms together, I pray to my ancestors and to all the venerable heroes in Vietnam's 5,000-year history, beseeching them to look over me. Although I have always disapproved of the superstitious Cult of Ho Chi Minh, I pray to him for guidance so that I might make the right decisions, emphatically so. To Buddha I appeal for mindfulness in the hope of eliminating my desire and suffering, if not in this life, then the next. I pray to the Jade Emperor to guide me along the Way and, despite my rejection of Jesus' defeatism, I ask him for advice on how best to redeem the wrongdoings of all those around me. Above all, I pray that Comrade Gecko will make the right move and somehow show me that my life has meaning and direction.

I open my eyes to find that the lizard is still in the corner: immobile, indifferent, resisting me.

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