

## Lan and Karen

**A**t 9:00am, Lan, Howard, and I finished breakfast and left the dining room on the 2nd floor of Hotel Vissai. Lan and I were going to the Golden Smile Clinic on Kỳ Hoà Street in District 5 of Ho Chi Minh City. The previous night a new patient, from Australia, had arrived after an 11-hour flight. The woman, Mary Lynn Tefford, lived in Canberra, the Australian capital.

“She will be at my mother’s clinic at 10:00,” Lan said as we rode down in the elevator. “She phoned two weeks ago. She flew in yesterday.”

Howard, though, was going to meet his friend, Emile, an executive at Burisma, a Ukrainian oil and natural gas company, who was staying at Hotel InterContinental in District 1 of Ho Chi Minh City.

The three of us exited the lobby and waited on the sidewalk in the polluted air. Howard hailed a taxi, got into the small car, and was gone.

A few minutes later, Binh, my driver, brought his car to a halt before Lan and me. The slender, soft-spoken man smiled, revealing a gap in his top teeth, a gap which hadn’t been present the previous day. Two days prior, he had mentioned needing to see a dentist, but I assumed he was going to have a minor procedure, like a teeth cleaning or a filling. His dentist had other ideas.

## **The Edge of the City**

The first rain clouds, dark specters, appeared on the horizon as Binh wove in and out of the buses, cars, and motorbikes on Nguyễn Văn Trỗi Street, the main road between the airport and the center of the city in District 1. By now, though, the daily changes in the weather were familiar.

Binh turned right on Công Ty Cp Bằng Hữu Quốc Tế-Cửa Hàng Số Street and then merged onto Trần Huy Liệu Street. As Binh drove, he periodically looked into the rear-view mirror and stared at Lan and me sitting in the back seat. He wanted to listen to the story about Mary, the new client from Australia.

“She’s 42 years old,” Lan said. “She’s re-married. She wants to have a child with her new husband in Canberra.”

Binh looked out the window and waved to a man on a motorbike, who waved back at him, shouting some words which were lost in the noise of the traffic.

“Mary doesn’t want to have surgery,” Lan confessed. “She wants to avoid any cutting with scalpels and a long recuperation from the trauma of surgery.”

Binh soon halted the car in an alley between Lương Nhữ Học and Triệu Quang Phục Streets. The area was popular with people looking for natural or herbal healers and for buying exotic and sometimes very expensive medicines.

## **Golden Smile Clinic**

When Lan and I arrived at the Golden Smile Clinic, we saw the same clerk who had greeted us two days before. She was 25 years old, but looked 16, and she wore the

same white pressed blouse, skirt, and stiletto heels she had worn then. The clerk passed through a door at the back of the clinic, and we followed her into a narrow yard.

There we saw a garden with an impressive collection of plants, not only sprouting from the ground but also growing in pots hanging from a wooden structure with curls drooping onto the ground. The clerk pruned several leaves off a tall vine with white and pink flowers, a pink-striped trumpet lily.

"We grow them for our clients," a woman's voice coming from behind me said. I turned and saw Lan's mother. She smiled at me.

The clerk then cut off a Vietnamese coriander sprout and gave it to Lan's mother. The clerk disappeared back into the clinic again.

The mother spoke to me. "Western medicine can help only so much in the most severe cases. I know it is the same in your country, even though you have many big hospitals and expensive clinics."

The clerk, who re-appeared suddenly with a surprised look on her face, said a few words in Vietnamese to Lan and her mother, who stood next to each other a few feet from me.

"Mary has arrived," Lan said, turning to me. "You can stay in the garden, if you like. Just relax until Mary leaves."

Lan and her mother went inside.

"Some water?" asked the clerk, whose name was Tran. "Coconut milk?" I shook my head without thinking.

I looked at my iPhone and saw a message from Karen, who was helping me collect data for a research project about literacy. She asked if I would meet her at the house of her friend, Emily, and walk with her to the school at SEAMEO.

Lan and her mother didn't return to the garden as Tran led me from plant to plant in the yard, describing each one and its uses, including the *tần dày lá*, or *plectranthus amboinicus*, for respiratory tract disorders; the *sả hoa hồng*, or *palmarosa*, for skin maladies; and the *rau má*, or *centella asiatica*, for blood circulation.

I went into the clinic again and saw Lan and her mother with Mary.

The Australian woman, who had short, blond hair and wore a blue polo shirt, tennis shorts, and Adidas shoes, was drinking a green liquid from a painted glass. The woman looked like she was 25, not 42, years old; she looked muscular and appeared athletic and well coordinated.

“My goal is to reduce the size of the tumor so that I can get pregnant again,” Mary said to me after shaking my hand. “The tumor is benign, but I want to eliminate it.” She stopped. She seemed distracted. “My new husband has no children,” Mary confided. “He wants a child.”

A jeep pulled up outside.

“I have to leave,” Mary added, turning toward the door. “I'll see you again.”

### **In the Heart of the City**

I told Lan that I had to go to District 1 and collect a folder of statistics on bilingual students in English and Vietnamese. Lan looked at me, disappointed. Her mother

frowned. Then I thought of a counter measure. I asked Lan if she could meet me for dinner at the rooftop bar of the Rex Hotel at 7:30.

Lan’s mother nodded, as if giving her daughter permission. Karen had said to me earlier that morning that Duy planned to take her to the Rex at 8:00. Lan agreed to meet me. I wanted Karen and Lan to have an opportunity to talk. Although they were my two best friends in Vietnam, I suspected that they would soon hate each other or, more realistically, that they already did. I wanted to introduce them formally before matters got worse or, perhaps, unbearable.

At noon, dark clouds gathered overhead as Binh brought his taxi to a stop on Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai Street. A door opened on the ground floor of the three-story house, and Karen appeared in the doorway. “Emily is here,” she said. “I’m going to take her to SEAMEO when I go back for my afternoon class. You can come with us to the school. I have the folder ready for you in my classroom.”

I stepped inside. The smell of a recently cooked meal was obvious. “Emily wants an extra teaching job,” Karen said to me, as we entered the kitchen. “But do you really need this job?” Karen said to Emily, who had just entered the room from another door.

“Yes,” Emily replied. “I can’t take any money from my mother in Texas right now. She opposes my relationship with Cao. I need the extra cash.”

Karen said, “Do you think that Cao will sacrifice his career in the army?” Cao was a major in the Vietnamese army and rising fast in the Communist Party.

“Why would he lie to me?” Emily commented. I could think of at least ten good reasons. I thought Karen could, too.

## **SEAMEO School**

Because Karen had to be back at the school at 1:30pm, I walked with her and Emily as they argued. From Lê Thánh Tôn Street, we entered the courtyard of the school, a property which once housed CIA headquarters. Emily stopped. I felt my iPhone vibrate in my back pocket. When I looked at the phone, I saw a text message from Howard, who reminded me about our meeting with Emile and Natasha, Emile’s fiancée. Emile wanted Howard to help Natasha look for a house to rent. Howard wanted me to go with him. The plan was to meet at Hotel InterContinental, where Emile and Natasha were staying, at 2:30 that afternoon.

Emily turned to Karen. “I appreciate your introducing me to the administrators here,” she said, “but I don’t understand your attitude toward Cao. I know you had a bad break-up recently.” Karen shook her head. “I feel bad for what happened to you,” Emily continued. She was referring to Karen’s recent affair with a security guard during which he had fathered secretly a child with another woman. Karen didn’t reply. “Although Vietnamese men have a reputation for promiscuity,” Emily said, “I’m not concerned. I know Cao loves me. My situation is different.”

“What Cao says now and what he says next month very likely will be different,” Karen replied with a scowl on her face.

“Let’s go and see the director,” Emily replied, ending the conversation.

## **Inside a Stretch Limousine**

After walking the short distance from SEAMEO to the Hotel InterContinental at 2:00pm, I stopped under a tree on Hai Bà Trưng Street across from the hotel in a light rain.

A black stretch Mercedes stopped in front of me. Although the driver, a Vietnamese man in his 20s, could have been anyone, I thought I recognized the big car. When the window in the back of the car rolled down, I recognized Howard in the dark interior. The car, I knew, belonged to Howard’s friend, Emile.

I assumed that Emile’s girlfriend, Natasha, was with Howard in the car. I remembered that Natasha had flown in from Moscow, where she lived most of the year, three days before. Probably Howard and Natasha were on their way to look at properties in the tony districts of the city. Emile had asked Howard, who was a long-time friend from Pittsburgh—part of a large Jewish community in that city—to accompany Natasha in her quest.

But I thought Emile wanted Howard present primarily to help Emile hide his new relationship with a young Vietnamese woman, named Ngoc, a financial analyst who worked for Emile. Howard had become, basically, a shield. I had tried to warn Howard that he was entering a trap, but he wouldn’t listen to me. He was unrealistic. Natasha’s step-father, Dmitri, was the CEO of Burisma. Dmitri often came into the company’s new offices in downtown Ho Chi Minh City when Emile and Ngoc were sitting together. I knew Dmitri would punish Emile, and probably Howard also, when Natasha found out about Ngoc and issued an ultimatum.

“Good afternoon,” Howard said, opening the door. “Why don’t you come in out of the rain and relax for a moment?”

Howard slid to the opposite side of the car, and, while closing the door, I sat where he had been sitting. Phi, a Vietnamese man in his early 30s who was a real-estate agent, sat beside Natasha, facing me. Natasha was facing Howard. The window

next to me went up again, and the big car started to move quietly, as if it had a mind of its own. While the air cooled my face and arms, the blue light overhead made me relax and forget about my encounter with Karen and Emily.

“Howard thinks he knows the housing market in Ho Chi Minh City better than I do,” Phi remarked. He looked at me. “How long has Howard been here? A month? It’s impossible. Crazy.”

Natasha glanced at me. “Although Howard knows the market in the States,” she replied, hesitating and calling attention to her Slavic accent, “how he might or might not be able to find a house for me in Ho Chi Minh City is not important. I wanted to have Phi, a local agent, helping me as well.” She ran a hand through her hair, looking at me, expecting a reply.

Natasha, in her 30s, had high cheek bones, full lips highlighted with a pinkish gloss, and long dark hair. She looked more than exotic. She seemed temperamental, used to getting her way. She focused everyone’s attention on her without trying.

Howard also was staring at me, expecting me to defend him, but I glanced at Natasha and decided I should refrain. The situation was complicated. I could have said many things, but I said nothing.

Natasha preferred a villa in the An Phu neighborhood, an exclusive area, located in District 2, but she hadn’t bothered to tell any of us, or even Emile himself, what she expected. Anyway, I knew that she had her own money and did what she wanted when she felt like it.

Emile, I suspected, was afraid of Natasha. I knew Howard was.



Howard picked up some papers lying next to him on the seat. “From the listing for the property Phi has selected,” Howard said, “I don’t know why we should even bother driving out to it and viewing it.” He pointed to the listing. “It’s written in English. I have pictures in color, too.” He looked up at Natasha. “I know what the place has to offer.”

Natasha, dressed in shorts with a see-through shift covering her legs and her upper body, placed a hand on Phi’s arm. “We’re going to see the place you’ve selected,” she remarked. “Don’t worry about it or worry about what Howard says or worry about what Emile might have told anyone. It’s my decision.”

I noticed at that moment Natasha wore a gold chain around her neck with a gold medallion suspended between her breasts. The medallion swung slowly, from one side to the other, reflecting the light.

Howard looked out the window of the Mercedes, trying to focus everyone’s attention on him. “What street is this?” he said. He seemed upset.

I wanted Howard to come to his senses, though, and forget about helping Natasha. I realized she was a powerful woman skilled at controlling people.

### **Bar at the Hotel InterContinental**

It was 4:00 in the afternoon. The crowd at the Hotel InterContinental’s ground-floor bar, called Purple Jade, occupied all of the tables.

A group of foreigners—four middle-aged men—sat at one of the tables. The men spoke with stilted English accents.

Natasha, Howard, Phi, and I sat at a separate table next to the four middle-aged Englishmen. They had been gambling at a casino, called the Palazzo Club, a couple of

blocks away. Three of them were discussing what they had lost. The fourth bragged about what he had won.

“I told you,” Howard said, looking at Phi, “the master bathroom has to connect to the master bedroom. And, as you will recall, in the last place we visited, it did not.”

Howard drank some wine from his glass. “Also,” he pointed out, “you must keep in mind that Natasha has a maid and a hairdresser. They go with her.”

We had walked through a villa with 12 bedrooms, renting for \$20,000 a month. Natasha had followed Phi through all of the empty rooms and been impressed with the lay-out of the large house.

“The place was beautiful, but it was not for me,” Natasha explained. “We’ll look at two more places tomorrow if I have time.”

Howard drank some more wine. He looked at me and then at Natasha. “Don’t feel like you have to settle,” Howard said. “Phi has to find something you actually want.”

“That’s the problem,” Natasha said. She smiled. “I don’t know actually what I want.” She looked at the Englishmen, almost dismissively.

Natasha stood up from the table. Her see-through shift seemed to get caught on her chair. “I’m going upstairs,” she announced. She jerked the shift away from the chair. I thought she was going to rip it off her body as well.

Natasha’s bare thigh brushed my arm as she passed between the tables.

The men from Great Britain watched Natasha. They wanted to question us about her, but they didn’t.

They were silent for the first time.

### **Driving in the Rain with Binh**

Under a mulberry tree on Hai Bà Trưng Street across from the entrance to Hotel InterContinental, I waited for Binh to arrive in his car and take me back to Hotel Vissai. The rain came down in sheets. Howard had borrowed a large umbrella for me from the concierge, but still I was getting thoroughly soaked.

In the taxi, Binh practiced his English. He paid no attention to me. He had his radio on. My thoughts turned to Karen, who now showed an interest in a relationship with Duy. Or, at least, she acted as if she no longer opposed one.

Binh pulled up in front of Hotel Vissai. I asked him to pick me up in one hour.

After showering, dressing, and sending e-mail messages to colleagues in the States, I found myself back in the taxi with Binh. It was still raining. Binh was talking to me in English. Once again, I paid no attention to him. I was thinking about Lan.

Approaching the Rex Hotel on Nguyễn Huệ Street in District 1, in the heart of Ho Chi Minh City, I saw that it was brightly lit in the darkness. Binh had stopped the car and turned to me. “Are you going to meet the American woman or the Vietnamese?” he said.

“Both,” I replied, getting out of the car. “It’s probably a bad idea.”

Binh smiled, revealing the gap in his top teeth.

### **Rooftop of the Rex Hotel**

Under a transparent awning in the rooftop restaurant, a cool breeze blew from the nearby muddy Saigon River and from nearly empty streets. I took a sip of Malbec, apparently imported from Argentina, and set the glass down. I didn’t care for the wine. I

perched uncomfortably on a barstool near one end of the room where I had a clear view of the elevator and of people arriving. It was 7:30. The rain had stopped.

A couple emerged from the elevator. At first, I didn't recognize Karen, who, wearing makeup and high heels, looked 10 years older than usual. She was taller than Duy. Even for a Vietnamese man, he was short. The maître d', wearing a black and orange uniform, led the two of them to a table along the railing at the front of the restaurant, where they had a view of the park below. They didn't see me.

When the musicians started playing, I turned around to listen and, a minute later, I felt Lan beside me, touching my arm. “Is that wine for me?” she asked. She knew it wasn't, but she started to drink it anyway. She finished the glass.

The music was loud; the singer, with long, black hair, was Filipina, but she sounded American when she took the microphone. “I know the song. It's by the Eagles,” I said. “I can't remember its name.”

Lan laughed. “The name of the song is ‘Take It Easy,’” she replied. “Glenn Frey of the Eagles wrote it about a small town, called Winslow, Arizona, in the U.S. Do you know it? I hum parts of the song sometimes.”

### **Ho Chi Minh's Statue**

“I like your dress,” I said to Karen. Lan nodded. I knew, though, Lan wasn't agreeing with me, only acting as if she did. The four of us sat next to the railing on the rooftop and looked down into the adjacent park. I focused on a bronze statue of Ho Chi Minh, a symbol, in the middle of the park, set off by beds of azaleas.

I couldn't keep my mind on Lan and Karen. I had hoped Lan would like Karen. Now I knew any friendship was impossible. Lan was jealous. I felt depressed. I could see Lan's dislike of Karen was unmistakable and wouldn't go away. Karen's argument with her friend, Emily, earlier in the day and Emile and Howard's impending doom were omens, not accidents. Down below, the statue of Ho Chi Minh, wet from rain, glistened in the night, reflecting an array of colors from neon signs on buildings around the park. I felt adrift, outside myself or history. Only the city was real.