

Khuê Pham

Brothers and Ghosts

[Wo auch immer ihr seid]

Outline + Sample Translation



Literary Fiction

btb

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She is 30 years old and her name is Kiều, like the girl in the most famous work of Vietnamese literature. But she prefers to go by "Kim" because it's easier in Berlin. At the end of the 1960s, her parents had come to Germany from Saigon. She often wished for a family that didn't have to become German first, but simply was. The loss of her Vietnamese roots has never bothered her. On the contrary. Until she receives a message. On Facebook. From her uncle, who has been living in California since he fled.

The whole family is supposed to meet for the reading of Kiều's grandmother's will. Kiều does not know these people. To her, the uncles and aunts are as unreal as the spirits of departed ancestors for whom her parents light a few incense sticks on Vietnamese New Year. It becomes a journey full of revelations – about her family, her origins and about herself.

"A groundbreaking work in German literature, Pham's novel marks a seminal accomplishment that tells the dignified, thorough, and epic story of a Vietnamese family through clear, gem-like sentences and unflinching observations. With Pham's vision, nothing is left unturned and all things are salvaged and lost at once. A courageous and bold achievement by a bright new voice." *Ocean Vuong*

Khuê Pham is an award-winning Vietnamese-German writer. A graduate from the LSE, she has contributed to the *Guardian* and before becoming an editor at the renowned German weekly *Die ZEIT*. Interested in pop culture and politics, she has interviewed Anna Wintour, but has also co-written an investigation into the Essex lorry deaths, that earned her the nomination for Germany's version of the Pulitzer Prize. In 2012, she co-wrote a non-fiction book about second generation immigrants in Germany. In 2021, she published her first novel *Brothers and Ghosts*, which is inspired by the story of her Vietnamese family. It was recommended by the international jury of New Books in German in their fall '21 selection, and was chosen for a highly coveted book presentation at this year's Berlinale film festival. More at khuepham.de/English

OUTLINE

Thirty-year-old Kiêu is named after the heroine of Vietnam's most famous work of literature, 'The Tale of Kieu'. But she prefers to call herself Kim in order to make it easy for her German friends. Living in Berlin, she works as a food writer for 'Monocle' magazine, and her boyfriend Dorian is a free-spirited barman who shares her love for orange wine and wasabi butter. She has little interest in either her Vietnamese roots or her extended family. When, at Christmas, she hears that her grandmother in California has died, she's unmoved; they haven't spoken to their US relatives for years. Now her father has to fly to California, because his mother has left him something in her will. 'Why don't you come along?' he asks his daughter.

In flashbacks, we learn how the Vietnam War tore the family apart half a century earlier. Minh, Kiêu's father, grew up in Saigon, the oldest son of a wealthy family. In 1968, his parents send him to Berlin to study medicine, where he gets caught up in the student movement and switches his political allegiance: while his family in Vietnam fears nothing more than a Communist victory, he takes to the streets in support of Ho Chi Minh. Far away from home, he doesn't know that his father is interned in a re-education camp after the war, or that his younger brother Son is risking his life to flee the country. It's only when Minh visits Vietnam in 1980 that he realises how disappointed his mother is in him: when he announces his intention to return after qualifying as a doctor, she rebuffs him. When he offers to get a visa for Son to join him in Germany, she turns him down.

Kiêu has no idea about any of this, as she reluctantly accompanies her parents to California and discovers to her dismay that she's pregnant with Dorian's child. Her relatives live in Little Saigon, a world where everyone speaks Vietnamese and where there's a restaurant catering for every Vietnamese specialty. 'Who would I be, if I'd grown up here?' she asks herself. Her parents raised her in a strictly German neighbourhood, and she barely speaks their language; while her relatives tell her over dinner that it's high time she had children, she sits in silence.

On the last day, they open the letter that her grandmother included in her will: in it, she tells them that she left her husband behind in the re-education camp in order to emigrate to the US with her children. Hoping to provide them with a better life, she didn't want to burden them with the truth. For decades, she told them that he had died in the camp. They're all deeply shocked by the revelation, but Kiêu senses that she's finally beginning to understand her family's history. A few hours later, as she's queuing at the boarding gate to return to her life in Berlin, she changes her mind and decides to stay in Little Saigon.

Sample Translation

by Imogen Taylor

KIỀU

Let me start this story with a confession: I can't pronounce my own name.

For as far back as I can remember, I have felt uncomfortable introducing myself to people. If they were German, they couldn't make sense of the melodic sounds. If they were Vietnamese, they had trouble with my harsh accent. Germans dodged the problem by not addressing me by name. Vietnamese people asked, 'How do you spell that?'

Once someone said, 'Are you sure about that?'

I was a child when I first attempted to deal with the problem. When we went to the department store, I would head for the toy section and look for my name on the personalized pencils. When we went to the DIY store, I set my hopes on the long, colourful key rings. If I found my name, I said to myself, it would be proof that there was nothing wrong with me. I sifted through hundreds of pencils and key rings. I found 'Katrin', 'Kristina' and once—my heart skipped a beat—'Kira'.

But there was no 'Kiều'.

'Kiều' existed only in my family's world and in the title of a book that stood on my father's shelves in the cellar: *Truyện Kiều, The Tale of Kiều*. A work that is as important to Vietnamese literature as *The Sorrows of Young Werther* to the German canon.

I couldn't read it, of course.

Whenever my father decided to clean up the house, he pulled out the book and said, 'Did you know that you're named after a famous young woman? Every schoolchild in Vietnam has read this book. You're known all over the country.'

I believed everything my father told me when I was little, so why should that be any different. I imagined walking through Vietnam and being approached by all kinds of people. I would constantly have to keep introducing myself—and each time I would have to say my name. How embarrassing.

When I was sixteen, I changed my name because I thought an easier one would improve my chances of getting accepted in Jeanette's clique. When I was twenty, I had my passport modified, and, for the first time, I felt power over my destiny.

For ten years I have been a different person. Germans call me 'Kimm'; Vietnamese people, 'Keem'. It isn't perfect, but it's easy. Shedding my past never bothered me—really it didn't.

Then I got that message.

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The message popped up on Facebook and was written in English. Someone calling himself Sơn Sài Gòn had contacted me.

Is this you, Kiều? There's something I need to tell you and your father!

There aren't many people who know my real name; beyond my large, sprawling family there are few who hold that information. On my mother's side there is a noisy Vietnamese branch with lots of children. Whenever any of them send photos, I am amazed at the number of new cousins whose names I can never remember, although—or perhaps *because*—they consist of only two letters each. The only person I can recall on my father's side is a deaf aunt. As far as I know, his brothers and sisters fled Vietnam after the war and ended up in California. Maybe they were boat people, maybe they weren't.

Then there's a great-aunt in the UK, who got rich acting as lawyer to the cannabis mafia, and a cousin by marriage, a poet, who was flown out of Vietnam to Canada after the war by the PEN club. I also have a young cousin in Paris who performed in that tacky music show that my parents love to sing karaoke to: *Paris by Night*.

I only know these people from hearsay. To me, they are as unreal as the spirits of the dead ancestors that I burn incense for on Vietnamese new year. Once a year they blow into my life, only to vanish again like smoke.

So who is Sơn?

His Facebook photo shows a man with bushy eyebrows and a straight nose that reminds me of my father's. His eyes are unusually round, so that, in spite of his wrinkles, he looks like a little boy. According to his profile, he lives in Westminister, California and runs an import-export business called 'Made in America.' He must be my father's younger brother, the one who was so bad at school but so good at cards.

I try to remember my father's family, the way you try to remember entries in a history book. I met them once fifteen years ago, when one of our visits to Vietnam happened to coincide with one of theirs. I don't know why we never visited them in California. When I asked my mother if there had been some kind of falling out, she paused for a moment and then shook her head.

'Actually,' she said, dragging the word out strangely, 'everything's fine. But Dad's family are difficult. It's best if we get on with our lives and let them get on with theirs. We send them money every now and then, there's no need to visit them.'

Then everything was hush-hush again and I didn't dare ask any more questions.

There's something I need to tell you!

Why is he bothering me?

I shut my laptop, ready to plunge back into everyday life in Berlin—a life that is organized, German and free of international family issues. I haven't spoken to my uncle for fifteen years; it can hardly matter if I don't reply immediately—or, indeed, at all.

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Two weeks later I return to the pale-blue house where my two siblings and I grew up. It's Christmas and as usual this puts me in a strange mood. Going back home means returning to that childhood sense of being out of place. My parents learned to celebrate Christmas the way they learned German grammar, going through the motions in order to belong. The tree in the sitting room is decorated with a cuddly Santa, hand-painted wooden figures, glittery baubles and two strings of fairy lights in different colours. All that's missing is the fake snow.

I sit down at the old piano and play Bach's C-minor prelude from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. The hammering notes merge with the clattering sounds coming from the kitchen, where my mother, as always, is busy with her pots and pans. I don't remember how many times I sat on this black stool in tears, arguing with her over piano lessons. But every single time, I wished that I could grow up in a family that didn't have to become German, but already was.

The skiing gear in the cellar, the BMWs in the garage, the framed family portraits taken in Ibiza, Paris and Hålong Bay—all these are illustrations to a story that everyone loved to tell. *Just look at that family. Even though they're immigrants they made it in life.* It always stung me when 'the Germans' (as we called them, like some distant, foreign people) complimented

us on my father's career, my mother's 'hardworking' nature, or the 'excellent German' spoken by my siblings and me. As the pride spread across my parents' faces, I would feel a stab of resentment.

I hit an off chord and stop playing, my fingers resting on the wrong keys. When the sounds in the kitchen die down, I close the piano lid. On the wall above me is a black-and-white photo that my father took decades ago in Saigon just before he left to study in Germany. It shows my grandmother, sitting slender and graceful in the back of a cab. Her hair is pinned to the side in curls; her Vietnamese silk dress, the *áo dài*, is embroidered with gold flowers. She is smiling broadly into the camera, but there is a melancholy look in her wide eyes.

My father once told me that my face reminds me of hers. It must be from her that I got the high forehead that I hide with different styles of fringe. I'm not quite as thin as her, a little taller perhaps, and of course I never wear an *áo dài*, but tend to dress in black trousers and monochrome tops. I'm horribly short-sighted, but I find there's something nerdy about Asians in glasses, so I always wear contact lenses. On my last visit to Vietnam, a lot of people took me for a foreigner and I have to admit I was pleased.

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When darkness falls through the floor-length windows, my sister, my brother and I sit down at the dining table which, in honour of the occasion, my mother has laid with the heavy Rosenthal porcelain usually reserved for German guests. She has even splashed out on a white silk tablecloth from Berlin's posh department store KaDeWe, though she rarely goes there and only buys items on sale. She has lived in Germany for decades, but never lost the Vietnamese habit of saving wherever she can. As a child she was very poor and even now, as an adult, she is unable to shake the sense of being hard up. Neither the BMWs nor the big house can change that.

'A hundred euros! I was really quite torn.' She runs a hand tenderly over the shimmering cloth. 'I thought one of you could inherit it.'

This evening's meal was the subject of many weeks' discussion, but we eventually decided on lobster, just as we had in the three previous years. None of us likes seafood, but lobster is festive and doesn't taste too fishy; once a year, we treat ourselves. There are five, gleaming on a platter, bright red and innocent. My father avails himself of a pair of garden

pliers that he bought as a makeshift solution the time before last and found so handy that he has used them ever since.

The phone rings in the bedroom.

‘Don’t get up,’ my mother says, rising from her chair to serve the salad. Her eyes flash with an anger I know so well from my teenage fights with her—nothing infuriates her more than those who dare to disturb the sacredness of a family meal.

The ringing stops and then, after a brief pause, starts again.

‘Incredible,’ my mother says, stabbing at the salad with her fork. My father, showing his usual solidarity, cuts a pincer off his lobster.

Silence, then it rings again.

I jump up from my chair. It might be an emergency. Or it might be my old schoolfriend Thomas, who is oblivious to family rituals and public holidays. I dash to the phone, the way I used to as a teenager to prevent my mother from getting there first and telling him off.

‘Who is this?’ I sound rude. I *want* to sound rude.

An unfamiliar male voice replies, asking in Vietnamese who is speaking.

‘It’s Kim,’ I say. I haven’t spoken a word of Vietnamese since our last holiday in Vietnam five years ago, and I feel annoyed at having to practice it on this stranger.

‘Who?’

Perhaps it’s one of my relatives; he clearly doesn’t know my German name. I try again.

‘It’s Kiều.’ I speak a little louder and drag out the vowel.

‘I still haven’t caught the name. Who?’

‘Kiều,’ I repeat. ‘Minh’s daughter.’

‘Oh, *Kiêu*! Why didn’t you say so?’

We have only been talking for thirty seconds and already I’ve been dragged to the darkest chamber of my soul. I see myself on my last visit to Saigon, stammering to make myself understood. For years I had locked the memory away—now I know why.

Maybe I should just hang up.

‘This is your Uncle Sơn from California,’ the man at the other end of the line says. ‘I tried to get hold of you on Facebook, but you probably didn’t see my message.’

He pauses, as if he finds it hard to talk. Not knowing whether to apologize, I say nothing. There’s a static noise in the line. The connection is lousy.

‘It’s about your grandmother,’ he says eventually. ‘She’s dying. I need to speak to your dad.’

In another situation—another language—I would have said something at this point. Something along the lines of: ‘I wish I’d known her better. Now it’s too late.’

But since I am not even capable of conveying my own name, I only manage to mumble, ‘OK,’ and cover the mouthpiece with my hand to call for my father.

Your grandmother is dying. So that was what Uncle Sơn wanted to tell us. I feel guilty for not answering his message; how arrogant of me to assume that he was pestering me when, in fact, he had serious family news. I fetch my phone, drop back onto my chair, and sit there thumbing it, although I’m usually the first to protest when people get their phones out at the table.

The photos that Uncle Sơn has posted on Facebook over the last months tell the story of a slow decline. There are dozens of pictures of my grandmother and with each series her body seems to grow more diminutive. I had never realised to what extent a person can shrink; now I see it before me, on the internet. Dark patches spread like puddles over her skin. Her hair grows wirier, her eyes dimmer. The other people’s faces change too. In the early photos, my grandmother is surrounded by bravely smiling relatives; by the end, their faces look deflated, as if the illness were stealing not only my grandmother’s life, but also my family’s hope.

I study the pictures with the detachment of someone watching a movie in black and white. The suffering seems to be taking place very far away. The photos are as sad as they are unreal to me. California is nine time zones and a world away. The things happening there touch neither my life nor—I’m just being honest here—my heart.

My father returns with a bottle of red wine. His thick, black hair is shorn short on the back and sides, parted and combed to the right over his forehead. It’s one of those haircuts Asian men of his generation just seem to like. When I look at photos of the Chinese National Congress, I sometimes get the impression that a single man has been cloned a hundred times on Photoshop—and every time, I half expect to find my father staring out at me from their ranks, even though he is not a Chinese politician, but a Vietnamese heart surgeon who is greeted with ‘Hello, Professor, nice seeing you here’ by fellow concertgoers in the Philharmonie.

The wine in his hand is an expensive Bordeaux, probably a present from one of his patients.

‘How did it go?’ I try to sound casual.

He looks at me over the top of his gold-framed glasses.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t pretend you don’t know. What did he say about Grandma?’

I hold out my glass to him. Focusing intently, he tips the bottle and slowly pours the wine. The splashing of the liquid only makes the silence louder.

‘He said she’s been on artificial respiration for two weeks. Her kidneys have failed and her circulation is gone. The doctors want to know whether to keep her on life support or not. Sơn was calling to ask for medical advice.’

He speaks matter-of-factly, as if he were briefing one of his patients on a forthcoming operation.

‘I’m afraid there’s not much more to be done for a woman of her age. She’s had Alzheimer’s for five years and had to be taken to hospital because of severe pneumonia. Now her immune system has collapsed.’

My father has always been rational. Even when his oldest friend got cancer (and survived) he never showed his feelings. All my life I have told myself that this hard-headedness is actually quite a useful professional deformation. Still, it surprises me to see him acting the same way now that his own mother is dying.

‘What do your brothers and sisters say?’ I ask.

My father shrugs.

‘Sơn sounded quite upset. They’re all there with her in the hospital, making each other nervous. They don’t know how to deal with the situation; everyone’s very emotional. They argued for a whole hour before they rang us.’

He raises his glass to his lips, but puts it down without drinking.

‘It’s just like the old days.’

He almost seems more troubled by his siblings’ squabbling than by the question of whether or not to keep his mother on life support. Perhaps his stoicism is his way of dealing with things. He is the first-born son, after all. His gaze wanders to the photo of his mother in her silk dress and rests there for a moment.

‘What did you advise them?’ my brother Tuấn asks. He is studying medicine and plans to be a doctor too.

‘I told them to switch it off,’ my father replies.

‘Really?’ My brother’s face widens with surprise. ‘Are you sure you want to let your own mother die?’

‘Come on, Tuấn, you’re a medic. I spoke to the doctor just now and he told me about her condition. Her chance of survival is close to zero. It’s better to terminate her therapy than to prolong her suffering. Sometimes you just have to make tough decisions.’

‘And sometimes people get emotional about family,’ my sister Lan says. She works as an event manager in Munich and probably has the best people skills of the three of us. ‘When are they going to turn the machine off?’

‘Now.’

‘You mean she’s dying as we speak?’

‘Yes.’

My father shifts his chair back a little and, from his place at the head of the table, he looks calmly at each of us in turn. His face has assumed the colour of the lobster—probably because of his Asian enzyme deficiency, but possibly for some other reason. He clears his throat, as if he were about to make a speech, but says nothing.

We pick at our lobsters in silence. It is strange to think that on the other side of the world someone is dying, without whom none of us would be here.

What do you do in a situation like that?

What do you *feel* in a situation like that?

I try to muster up some kind of emotion, but I can’t; there’s nothing there. No grief, no shock and certainly no urge to talk about a woman I only met once in my life. A few months ago, my old Polish neighbour died, a lovely woman who sometimes brought me cake. The thought that I would never bump into her in the hallway again brought tears to my eyes. Her death brought disorder to my day-to-day life, but my grandmother’s death changes nothing.

I realise that I am thirsty, reach across the table for the bottle of water and knock it over. The white silk tablecloth is soaked.

‘Oh, Kiềuuu! Why do you always have to spoil everything?’

My mother jumps up and hurries into the kitchen to fetch a towel. The accident has cut into the oppressive silence, the emotional invasion of our family dinner. My mother rubs at the wet patch; she works it so hard that the tablecloth rucks and tears.

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(...)

In the middle of the night I am suddenly wide awake. Light is shining through the white fabric of the blind and floating through the room. I hear a hammering sound and realise that it's my heart. Although it is cold, I am sweating as if I'd run a marathon. My alarm clock says 4:37; beside me, calm and steady, Dorian's body rises and falls. As always, after an argument, we smoked weed until the problem was lost in a warm fug and then collapsed into soothing conciliatory sex.

Now I feel dark, as if someone had switched off the light inside me. I get up and shuffle into the kitchen. I open the fridge, expecting nothing special, but still feel disappointed. A bottle of Sancerre, a box of eggs, a piece of yellow-looking broccoli. Nothing I can stuff myself with.

I pull over a chair and climb onto it. My hand crawls to the top shelf of the cupboard where I keep the unhealthy food. There is a rustle of plastic as I grab the instant noodles—the salty, prawn-flavour ones. I rip off the silver foil and take out the pale briquette. I should put the kettle on to make soup, but boiling water feels too much like work when it's half past four in the morning and all you want is to keep the darkness at bay.

I reach for my phone.

Yesterday evening when I was sitting in the *Neue Heimat* bar, sipping orange wine, my father sent me a photo on WhatsApp. It showed a haggard-looking woman with wiry curls, whose *áo dàì* was the same pale grey as her hair. Wrinkles covered her face like criss-crossing waterways; her sunken cheeks were lightly dusted with rouge. She lay on a gleaming white pillow, radiating the look common to all dead people: peaceful, waxen and no longer of this world.

She was very beautiful when she was young, my father wrote, sounding sentimental by his standards.

I bite into the dry block of noodles and wash them down with Sancerre, feeling them soften on my tongue, disintegrate and dissolve. Spicy goo forms in my mouth. It tastes nothing like prawns, but in the dark, my standards are low.

Chewing and drinking, I shuffle to the leather sofa in the sitting room and lie down flat so the night can swallow me up.

What about the funeral? I had written. *Are you going to fly over for it?*

I don't know what made me ask—whether it was my conversation with Dorian or the growing sense that my father was more miserable than I had thought. He had been distracted for days, constantly exchanging messages with Uncle Son.

I have a conference next week, he replied. But I've sent money.

I see.

It'll be a big funeral—all my brothers and sisters will be there. I've asked Son to record it on camera for me. They're sorry we can't be there.

We? I wondered. Why did he just say *we*?

Why don't you go to California with mom next summer? I suggested. *You could go on vacation.*

I doubt she would like that.

There was a slight pause, then he followed up with another message, a question I didn't want to be asked—not by him, anyway.

Why don't you come too?

Me?! Why should I go?

If you could make it, mom would come, too. You know what she's like. We could visit the relatives together, they've been asking about you.

I knew he was right: if I went, my mother would join me. And if we went, the family visit would be more bearable for him.

Persuading myself that the matter would go away if I ignored it, I didn't reply to this last message. For the duration of a chat, I wanted to pretend that ours was a family like any other—a family where everyone was responsible for their own affairs, and thirty-year-old kids were regarded as adults.

Bing. A new message from my father pops up on my phone. Looks like I'm not the only one having trouble sleeping.

It would mean a lot to the relatives if you came. These are difficult times for them. Maybe you could persuade your siblings, too.

Now that we have passed the age of threats and punishments, it is striking how often my father tries to appeal to my sense of family. Much to my frustration, I am vulnerable to these appeals. I am the first-born, after all.

It would make me really happy, Kiều! ☺☺☺

The message stares at me out of the darkness, bizarre and demanding. My father has never used emojis before.

My Father's Story

Part I

MINH

Saigon, 1967

(...)

Minh may have had the smooth, innocent face of a child, but he already had the self-assertion of a man. His slim body had become lean and well-defined through years of taekwondo. He wore his bushy hair swept to the side and needed thick glasses to correct his short-sightedness.

Not long ago, on television, he had seen the great French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre wearing a pair of black horn-rims and had immediately bought some for himself. At school he was often seen hurrying down the corridors with a book in his hand, his soft face full of importance because he was about to meet his older friends in a café to discuss existentialism and secretly smoke cigarettes.

He was the oldest son in a family of seven from Saigon. His parents had achieved a certain amount of prosperity with their tailor's shop, and thanks to their close relations with an influential businessman who liked to order Western-style suits, they had managed to land themselves a house in the centre of town. It was on an avenue of lush tamarind trees, which was once called Rue Catinat, and then renamed *Đường Tự Do* or 'Liberty Street' following the victory over the French colonialists.

With its white French façade and pale-green shutters, the house was very much a part of the surrounding neighbourhood with its elegant shops, restaurants and hotels. The sumptuous display in the ground-floor store window drew in the customers: the mannequins were dressed in suits and *áo-dài* dresses of the finest silk, cut to fit like a glove—the high collar elongating the neck; the tight, high-slit dress flattering every figure; the loose trousers softly floating around the legs.

On the first floor was the living room with the broad balcony. On the second floor Linh and Sơn shared the larger room, because, at thirteen and seven respectively, they were the second and third eldest. The twins, who were only five, slept in the smaller room. Higher up, on the third floor, Minh had the study on the right and his parents' bedroom was to the left.

Being addressed as ‘elder brother’ by his siblings from an early age gave Minh a self-confidence that set him apart from the others. He was the only one in the family to receive pocket money. He drew up rules for his brothers and sisters and reached for the cane when they disobeyed him. Since his father was away most of the time, he was also allowed to use his moped. As a colonel in the South Vietnamese Army, he had been deployed to central Vietnam—sent to fight in the war.

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A few weeks later—the year of the monkey had just begun—Minh was woken one night by the loud thud of an explosion. Still hazy from sleep, he opened his eyes. It was the first day of the Tết new year celebrations and he had spent all evening on the balcony with his brothers and sisters, looking out at the noisy, decked-out street. Their next-door neighbour Mr Giang had given them a string of Chinese firecrackers and stood laughing with their father, both men delighted to be on leave and spending the holidays at home.

Dazed, Minh wondered what was going on outside. Were people still setting off fireworks?

He rolled over onto his side and pulled the pillow over his head. The fan whirred softly beside the bed, blowing cool air into the blue mosquito net. He drifted back to sleep, but was jolted awake again a few minutes later.

Boom! There it was again, duller and louder than before. A rumbling sound like heavy thunder, only shorter and nearer-sounding.

He sat up.

His father burst into the room, naked to the waist, clutching a pistol in his hand.

‘Something’s going on out there. Quick!’

Minh leapt out of bed, grabbed his glasses and ran downstairs to fetch his brothers and sisters. They hurried into the living room and joined their mother who was pressed up against the balcony door, looking out.

Minh saw searchlights slice through the night. In the distance he heard a rapid rattling sound, a little like the string of firecrackers, except that it was intermittent. Interspersed with this was the dull, rumbling boom, sometimes from the north, sometimes from the west.

Could it be bombs? Here, in Saigon?

'Put the radio on,' his mother whispered. Minh walked over to the sideboard and twisted the volume knob. The Vietnamese station was, strangely, playing nothing but Beatles songs. The reporter on Voice of America sounded agitated.

...a surprise offensive in various cities. Vietcong fighters in Saigon have attacked the airport and infiltrated the American embassy; there is fighting and shooting. The headquarters of Radio Vietnam are occupied; it seems that the Communists tried to broadcast a recorded speech by North Vietnamese President Hồ Chí Minh, but fortunately this was prevented by a Radio Vietnam employee. Some fighters have advanced to the Presidential Palace...

'How dare they attack during the holidays?' Minh's father ranted. 'A three-day ceasefire—that was the deal. They have no honor, no shame!'

Adrenaline surged through Minh's veins. Although it was pitch black outside, he suddenly felt wide awake. The thought that something dangerous was happening made him jittery with fear but also curiosity. He had never seen a communist. He wondered if they were really as savage and dirty as his mother said.

Pushing his brothers and sisters out of the way, he opened the balcony door a crack. A rush of cool air hit him. Feeling his courage grow as his siblings whispered in fear, he stepped out onto the balcony. He went right up to the balustrade to get a better view of the street. It was strewn with shreds of red paper from the spent firecrackers, but otherwise so empty that you could have swept it with a giant broom. The black power cables that were strung between the tall masts swung gently in the air. Far off in the distance, a grey cloud of smoke rose from the sea of houses.

'Everything is quiet,' he said, a hint of disappointment in his voice. 'There's no one about. You can go back to bed.'

His father joined him on the balcony and lit a cigarette. Since his promotion to colonel the previous year, he had aged considerably. Although he was only forty, his forehead was deeply furrowed, his black hair was shot through with white and he had lost weight. His high cheekbones stuck out, accentuating his slenderness.

Minh didn't know what his father did in Central Vietnam. His parents had never said it in so many words, but he sensed that the war was not something to be talked about. It was bad enough that the communists were terrorizing them; talking about it would change nothing.

His father's rare, brief and cryptic letters had made him none the wiser. The basic message was always the same: first, the enemy was wily but inferior, and secondly, the older children mustn't be allowed to neglect their schoolwork just because there was fighting in the uncivilised parts of the country.

Minh was torn from his thoughts by his father's voice.

'So how are your brothers and sisters doing?'

He spoke as casually as if he were asking about last week's weather. He always grilled Minh about his younger siblings when he was home on leave; Minh was, so to speak, the man of the house when he was away.

'You don't need to worry. When I tell them something, they listen. I've taught Linh to read a bit and Sơn's marks have improved.'

'What about your grades? Will you do well in the baccalauréat? Your mother and I are counting on you, you know.'

Minh dreaded the question. Although he supervised the education of his brothers and sisters with a certain ambition, he hated talking about his own academic achievement. He was good at school, but not great—blessed with talent, but also arrogance. He didn't see the point of memorizing English phrases or the dates of the Vietnamese dynasties, and so there were better students than him at the French lycée he attended. At the same time, he didn't want to annoy his father by telling him this.

'Everything is fine. It's six months till the baccalauréat; plenty of time for me to prepare.'

'That's good. You see, I have a plan for what you could do afterwards.'

His father blew smoke into the night air. Minh wistfully watched it disperse. The conversation was making him nervous; he would have given anything to have a smoke too.

'I've gotten to know a very capable doctor up in Central Vietnam. He is very impressive — a hard-working, highly respected man.'

'A doctor?'

When Minh was five he was sent to fetch a doctor because Linh had bad febrile convulsions. He had given her an injection and told them that it was a potent new drug from China. It brought the fever down, but it also permanently damaged Linh's hearing. Because she was only a year old at the time, she never learnt to speak. And because she couldn't speak, she would never go to school, never find work. Even now, twelve years on, Minh could still picture the man drawing his syringe and injecting it in his sister's soft thigh.

'He's a surgeon. He recommends that you study medicine and eventually open your own clinic. It isn't easy, but if you succeeded, you'd be rich. The whole family would benefit: your brothers and sisters could be assistant doctors; Linh could be a nurse. You don't have to be able to speak to nurse people. It would be perfect, don't you think?'

His father looked at him expectantly.

'Our family hasn't had the best experience with doctors,' Minh reminded him.

'That was a black sheep. Nothing like Professor Xanh. It's a *very* good job with *very* good prospects. Just think: war or no war, people will always get sick.'

'I'm not sure it's really what I'm interested in,' Minh said cautiously. He knew he shouldn't argue with his father, but he had to try to get him to understand. There was no profession he despised more than the medical profession. He viewed doctors as charlatans who made false promises to desperate people so they could cheat them out of their money.

Did his father really want him to become one of them and spend his life in a place that smelt of drugs and disease? The thought made his flesh creep.

'What kind of an attitude is that, Minh?' His father's voice dropped deeper as he scowled at him. 'You should be glad we are sending you to university. Don't forget that this isn't just about you. At least one of you five is going to be a doctor. You're the eldest son; you must set an example.'

*

KIỀU

(...)

(In Little Saigon, California)

A Western user interface with Vietnamese features rolls past the window. The shops look typically American, but they have names like ‘Saigon City Marketplace’ or ‘Hanoi Corner’. The restaurants sell Vietnamese noodle soup, sticky rice and sandwiches—*phở*, *xôi* and *bánh mì*. The drug stores have Vietnamese names, as do the laundrettes, the bubbletea shops and the massage parlors whose services are so cheap that it seems criminal (*1 hour — \$15 only!*).

I only see a few people walking down the streets, but all of them have black hair and Asian builds. Their bodies would probably seem small in comparison to white ones, but here, among their own kind, they are sturdy or athletic or slender—and sometimes even tall.

A Vietnamese family passes us in a Ford pick-up. The mother has loosely pinned-up dyed brown hair; the father wears black architect’s glasses, a white T-shirt and a jacket. I look at them with envy. Who would I be if I’d grown up here?

When I think back to my childhood, I see a girl with black hair who lives in a pale-blue house and grows up speaking the melodic language of her parents. Innocently, I repeated the words with which they rocked me to sleep, tender with happiness at their first-born child. When I was little, I didn’t know that my family’s world was different from the world around us—that I was growing up on a planet shared by only five people: my mother, my father, my sister, my brother and me.

It first dawned on me in preschool. There, I met Paul and Sarah who played with coloured building blocks while I looked on in silence. Their parents were tall, blond and sure of themselves; when they came to pick up Paul and Sarah, they joked with the childcare workers. My parents were small, black-haired and always late; by the time they showed up, I would be sitting outside the door, trying to recreate buildingblock castles.

As I grew older, I saw how different we were. As I grew smarter, I studied how others behaved. Every day, I added a few German words; every night, I lost a few of Vietnamese ones. I forgot the songs I had learned from my parents and joined in when my classmates sang ‘Silent Night’.

I wanted spaghetti for dinner, not *phở*. When my parents held parties for their Vietnamese friends, I rolled my eyes at their karaoke singing. I was always expected to play the piano. My parents always bragged about my marks. I took some solace in the other

Vietnamese kids who had to play the piano too. Together, we stood there cringing as our parents boasted about our exam results or somebody's performance in a math contest.

I never saw this pressure to achieve among my German friends. They got money for scoring a B on a math test; they asked their parents for cigarettes at the age of fifteen; on weekends, they were allowed to stay out as long as they liked. On the rare occasion when they did get into an argument, they held family talks involving the words 'sorry' and 'love'. I found it bewildering. Why would they speak so openly about their feelings? At the same time, I knew it was strange to be bewildered, and so I said nothing.

I wanted the differences between my family and their families to disappear, because our world was small and strange, while theirs was big and universal. 'Make sure to dress decently, you know how suspicious the Germans are of foreigners,' my mother always said with a mixture of fear and menace in her voice. I can hear her to this day.

We were ready to be anything—except who we were. There was no place for us in nineties Germany. Strangers would stop my father on the street to ask for cheap cigarettes. I unlearned my own name. My parents, caught up in their immigrant ambitions, let it happen. They wanted me to make it in Germany, whatever the price.

Kiêu came from a small world, but Kim knew her way around the big one; she knew how to please the Germans, how to become one of them.

It is only here, in Little Saigon, that I begin to wonder if things could have been different.