

Rosa

Golden Boy, that's what we called him. Not to his face, but not in a mean way either. He was my boss at the biotech start-up that was developing the drug he invented. Golden Boy was brilliant – effortlessly so, it seemed – and already a star of the medical research world when he died at the ridiculously young age of thirty-three. He was universally acknowledged as an all-round good guy too, although of course the truth was more complicated.

His name was Dung, but I only learned that at his funeral. While he was alive I never heard a soul call him by that name, a name chosen by someone who loved him. I hadn't expected to cry at his funeral, but that realisation undid me.

Golden Boy. Dung. I still think of him every day, even now, ten years after he died. Because he's the reason I'm where I am today. And because what I did killed him.

Melbourne, 2006

Part 1

I mean, shit, we learn by climbing over the bodies
of humans ...

– MURRAY GARDNER, MD, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IN
*SHOTS IN THE DARK: THE WAYWARD SEARCH FOR AN
AIDS VACCINE* BY JON COHEN.

Dear Ly,

I've tried to make my mother proud. Ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây, she would say. When eating the fruit, think of the person who planted the tree. I've tried to do that, and more. I've tried to live honourably, to treat people well, even when they've treated me badly. I've tried to be different from my father, to look after the women in my life, like he didn't. Especially you, little sister. I've tried to look after you. I've been trying to atone for what I did, without even knowing what it was.

Ly (Natalie)

It started when Dung went on TV with Charlie Cunningham. I saw them, on the news. It was a Saturday in May, and my salon was the only business in the lane still open when the news came on. I normally shut at six, but my last client had come late. I was sweeping the floor and Trà My was putting clippers in the steriliser when Wendy arrived, almost thirty minutes late. Wendy didn't care that we were packing up. 'I need a full pedi,' she said, 'and a manicure too, darl.' She'd only booked a toenail file and paint, but, no problem, business is business.

Trà My started applying remover to the chipped polish on Wendy's fingernails. Wendy wouldn't try shellac, even though I'd told her – many times too – that it would last longer than the Big Apple Red polish she always went with. Shellac would be worth the extra money, but Wendy is cheap. I was on feet, even though I am the boss. Trà My says smelly feet make her want to puke. So I was sitting on the stool checking Wendy's feet, which are always bad news because she squeezes them into pointy stilettos, when Wendy said, 'Let's catch the news.'

'The Trouble with Mr Bean' was playing on my new TV, a fifty-inch flat screen. I got it on a plan and didn't have to make the first payment until January. I hadn't told Dung about the TV.

He was my partner in the salon, so I suppose I should have, but he would have said it was silly to spend money on a fancy TV. He would have been mad about the payment plan too.

Mr Bean was my favourite TV show when I was little, and Dung had given me a box set for Christmas. ‘The Trouble with Mr Bean’ is the best episode. Even though I’ve seen it heaps of times, I still laugh out loud when Mr Bean chucks a cupcake full of wasps into the car that a thief is trying to steal. The thief squirms like a worm, but he can’t escape the wasp.

Trà My switched the TV over to the news like Wendy wanted, but I wasn’t watching or even listening when Dung came on. I was hungry. I was thinking about the *canh chua* Má would have waiting at home. On Saturday it was always *canh chua*.

Trà My saw him first. ‘Ly,’ she shouted, ‘*Nhìn kia!*’

I looked up, pissed. I’d told her heaps of times: ‘Call me Natalie in front of clients, not Ly. And speak English.’ Speak Vietnamese, then clients want a cheap price. I give good prices, good Aussie prices. A mani and a pedi? Fifty dollars. But if clients hear Trà My speaking Vietnamese, they say: ‘Oh, it was only twenty in Phuket,’ or ‘Really? The nice girl in Bali only charged me fifteen.’ They want the same price in my salon that they got wherever they last went on holiday. No way is that happening, so speak English, I tell Trà My.

‘*Anh của Ly trên TV kia,*’ she said, pointing. I turned to look, and Trà My was right. There was my brother, on TV, on the news.

I picked up Wendy’s right foot and put it in the footbath, then the left foot with the bulging bunion. ‘Soak for five minutes, Wendy,’ I said, and stood up to see Dung better.

It looked like he was at the hospital. He had a white coat on and his stethoscope around his neck. He was talking to an old lady who was lying in bed. Sick, I suppose, but she looked okay. What was going on? Dung didn't look after sick people any more. Now he worked in research. He did experiments, and he'd discovered a new medicine.

Wendy sighed. 'I *am* in a bit of a hurry,' she said.

My brother often gave me advice: 'Always call your clients by their name,' he said when I opened my salon. 'You know how Aussies love to hear their name.' He was making a joke, but still I try to follow his advice. I make jokes too. Jokes to myself. Jokes to remember the names of clients. Sourpuss Samantha. Moustache Michelle. And Wino Wendy, who smelled of wine that night. She must have had time for drinks with friends before her appointment, then decided she needed a mani *and* a pedi. Now, she was in a bit of a hurry. Well, too bad. 'Your callouses are hard. You have to soak,' I told her. The water in the footbath was warm and bubbly. Wendy could relax. Enjoy!

But Trà My said, 'No problem, Lady, we quick.'

Lady! Trà My had already been in Australia for two years then, but she was still such a fob. I only hired her because her Auntie Kim got Má a job when we arrived here. Cleaning the houses of Aussies was the job. Má said that now it was our family's obligation to help Kim. Má meant that it was *my* obligation. And it wasn't just Kim's family I had to help. Now I had to return all the favours that were done for Má. Otherwise she said she would feel shame. There were lots of things I had to do so that Má would not feel shame. And also lots of things I mustn't do.

On TV, Dung was somewhere else now – where he worked, I suppose. ‘The lab.’ He had taken off his white coat and was sitting on a stool in front of a bench. There was an Aussie man on the stool next to him – young like Dung, but fat. At the bottom of the screen were their names: Charlie Cunningham and David Tran.

Trà My yapped: ‘Lady Wendy, that’s Natalie’s brother. Dung ...’ She stopped and corrected herself. ‘David. David is a doctor.’

‘Really, Natalie, your brother is a doctor?’ Wendy asked.

What was her problem? Did she think I was too stupid to have a doctor brother? It’s true that I am not smart enough to be a doctor like Dung was, but that doesn’t mean I’m stupid. Anyway, Dung thought it was okay for me to be a manicurist. He said that ladies need to have nice nails as well as be healthy. He said there were too many doctors anyway. And when I finished my training he said: ‘You should start your own business, Ly. I’ll help you.’ So that’s what happened. Dung paid the key money for my salon. ‘I’m your silent partner now,’ he said. But then the agent wouldn’t give me the key. He said the landlord had changed his mind and wouldn’t rent his shop to me.

When I was little, an Aussie girl at school called me a ‘slope’. I didn’t even know what a slope was, but I knew she was being mean. I cried so much Má had to come and take me home from school. Má was angry. ‘Stupid girl. Why you cry?’ she said.

Dung was kind though. ‘When someone’s mean, turn the other cheek,’ he said. But when the landlord wouldn’t rent his shop to me, I told Dung that I didn’t want to turn the other cheek. So my brother didn’t stay the silent partner. He came to

the agent's office with me and he sorted it out. We got the key and walked back together to the shop that would be my salon.

It wasn't nice then. It was dirty. I had to work hard to clean it. It had been a jewellery shop, and the jewellery it sold was cheap. I told Dung there would be nothing cheap in my salon. Nothing tacky. No plastic flowers. No golden cat waving its hand.

'But, Ly, they bring good luck, those cats,' Dung said. No, I told my brother, no cat.

Now here was Wendy looking at Dung on the TV, then back at me, then at Dung again. 'He doesn't look like you,' she said.

'Agree with your clients' was another piece of advice Dung gave when I opened my salon. 'The customer is always right. Make that your motto.'

But I didn't want to agree with Wendy, even though she was right: Dung didn't look like me. 'He's tall,' was all I said. Dung was six foot one, very tall for a Vietnamese. Dung said that was because of all the protein he ate when he was little, all the beef steak Má fed him when they lived in Vietnam and all the chicken he was given in Hong Kong when he was so thin the doctors thought he might die. Má never gave me beef steak, and only little bits of chicken, so Dung was much taller than me. I'm five foot nothing. And even though they were sitting on stools, I could see that my brother was also much taller than Charlie Cunningham. Dung's neck started where Charlie Cunningham's potato head finished.

'Handsome too,' Trà My said.

Trà My was right about that at least. Dung was handsome, and on TV that night he looked good. I'd done his buzz-cut the

week before, in my salon, even though I'm not a hairdresser. Number four, just how he liked it. His clothes looked smart too, even though his girlfriend, Abigail, helped him buy his clothes now, not me. A nice white shirt, a maroon tie, navy stovepipe trousers that suited his giraffe legs. And on TV Dung was smiling, happy. But Dung was always happy.

'What you think, Lady? Handsome?' Trà My asked Wendy.

'Mmm ... he's not really my type,' Wendy said.

Not her type! Did Wendy think that she was Dung's type? As if! I grabbed the remote from Trà My and turned the sound up on the TV. A woman was asking Dung and Charlie Cunningham questions, but I couldn't see her. Charlie Cunningham was saying he had started a company that would sell the medicine Dr Tran had discovered. The name of the company was SuperMab. I knew that already, even though I hadn't known Dung was going on TV.

'What say?' Trà My asked Wendy.

'Natalie's brother is going to be very rich,' Wendy told her. 'Charlie Cunningham is saying sales of the drug he discovered will be a billion dollars a year.'

'Wow!'

'Yes, wow,' Wendy said. 'What's the problem, Natalie? You don't look happy.'

I pulled the plug from the footbath. 'No. No problem.' I picked up the scalpel. 'All good.' I began to scrape the still-hard dead skin from Wino Wendy's heels.

Trà My blabbed on: 'Lady, other one, Aussie man, get rich too?'

Wendy laughed. 'Charlie Cunningham? He's already rich.'

‘Your type?’ Trà My asked.

I looked at Charlie Cunningham on the screen again. His face was covered in orange freckles. His thin, straight hair looked greasy.

‘Darl, Charlie Cunningham’s so rich he’s everybody’s type,’ Wendy said.

So that was how it started. Dung, going on TV with Charlie Cunningham. Charlie Cunningham saying ‘a billion dollars’. And the stupid thing is that it wasn’t even true. The fat Aussie, Charlie Cunningham, made up the billion dollars.

‘But if it was on TV, on the news, it must be true,’ I said to my brother. ‘It wasn’t as if it was an ad.’

‘No Ly, it *was* an ad,’ Dung said, ‘an ad for our company, an ad for us.’

So Charlie Cunningham had made up the billion dollars. He made the movie of him and my brother talking. He sent his movie to the TV and they put it on the news, as if it really *was* the news. That was how it started.

It was dark when we finished Wendy. ‘You go,’ I told Trà My. ‘I’ll clean up.’

I knew that the man I used to call Pa would be waiting at home for me. He would have heard Charlie Cunningham talk about the billion dollars on TV, or someone would have told him. He would already be sitting in Má’s kitchen, his snake eyes ready to watch me slurp my *canh chua*.

I had been too busy that Saturday to eat lunch. Now I was hungry. I still had the *cá kho tộ* Má had given me. Aussies don't like its fishy smell, so usually when Má gave me *cá kho tộ* I had to chuck it in the bin and pay nine dollars fifty for a sandwich. But the night Dung went on TV with Charlie Cunningham, I put my *cá kho tộ* in the microwave, I switched off the lights in my salon, I sat in the dark and ate it.

It was raining when I got off the bus, so I walked the four blocks to our street fast and didn't slow down until I was outside number eight. I could see the number-eight Nguyens inside, sitting at their table, talking and laughing while they ate their supper.

I kept walking. When I got to number fourteen I stopped and lit the cigarette I'd taken from the pack I keep at my salon. Má would smell it on me when I went inside, but too bad.

I could see the number-fourteen Nguyens inside watching TV. I stood on their nature strip and looked across the road to my house. The man I used to call Pa had parked his black Merc outside. It was parked crooked, staring at me like a tiger. He would be inside, sitting at our table, playing with his big, ugly ring. His foot would be resting on the yellow wall, making a dirty mark. Má would have to scrub hard to get that mark off – so hard the paint would come off. She would have taken the Johnnie Walker whisky out from the back of the cupboard and poured him two fingers. She would have made him a sandwich too. Peanut butter. His favourite. Má would be sitting with him, quiet, while he sipped his whisky and ate his snack, but her

hands would be underneath the table, her thin fingers picking her cuticles. She would pick till her cuticles bled. Then she would pick some more.

The rain had stopped, but my denim jacket had got wet. I was cold. I chucked my cigarette butt onto the number-fourteen Nguyens' grass. I thought about Dung, my tall, handsome, smart brother. That day, not so smart. I crossed the road and opened our gate. That was how it started. Seven months later, Dung was dead.