

*Lotusland*  
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# Lotusland



*David Joiner*



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*This book is dedicated to my parents,  
who are more patient with me than I deserve*



# One



Nathan tossed and turned on the hard lower bunk of his sleeper-class room. He peered at his cell phone; it would take 30 more hours to reach Hanoi. He was struck by how things were always a long wait for him. Nothing was simple, and whatever seemed certain had a way of being turned on its head without warning.

The sound of the train was low and whooshing, like the winds of a relentless rainstorm. Whenever the train pulled into a station the lull of stillness became just as loud, howling inside him, heightening his restlessness.

Lying there, discomposed by his companions' snores, a premonition of endless night took hold of him. Unable to stand it, he left the room.

In the passageway a young man sat on a stool with his face buried in a copy of the *Army Newspaper*. There was nowhere else to sit, though Nathan did see, at the end of the last train car he was in, that the door was open and led to a small platform.

He stepped outside and sat down. The night was cool and full of starlight. With his legs dangling over the edge he watched a mosaic of moonlit fields emerge from a tangle of trees now receding on both sides of the track.

Nathan turned around at the sound of someone approaching the platform door. He was surprised to find a young woman with a train-issued blanket draped over her head. It was an odd way to wander through a train, and coming outside alone and as late as this piqued his interest. As she stood in the doorway considering the small space



that Nathan occupied, or whatever was on her mind, he gestured for her to sit with him.

She tugged the blanket from her head and, when she slipped into a shaft of moonlight, her hair appeared as pink as a rose.

Her age was hard to guess, though she was young, between 20 and 25. The more he looked at her hair the more its shape came to resemble that of a rosebud: it enfolded her face so that the ends nearly met beneath her chin.

She wore loose-fitting pajamas and *tatami* sandals. She asked him for the time — *Trời ơi, mệt quá ... Bây giờ là mấy giờ rồi?* Her pronunciation — z's in place of y's and r's; ch's in place of tr's — was lilting and feminine, yet distinctly northern. There was something almost startling about the Vietnamese she automatically used, and it pleased him that she would.

He pulled out his cell phone and saw it was just after two. *Hai giờ rồi. Hai giờ hả?*

The northern accent was easier for him because it distinguished more between sounds. Yet there was something cold and hard about the northern way of speaking, a wintry almost martial quality. But maybe it was only Hanoi's chill weather and thick cloud cover that bled the color from the streets, buildings, even the clothing of the people, and made him feel this. For there was something warm and inviting about this pink-haired young woman.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

"I came outside to get a phone call." She rubbed her eyes. Under the dark sky he couldn't tell if she was merely tired or had been crying. "Why are you out here?"

He didn't feel like explaining his insomnia. "I can't sleep on trains."

They were silent a moment watching their knees sway back and forth. He pushed himself backwards until he leaned against the wall.

"Going to Hanoi?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you take a plane?"

"I must have forgotten I can't sleep on trains. Where are you going?"

"Same as you."

Watching her yawn into her hand, he asked if she lived there.



Nathan awoke to find the pink-haired girl placing a bowl of instant noodles beside him, followed by two small bananas. She'd changed clothes and wore an old knee-length skirt and t-shirt with a faded *Đông Hồ* painting of carps across the chest. Gold Chinese lettering cascaded down the side and sparkled in the clear morning light.

It took him a moment to realize she'd spoken in English. Behind her, sunshine stabbed through mists that encircled the jagged mountains.

"You brought me breakfast?" he asked.

"You missed the delivered meal. This is better, anyway. Go ahead and eat, I'll be right back."

Stretching to break up the stiffness he felt from sleeping all night with his back against the wall, he looked over the other side of the platform. Broken rocks lined the tracks, and between there and the near rice fields were ditches of stagnant water. It was a miracle he hadn't tumbled off in the middle of the night.

He pulled out his cell phone to see the time, and noticed that his old friend, Anthony, had sent him a pre-dawn message. "Big week coming up. Not sure how much time I'll have for you in Hanoi."

The message was not what Nathan wanted to hear. While his trip north was the best chance they'd had in three years for a reunion, Nathan also wanted to ask him for a job. He'd been preparing for several weeks to approach him about this.

Over the last few months, the focus of their correspondence had been on the money he owed Anthony. In his last e-mail, however, Anthony mentioned that his wife, Huong, wanted him to forgive Nathan's debt. "Of course, you and I both know her idea is ridiculous," Anthony had written. "I guess that's just the not-yet-dead embers of a first love speaking."

The pink-haired girl returned with tea. Steam peeled off the cup and thinly veiled her face as she set it beside the bowl.

A Lipton bag bulged at the bottom of the cup. Swirls of orange rose from it like something being pumped. He was conscious of a pleasant tightness in his chest.

"Thank you." He reached for his money but she stopped him.

"It's my treat." When he hesitated, she told him to eat before his food got cold.

He marveled at his interaction with her, whoever she was. The marvel came less from her having awakened him and brought him breakfast than from how comfortable she'd felt doing this, that it was all in the natural order of things. It gave him a sense that they'd long known each other and this was an established routine. The fact was, however, he knew nothing about her. He thought perhaps there was something the matter with him.

For the next hour he waited for her, but she never came back.



He felt the train slowing. Soon the view changed from nearly empty countryside to the cement homes and paved roads auguring a small town. The brakes squealed as the train pulled into a one-room station.

The station's yellow walls and orange roof-tiles glistened in the crisp spring air. In the shadow of the sloping roof, several stands sold cigarettes, bottled water, and items wrapped in banana leaf.

At first the place seemed deserted, but then he spotted several vendors under a grove of pepper trees, dozing in hammocks. The bright noon sun seemed to have sapped their entrepreneurial spirit. As the train came to a halt, the vendors gathered up their goods and trudged across the platform.

The pink-haired girl stood in the vestibule waiting to alight. He watched her step down and glide across the platform. Propelled by his attraction to her, he followed her.

He headed for a drink-stand, keeping his eye on the vending area where the pink-haired girl was helping two elderly passengers sort through fruit. Her stillness in the presence of movement was a natural grace, he thought, like the sun shining through a midday down-pour. The same could be said of her eyes, and the fresh, high color in her cheeks. It was something superior, an inborn quality he was certain she'd possess all her life.

The stand's matron came up to him. Not knowing English she smiled and pointed hopefully at a bottle of water.

"I'll have tea," he said in Vietnamese. "And a pack of chewing gum."

The matron quickly brought him a glass and a small pack of



She asked the matron to bring a cigarette.

Her smoking surprised him. Normally, only prostitutes and foreign women smoked in Vietnam. The matron came over with tea and a pair of cigarettes on a plate. Once she'd set these down she fished in her pocket for a box of matches and handed it to Nathan. He put it on the plate and pushed it across the table. The girl lifted the plate toward him, offering him one, but he shook his head. She took a cigarette and turned it between her fingers.

"Give me a light?"

He picked up the matchbox, glancing at the picture on the cover: a white dove with a rose in its beak, flying through a cloudless sky. Stamped along the top were the words Reunification Matches. He fumbled with a match but eventually struck a flame. He held it out to her, cupped behind both hands.

When she'd lit her cigarette she leaned back and pushed her hair away from her eyes. Not a trace of black was visible, not even when the breeze picked up and exposed the roots. Again he wondered if she wore a wig.

"Why do you have pink hair?"

Smiling, she tapped some ash onto the ground. "To be different," she said. "And because it makes me happy."

She'd spoken enough English for him to determine she wasn't a prostitute. The cigarettes, he decided, were meant to impart sophistication.

"Ask me something else."

"Okay. Why didn't you come back last night after you said you would?"

She brought her cigarette to her lips, which had formed a barely discernible smile at his question. "I wanted my companions to know I was okay. Then I must have fallen asleep. Were you waiting for me?"

"You said you were coming back."

"I didn't forget. I'm here, aren't I?"

Sensing they were attracting the attention of fellow travelers, Nathan looked around. His eyes settled on the line of green, sun-beaten train cars. In half the windows, behind wire screens, Vietnamese faces casually observed them.



“Who are you traveling with?”

She pointed to the old couple eating custard apples in the shade of the station. “They say I remind them of their daughter. Only she died a long time ago.”

He wondered if this was why he found her sleeping at the end of the train last night. “Does that make you uncomfortable?”

“Not at all. And anyway, they treat me kindly. Where are your companions?”

“I don’t know.”

She lifted her glass and swirled the tea leaves that drifted from the bottom. Clearing her throat, she set the glass down, tapping it against the table. Nathan saw she had something on her mind, but rather than draw her out he was content watching her build up to it. Her large, petaline eyes sparkled and her lips moved slightly as if practicing what she wanted to say. When she saw his bemusement, her face reddened and she straightened in her chair.

“When will you return to Saigon?” she said.

“I’m in Hanoi for three days. I’ll be back in Saigon after that.”

“When you return, can you teach me English?” she said. “When you’re free, I mean. Just a few hours a week. Maybe we could meet at a café and talk.”

The question was unexpected. “I think you’d get more from a class than from me.”

“I don’t have money for a class,” she said. “Nor could I pay you.”

He smiled to himself, thinking it was always this way in Vietnam. He couldn’t begin to count the number of times he’d been approached to teach English “as a favor.” Now, unlike his first few years in Vietnam, he followed Anthony’s practice of doing nothing for free. But before he could raise an objection she went on.

“If it’s money you want, I understand. But I’m open to other arrangements ...”

Her last sentence and how she delivered it — her voice trailing off, as if too embarrassed to admit she was poor; looking down at her hands; her shy coquetry — aroused his interest. “Such as?”

“You could teach me English and help me apply for a visa to America.”

## Two



Nathan stepped onto the third-floor balcony of Anthony's house and gazed out over West Lake. A cool breeze rippled the water's surface, and he stuffed his hands in his pockets to keep warm. At the bottom of his pocket, his fingers brushed Le's business card.

When he'd told Anthony about her, Anthony warned him to be careful. "I'm not talking about your so-called arrangement, either — that's just good luck. What I mean is that in Vietnam you're conspicuous simply by being a Westerner. But with a pink-haired local at your side, expect trouble."

Nathan was thankful he hadn't kept her card in his wallet, for he'd been pick-pocketed that morning on a bus ride back from Friendship Village, an Agent Orange care facility and training centre on the outskirts of Hanoi. In the crowded aisle where he'd stood, bodies collided as the driver made his way haltingly through the dusty, congested streets. Looking back, Nathan couldn't recall when a hand might have slipped into his pocket. He hadn't even noticed his wallet was missing until he'd returned to his mini-hotel, worked on his article, and ventured out again for lunch. At a street stall, after ordering a bowl of *bún chả*, he'd reached into his back pocket, and then all his pockets, and came up empty-handed.

The timing couldn't have been worse. He'd owed the hotel for two nights and was waiting to buy a return ticket to Saigon until he knew what class of seating he could afford. He'd gone a day without food before — three weeks ago was the last time — but he wouldn't arrive back home, even on an express train, for one and a half more days.



So he'd called Anthony. "My wallet was stolen," he told him. Anthony had immediately replied: "Don't worry. There's five hundred bucks in my desk with your name on it." The amount was several times more than Nathan had planned to ask for, but Anthony insisted that he borrow it all.

When Anthony had swung by Nathan's hotel, their first meeting together in three years began with Anthony saying: "It looks like you lost more than your wallet. When did you become such a skinny little shit?" Handing him the money, he'd added: "I should give you more just to buy some meat for your bones. And don't worry about the amount. There are weeks when I spend more than that just on drinks."

A breeze picked up off of West Lake and blew Nathan's hair over his eyes. As he brushed it away, voices inside Anthony's house grew loud enough to overhear.

"They're your children, too. Tell them yourself."

"I can't."

"You could if you tried."

"I do try. Now tell them what I said."

"No," came the shrill reply.

Wary of drawing attention to himself, Nathan twisted his neck to look inside.

Anthony and Huong were arguing from across opposite sides of the high-ceilinged sunroom, separated by a new set of furniture. Anthony was pointing at their children, Anh and Hao, who were grabbing Huong's legs and sniffing. The children's features were a shade between those of their mother and father. Their dark blonde hair and hazel eyes made them look more Western than Vietnamese, but at four and three they were too young to suspect they were anything but the latter. As far as Nathan could tell, they barely knew English. They had English names, too, but never responded to them, no matter how often Anthony encouraged them to. Huong pried their hands from her legs and sent them away with the nanny, who hovered in the doorway, quietly observing.

Five minutes ago, Anh and Hao had charged outside shouting Nathan's name. When Anthony nudged them back inside they fell, scraping their hands and knees.

Nathan turned back to the lake, trying to push away pangs of envy. Seeing Huong again had brought back old feelings he thought he'd gotten over; and seeing Anthony so careless with the life he'd built with her made him resentful.

Anthony returned to the balcony with a bottle of Bénédictine. He poured an inch into his coffee and stirred it. "French monks came up with this drink five centuries ago," he said. "Life must have been much simpler back then, don't you think?"

"I don't think life's ever been simple."

Anthony slid the bottle across the table. "Help yourself."

"No, thanks. I prefer to get through my day sober."

Anthony leaned back and pushed his hands through his hair. He appeared about to say something but instead turned to the lake.

Nathan fixed his attention on the changes that had etched themselves in Anthony's person. Physically speaking, the last few years hadn't been kind. Middle age had crept up, silvering his blond hair, adding several inches to his waist, and wrinkling his forehead and the corners of his eyes. Over six feet tall, he still carried himself well; not gracefully, but with enough natural authority that few would dare to cross or contradict him.

A profound tiredness seemed to lurk behind his eyes, and the shadowy rings beneath them accentuated this. In the short time they'd spent together Nathan thought he could count on one hand the number of times Anthony had smiled or laughed.

A door slammed inside the house, followed by sounds of the children's crying.

"If we had a dog," Anthony remarked dryly, "it would rank higher in this family than me."

"I'm sure they blame me for what happened, not you. After all, I'm the stranger here."

Anthony added a half-inch of Bénédictine to his cup. "They think you're great because you speak Vietnamese. That puts you above me in their eyes."

It was true they seemed mesmerized by Nathan's ability to speak Vietnamese. According to Anthony, they'd never met a foreigner fluent in Vietnamese before.



“Yeah, but you’re their father.”

“If they knew English, maybe it’d be different. My complete lack of Vietnamese gives Huong more authority over them.”

Anthony tried to steer them back to the conversation they were having before the incident with his children, but Nathan wouldn’t let him. “When are you going to learn Vietnamese?” he asked.

Anthony closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. “Why waste my energy? It’s only a matter of time before my kids pick up English. In a few more years I won’t need to.”

Nathan stared blankly at him. “A few more years is a long time from now.”

“Of course, how can anyone predict language development at their ages?” Anthony raised his cup to his lips, then lowered it to add: “Who’s even to say how smart they are? I have to take Huong’s word for it because I can’t understand anything that comes out of their mouths.”

Nathan didn’t know what to make of this. In Saigon there were plenty of bilingual children, and not just in bicultural families. The Vietnamese placed a primacy on language learning, which made them some of the most successful polyglots in Southeast Asia.

“Why don’t you teach them?”

“Huong wouldn’t like it.”

Notwithstanding the notion of fairness, Nathan supposed there was no point asking why Huong didn’t take on the responsibility. He couldn’t tell if Anthony wanted to open up about this or if he simply found the whole subject distasteful. Nathan was going to ask why he didn’t hire a teacher when Anthony’s cell phone rang and he stepped inside to take the call.

Anthony wasn’t the only foreigner he knew who couldn’t communicate with his children. At least Huong’s English was good, though it didn’t seem like they spoke much anymore. When Nathan thought about it he could recall several foreigners who’d married Vietnamese women with whom all they shared linguistically were a handful of words.

Nathan tried not to use his Vietnamese around Anthony, who bristled at the sound of it — the rising and falling, the glottal stops,

the broken tones — not unless the situation demanded it. In Anthony's own words, the Vietnamese language was like cold, hard rice. "No amount of money," he liked to say, "could persuade me to eat a stale grain of it." More recently he started calling it an acquired aversion.

From the side of the house came a sound like ripping cardboard. Huong's father stood behind a window, leaning over a blooming flowerbox: twisting his thin face he hawked and spat, then watched his sputum plummet like a sparrow's egg into the garden.

To Anthony's dismay Huong's parents had moved into their house several weeks before. Huong had pushed hard for him to accept this arrangement, explaining that it was her duty to support them now that they were old. He'd acquiesced after she went two weeks without speaking to him.

When Anthony returned he asked Nathan how they'd gotten on the topic of his family. "Weren't we talking about something more interesting?"

"I was begging for a job."

Anthony frowned. "That's right. You were trying to convince me that your lack of business acumen wouldn't be a problem."

"You recruited me once before," Nathan reminded him.

"Yes, but back then we were small and I thought it would be fun having you around. I'm not saying it wouldn't still be fun, but three years have gone by. There's more at stake now."

"Two years before that," Nathan said, "we were both English teachers in Saigon. You made a leap, and now I want to do the same."

"Things have changed, Nate. I need someone experienced."

"You know I'm a quick study. And I could take the pressure off you."

"No one can take the pressure off me. If it's not work, then it's my life outside of work." He glanced toward the living room before taking a long sip from his glass.

Nathan saw that this was becoming a lost cause. "I guess I've said what I needed to. I just wanted a chance to see where I stood."

Anthony watched him as if he expected Nathan not to give up this quickly. "And your writing career? What happens with that?"

"I told you before: I need the money."

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Quote on page 317 from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Chapter 18: Conclusion, paragraph five, p. 323-24 (Princeton University Press, 1971).

## *About The Author*



David Joiner was born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, and attended Earlham College, a liberal arts school founded by Quakers where he majored in Japanese Studies. He later earned an MFA degree from the University of Arizona, where he won awards in fiction and play-writing. He has been living in Vietnam off and on since 1994; his most recent move back was in the summer of 2013. He speaks varying levels of Vietnamese, Japanese, and Spanish. Over the last year and a half he has been writing full-time in Vietnam but plans to return to Japan soon to resume his work as a university writing instructor. He is currently at work on a second novel, which takes place in Vietnam and Cambodia in the early 1990s.