

Bich Minh Nguyen



'Nguyen is a writer to watch, a tremendous talent with a gift for gorgeous sentences'

Chicago Tribune

Short Girls
by
Bich Minh Nguyen

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After Miles left, Van began checking the security alarm every time she entered the house. She had nightmares of the alarm failing, losing the password of her and Miles's wedding date. Pressing those numbers made her remember his hand on her back, guiding her through dance steps. They had practiced in a ballroom class, then in his apartment, Eric Clapton singing "Wonderful Tonight" over and over. She didn't tell Miles that the lyrics bothered her: *Why must the woman only look wonderful tonight?*

The rooms hushed around her, the open floor plan stretching forth on the hardwood. Though they'd moved in almost three years earlier, she still felt vaguely like a house sitter. She was careful to keep the hand towels neat, her shoes lined up in the mudroom. She circled the first floor, making sure the blinds were drawn, and turned on all the outdoor lights. She lingered in front of the television, for going upstairs seemed almost unsafe, a yielding of territory. Someone could trap her there. She thought of places to hide, to buy herself time between the breach of the alarm and the arrival of police: behind the armoire in the bedroom corner; in the cedar chest in her closet.

She could just fit into it, her small body folding into the tight darkness, the lid clamping down like a set of perfect teeth.

Van spent most of her time in the TV room, where she lay on the sofa between the windows so that someone standing in the backyard would not be able to see her. Only in bright daylight did she want to peek outside. It was always the same Ann Arbor subdivision, the houses as new and graceful as hers, with brushed-brick facades and wrought-iron sconces. Cars nested in garages. Streets rounded into cul-de-sacs. “Para-noi-a,” Miles sometimes sang softly when he caught Van squinting through a slit in the blinds.

Those first two weeks of Miles’s absence, Van had waited for someone to confront her. She was certain her coworkers would read in her face what had happened. She prepared answers. A business trip. A big case, confidential. But the days went by and no one at her law office asked her if she was okay. Her friends e-mailed their usual brief messages about work, pictures of their kids. Her sister Linny did not appear on her doorstep to crow about how much she’d always disliked Miles. Van nearly convinced herself that he *had* been away on a business trip. It was almost easy to go along, letting her world split from that one day in February into separate versions of reality.

How little anyone knew of Van’s real life.

Even so, she kept checking the caller ID. She didn’t stop expecting to see Miles’s cell number, and hated how her heart jumped whenever the phone rang. But it hardly ever did. A week before he left, Miles had added their number to the national Do Not Call list. Van wondered if it was a planned courtesy, that she might exist untroubled by telemarketers while sitting down to her solo dinner.

She had not been the kind of teenager who could talk for hours on the phone with a friend; that realm had belonged to her sister. When she and Linny called each other they ended up using their father as an excuse: Who was going to visit him next? Had he said anything about Thanksgiving? How was he doing all alone in that house? He was the spool around which the thread of their conversations wound.

Van's father didn't like phones, not even to acknowledge birthdays. In college, she could go almost an entire quarter without hearing from him. His calls, when they came, seemed random. He would want to know where a friend of his could find good sushi in Ann Arbor. Or he'd ask, *Do you remember where I put the pliers? Were there any D batteries in the house?* As if she were still there, or should be.

But now he was reminding her to come home.

After twenty-eight years of stubbornness her father was finally taking his oath of citizenship, letting go at last of his refugee status and the green Permanent Resident Alien Card. He had taken the test, handed over his fingerprints, had his background checked—the last of all his friends to do so. To celebrate, he was throwing a party in the old style, the way all of the Vietnamese families in their town used to gather in the late seventies and eighties, finding relief in their free-flowing beer and language. It would be a reunion, a remembrance of their collective flight from Vietnam and settlement in America—1975 all over again. Van, who was born in a refugee camp three months after her parents arrived in the States, knew only her mother's description of the dusty barracks and tents at Pendleton, and the startling cold of their first winter in Michigan. She didn't understand why her father would want to return to 1975.

“It’s the last hurrray,” he insisted when he first told her his idea for the party. “We come a long way, baby.”

After Van had left for college her parents decided to live on separate floors of the house they’d had for twenty years, a sixties ranch in Wrightville, a suburb of Grand Rapids, Michigan. They’d fallen into the arrangement after yet another petty argument—which potted dendrobium at the home and garden center looked the healthiest—blew up into a two-day fight. The Luongs had always done this, scratching at each other’s words as much out of habit as anything. But this time when Thuy Luong told her husband to go sleep in the basement “like a dog,” he stayed there instead of slinking back upstairs. When Van went home for winter break she found that he had actually moved to the basement. He had shoved aside the old fold-out sofa they’d had since their first apartment in the States and set up a futon right in front of the big-screen TV, a clunky first-generation model that would soon be replaced by newer and newer models, to which he’d add an elaborate sound system, with speakers hidden inside wooden figurines of Vietnamese fishermen.

The basement had always been his domain. Van was going on nine when they moved into that house, and she had helped him partition off a section of the floor to create a studio for his company, Luong Inventions by Dinh Luong, for which he often ditched his “everyday money” jobs in tiling and construction. He kept his sketches tacked up on the faux-wood paneling, along with photographs of himself trying out his prototypes. His most successful invention—or least unsuccessful—was the Luong Arm, a tong-like gadget devised to help short people reach items on a high shelf. He had sold more than a hundred Luong

Arms to various friends in the Vietnamese community. But the product had never been quite right—the mechanical grip could grab a light basket, but lost control with plates and glasses. When Van graduated from college, her father gave her a prototype as a gift, saying, *Short girls have to take care of themselves.*

In law school, when Miles first came over to her apartment he had spied the Arm immediately. It lay on top of her kitchen cabinets, where Van had stored and forgotten it because she couldn't see that high up.

Amused, Miles examined the Y-shaped instrument and held it like a divining rod. "Will this lead me to gold and riches?" He steered it toward her.

"It didn't for my dad," Van replied.

She showed Miles how it worked: put the wrist through the velcroed brace, hang on to the wand, and use the thumb to work the lever that opened and closed the tongs. Miles wanted to try it, aiming for a thin-necked vase in Van's kitchen cupboard. "Don't," she said. "It's the only one I have."

"I've got it." He secured the grip and drew back slowly to set the vase on the counter. But it slipped from the Arm and crashed onto Van's linoleum floor.

When Dinh Luong settled into the downstairs part of the house, he bought a set of safari-print sheets from JCPenney. The basement, with its low ceilings and movie-worthy darkness, was perfect for running *Die Hard* and Indiana Jones DVDs until he fell asleep. He got a mini-refrigerator to store his beer and bought a George Foreman grill from a garage sale. When he cooked he made turkey burgers with pickle, dipping each bite into *nuoc mam* sauce. When he got cold he used a space heater that made the basement smell like Linny's old curling

iron set on high. Van worried that her father would burn the whole house down but he had laughed at that. “I’m an inventor,” he said. “I’m not destroying—I’m *making*.”

Upstairs, Van’s mother and sister made changes too. They gathered up Dinh Luong’s infomercial orders—the food dehydrator, the vacuum sealer, the automatic shoe polisher—and left them on the basement steps. Mrs. Luong painted their bedroom lavender, and threw out the pile of *Popular Mechanics* magazines her husband had saved in the bathroom. They didn’t ignore each other, didn’t quite divide the house in two, but it was clear to Van that they had come to some sort of resolution about their space: they just didn’t want to have to see each other very often. Linnny, a senior in high school then, used the opportunity to spread out her clothes and music, stay out late while their parents were so distracted.

Van was secretly glad that they hadn’t just given up and divorced. In her mind they couldn’t—they were too conjoined, had known too many years together. Ornery as old house cats, they needed each other’s presence without ever admitting it. They could have gone on like that for decades, Van knew, living together but not together, meeting only occasionally when Van’s father needed to get some towels or utensils from upstairs or when Van’s mother needed to use the washer and dryer. And maybe they would have if Thuy Luong hadn’t collapsed in her best friend’s nail salon that May, 1994, nine years ago; Van was finishing her first year at the University of Chicago and Linnny was about to graduate from high school. At the hospital, the attending physician had been fairly sure that it was a stroke, rare for a forty-two-year-old, though they never knew for sure because Dinh Luong had refused an autopsy. *She wouldn’t*

want it, he said, and the pronouncement gave a strange comfort to Van, made her think that in spite of all the arguments, her parents had known, after all, a river of intimacy. The fall after Mrs. Luong died, Linnny started community college and moved into her own apartment, and their father returned to the upstairs part of the house for good.

When nighttime started its descent over Ann Arbor—less swiftly every day, Van noted, grateful for hints of spring—she wondered what it would be like to coexist with Miles, each living on a separate floor. Would she rather have him in the house, secure in his nearness, or would it make her insane, force her to eavesdrop on his phone conversations with people she didn't know? Watching television in her usual way, lying on the sofa so that everything on the screen appeared sideways, Van was glad that Miles could not see her like this. If he were home she would be sitting up with a glass of wine, playing an indie movie since Miles called network television a scourge on the brain.

Van knew that she would have to go to Wrightville for her father's party, and that questions would follow her: *Where's Miles? How's Miles? When are you and Miles having a baby?* She had begun to plan her answers, simple as tabbed files: *He had a case. He's doing fine. We're in no hurry just yet.* The last one a lie she had been telling for more than two years.

Van pictured her father shuffling up from the basement, stepping into the kitchen. If in a good mood he would wave hello and pat her on the back, saying, "Where's that Chinese boy?" It's what he'd been saying since the first time Van brought Miles home. They were engaged by then, and Van's father had

inspected the prongs that held the diamond in place and said, “Good thing we love Chinese food.”

If Van had dated a fourth-generation Chinese American in high school—if there had been any to date, if she had dated at all—her mother would have wept and her father would have forbidden it. Those were the days when they were strict about Vietnamese boys who would grow into suitable husbands for Van and Linny. Once, during Van’s junior year, her mother had tried to make her go on a blind date with a son of a cousin of a friend who had just settled in the area. Van had outright refused. But a few days later Pham Ly was sitting at the kitchen table when she came home from a Sunday trip to the downtown library. He was gawky and full of smiles, his cheekbones sharp and shiny. In those days, phrases like “fresh off the boat” embarrassed Van. By now it had become hip or funny, one of those bits of language people were trying to reclaim. They’re so *fobby*, her friend Jen Ye had said affectionately about her own parents. Van often thought the word applied to her father too.

Pham had been in the States for less than a year and his accent showed it: warbled, clotting the sounds he couldn’t yet pronounce. Mostly he spoke in Vietnamese with Van’s parents, and the three of them shouted with laughter over jokes Van could not understand. Sullenly she ate her mother’s fish soup, wondering where Linny was. Even in tenth grade, Linny had things to do. She was always going out; she dated Van’s classmates. By then they hadn’t been close, hadn’t really talked to each other without squabbling, in years.

Their parents were erratic in their rules, probably because they could never unite in enforcing them. Mrs. Luong could scream at Linny for coming home at two in the morning, but

Mr. Luong would have forgotten it by the next day. He might announce, “You’re grounded until further notice!” (a phrase he had learned from TV) but it would be his wife who would have to make it stick. Linny, taking advantage of the disarray, slipped around the questions so that their parents often ended up interrogating *Van*—what she had been doing after school, and who had been there, though she was more likely to play Trivial Pursuit than a drinking game.

At the end of dinner Van’s parents suddenly retreated, leaving her alone with Pham, who had become flushed and cheerful from the Budweisers Mr. Luong had offered him. “What you doing tonight?” Pham asked her. The dinner, the company, the beer had turned his shy smile slick, and Van looked away. “I have to study,” she said, making sure to emphasize her English, using a cold voice she didn’t know she had. It was something that would come in handy later, in law school. Then Van got up from the table and fled to her room.

By the time Van left for college her parents had pretty much given up: any Asian was a good Asian. They had seen enough of their friends’ children dating white people to realize that. Van wondered how much she’d had her mother’s wishes in mind when Miles came into the picture during law school. Her mother had once said they probably had relatives who were part Chinese, their heritage handed down through centuries of rule. Chinese, Japanese, Korean—here in America, it was all the same.

Van changed the channel—*The Golden Girls* starting on Lifetime—and fought the desire to call Miles and tell him that

she was going to visit her father. The idea of leaving town and coming back and never saying a word about it to him made her shiver. How would he know where to think of her?

She worried she wouldn't be able to keep up the lie, at least not with Linny, who might stare her down, narrow her eyes, and in that way force the real story. Van knew, too, something harder: it had been six weeks, and each day meant a greater separation, a further burrowing of the truth. One day, she would have to open her mouth and speak it.