



NHI DO

Elizabeth

She was a top student, someone who got awarded for writing the best thesis and graduated summa cum laude. She was a little taller than me, blonde, and white. I was the only Asian in my program. A freshly founded English-taught Master of Arts. Because of Covid-19, I was among the very few international students flying to Paderborn that year. The pandemic prevented me from attending real classes and meeting new people, so I got bored and began using Tinder. And we bumped into each other there. She was funny and witty and only lived a kilometre away from my dormitory room.

Before I knew what we would ever become, Elizabeth and I started hanging out once a week. I learned that she would leave Paderborn in four months to do her PhD in another city, in the field of drama studies. She smoked and drank coffee a lot. And she had to travel frequently for her second job as a stage-lighting technician. One summer afternoon, we had a picnic together and she gave me a collection of essays as a birthday gift. On the way home, I thought while riding my bike that maybe finally I could make friends in Germany. It was an immaculate day, with pleasant breezes and smells of blooming flowers filling the air. One night, she invited me over to watch a film. I got a glimpse of what was waiting for me in the end of the night. At around 1:30 A.M, standing by the window of her small apartment smoking and watching the moon, I turned around and slightly kissed her on the lips. Her response was a passionate, almost-harsh kiss, and in the next second, I found myself lying in her bed.

I had known, right from the very first moment she touched me, that the affair could never last, and that we would eventually fall apart in the most painful way. But there was no way I could tell her that or stop myself from having feelings for her. After that night, sometimes I would stay over at her house. She often cooked for me. We had dinner, watched a film, had sex with some music on, and slept. Whenever lying next to her, I always had the same dream. In that surreal world, she was driving a car, and I was at the front passenger seat. We were heading towards a vague destination in total silence. I glued my eyes to the passing scenery outside the window, until at one point, I suddenly turned my head left, looked into her smoky green eyes, and asked "Are you real?". When I woke up, I felt like crying but couldn't cry. It was usually before dawn.



One day in early September, while having a short holiday in Luxembourg, I received a message from her. She invited me to Berlin to see a contemporary theatre play. It was part of the project she was working with some artists at that time. I hesitated to say yes at first, but because I adored drama and it was also the first opportunity to watch a play live in Germany after the peak of the pandemic, I ended up agreeing to visit Berlin for two days. One week later, I took two successive trains to Berlin. Walking out of Berlin Hauptbahnhof with a small backpack, I found myself staring at a huge dynamic metropolis. Clusters of fine-dining restaurants stood side by side chic coffeshops and art galleries in the city centre. An interlacing cobweb of U-Bahn, S-Bahn, trams, and buses incessantly transported people from place to place, their numbers blinking in the afterglow of a late summer sunset. A sudden shudder ran through my body. I took a bus to the theatre and met her at the entrance, thirty-five minutes before the second performance. She was wearing a grey shirt, soaked in sweat, and obviously nervous. We stopped by a kiosk for her to buy a bottle of Coke and went to smoke on a public bench nearby. I asked her about the premiere. It was a great success, she said, but everybody was stressed and nervous. The director even went to the bathroom to cry after the premiere just ended. In the end of the conversation, she cheerfully added that, if possible, she would like me to stick around after the play to attend a wine party alongside the director and her colleagues. Some famous German writers would also be there.

I followed her to the back room of the theatre to receive a white envelope with my name written in blue ink from a blonde receptionist. Inside it was a neat blue ticket containing the name of the play and my seat number, third row, right in front of the stage. The play would be conducted in half German, half English, which meant I could only understand half of the dialogues. I was the first audience to enter the auditorium. On the way to the seat, my footsteps faintly reverberated around the spacious room. The stage was dimly lit and nearly empty, with only an upright piano standing in the top right corner. Everything was wrapped in deep silence. About fifteen minutes later, other audiences started arriving. An elegant middle-aged woman in a red-wine shantung sheath came to sit beside me. She smiled and spoke something to me in German. I replied in English saying I only spoke English. She switched to English, saying she wondered why the audiences sat quite close to each other during the corona time. Following her words, I glanced around the room. She was right, the distance between two seats must be less than two metres. Perhaps people had decided it was safe enough to keep shorter distance as the number of new cases was decreasing day by day. I darted my eyes across the auditorium once again, in that very instant, I suddenly noticed one thing. I was the only person of colour in the whole theatre.

The stage got lit up and the play began. A pianist emerged from the backdrop and started skillfully moving her fingers through piano frets, warming up the whole theatre with cheerful music. Then twelve actors, one by



one, came out from the backstage and started dancing. Their movements were abstract, smooth, enchanting, like swans on a lake in early spring. I followed every single gesture with great excitement. After about ten minutes, the dance ended to make room for a couple of actors, one man and one woman, standing face to face starting a conversation in German. They closely looked into each other's eyes, their soft voices gently echoed around the room. At one point, the actress said something funny, and the whole theatre burst into laughter. I discreetly glanced around. Everybody looked so relaxed and happy. When two third of the time had passed, the English part began with an old actress in a white suit standing in the middle of the stage posing philosophical questions to the audiences. The questions were highly intriguing, ranging from big topics like the essence of time and the universe to how much money and love we needed in life. Then finally, after a short pause, gazing directly into the audiences, the charming old woman asked "Where is your family now?"

The question stirred up a sharp pain within me. Where was my family then? In a small town in Vietnam. So physically far away from me. Suddenly, memories, one by one, like a film reel, flashed back before my eyes. Dad and mom were standing at Tan Son Nhat airport, waving until I disappeared into the waiting room. Dad took me to an English class on his old motorbike in winter when I was twelve, rain soaked through his faded denim jacket. Mom's happy crying when I received an admission letter to study literature in Europe. On a sun-drenched beach in my hometown, one day before the flight, my boyfriend and I shared some boiled eggs and iced tea. The tiny reddish face on Zoom of the leader of a local book club I joined after enrolling in the university, when he pointed at the Japanese novels on my hands and said with a smirk "I only read good books". The beautiful watercolour paintings of the Austrian student from the Informatics faculty, which I adored very much until one night he got drunk and accidentally texted me "Wanna come to my room? I've got the passport you like you know". What did I often say whenever calling home at weekends? "Yes, yes, everything's alright".

And I thought about the party after the play, the party full of white faces...Everybody just stood up to give the performers a standing ovation. The play had ended in a rapture of handclapping. A success beyond any expectation. I looked up, and there, on the well-lit stage, Elizabeth walked out to stand alongside the actors. Her blonde hair glistened beautifully under incandescent light, a tint of blush on her face. A middle-aged female audience came up the stage to give the whole theatre team some sunflowers. Elizabeth received one and smiled radiantly. An insurmountable pride and happiness surged up inside me. I clapped my hands louder for her. Then, without anyone's notice, I silently sneaked to the exit, stepped out of the theatre, and disappeared into the gentle midnight darkness.



BIOGRAPHY

Nhi Do is a Vietnamese writer, artist, and English teacher. Currently, she is doing a Master of Arts in English and American Literary and Cultural Studies at University of Paderborn, Germany.