

JOHN DÔ

BY JENNIFER F.

John Dô got his dick wet when he was 15. That summer, like every summer in Boston, was the hottest anyone could remember. By August the Public Garden greens were baked yellow and John and his friends were fried red from sweating out all of their afternoons on Carson Beach, a perfunctory patch of sand halfway down the Red Line. It was no Nantucket, but there were fewer syringes rolling in the ripples than there were in Revere, and girls occasionally turned out in bikinis.

“I bet you a hundred bucks you can’t get laid today,” said Phu.

“So if I get laid, you’ll give me a hundred bucks?” That would give him enough to buy something from the new Supreme release, which he could resell for twice as much.

“Yeah, and if you don’t, you pay out.”

The rest of the boys yelled the “ooohs” that they reflexively yelled whenever anyone said anything that aroused them. John wondered briefly why Phu felt like putting the bet on him instead of anyone else in their group. If anything, he gave Phu the worst odds. He was the tallest, and the time they all had taken out their erect penises in a fit of pubescent curiosity, John’s had been the longest. None of them had ever so much as pawed a blouse, but—at Vietnamese school, at least—John had caught the eye of a few girls who asked him where he got those light eyes and soft brown hair.

Maybe Phu just felt like shedding a hundred bucks. His dad was pretty well-placed in the complicated bureaucracy that ran the main underground casino in Chinatown, so he had more reliable pocket money than the rest of the boys. He liked to wave it around occasionally, a maneuver he’d learned from the casino men.

“Deal,” John said, and shook Phu’s hand. The rest of the boys patted his back.

There weren't many people on Carson Beach at 1 p.m. on a Tuesday. It was mostly idle guys like them, high schoolers and the older, more worn down youths who hang around the high schoolers long after their own graduations. A few of these guys had girlfriends in tow, but hardly any of the women on the beach looked unattached. There was an ambiguously foreign nanny watching heavy-lidded while her blond Beacon Hill charges played something pugilistic. Two women past 50 made righteous-sounding conversation in a guttural language, faces shaded with wide straw hats. They appeared to be pointing some of their disapproving head shakes at the one lone woman on the beach, reclining on a folding lounge near the water. Her swimsuit was not a bikini, but it was hot pink and cut high on the leg. Her long black hair was tied back in a scrunchie in a similar shade of pink. She made John think of his little sister's Asian Malibu Barbie.

Technically, the doll wasn't a Barbie; the box she came in said her name was "Kira, Barbie's Exotic Friend." Her face looked vaguely Asian, but her irises were painted a strange blue and yellow pattern that matched her original earrings (now lost). They were almost a plasticized version of his eyes, which looked blue in the brightest sun and bilious yellow in the rest. Kira didn't look anything like John's sister Jess; her dad had overridden his mom's half-white blood with his own unambiguously Vietnamese features. John could remember the man who used to come around to see his mother seven years ago, one of the regulars from the casino, his black hair slicked back with so much pomade it perfectly reflected the twinned fluorescent tubes in the ceiling.

Jess had other Barbies, half a dozen of the standard Caucasian ones, stripped bare of their differentiating accessories and now assimilated into one homogeneous pile of tangled blonde hair. But only Kira did it for John. Once he'd taken the doll out of his sister's room and peeled open the velcro back of her swimsuit. Though the breasts were nippleless, the subtle V carved into her pelvis was so enticingly suggestive that he hardened immediately. It was only after his ejaculate dripped onto the doll's pert plastic ass that he

felt shame. He ran her legs, molded from a stickier, more pliable plastic than her arms and torso, under the bathroom faucet and patted them dry on his mother's pink bath towel. That was his first and only tryst with Kira. Now, when he watched his sister play with her Barbies, arousal and discomfort bubbled simultaneously in his lower gut, a cocktail as dangerous as ammonia and bleach. He felt the same when he looked at the woman on the beach.

"Go for it, man," said Phu.

John stood up. His friends cheered discreetly. Every step towards the woman seemed to pull him deeper into the sand.

Up close, the woman in the pink swimsuit looked older. A little fatter. The black makeup around her eyes has flaked away in places and settled on her cheeks like dandruff. No—those were freckles, the same dark patchy ones his mother had. She only looked up when his shadow passed over her paperback. Their first eye contact sent a jolt through John's stomach and into the base of his penis. Her eyes looked blue in this light, with a golden edge.

"Can I sit here?" he said, gesturing to the space beside her.

She looked back at her book. "Go ahead."

He should have brought his towel. He couldn't go back for it now, so he sat on the bare sand beside her, knees pulled close to his chest. In his head, he ran through the pickup lines he and his friends tested on each other, culled from websites lousy with pornographic pop-up ads. His favorite had impressed them all, made them break into their chorus of "ooohs." "Damn, son," Phu had said. "Any girl would drop her panties for that one." And John had believed it. Maybe it was because he read it next to an animated GIF of a woman rubbing her own breasts, but the line seemed genuinely sexy to him. Now, even in his head, it sounded ridiculous.

John rubbed some sand off the top of his right foot. "What are you reading?" he asked the woman.

"A book." She turned a page.

The blond kids ran past them in the ripples. One pushed the other, who tripped and splattered his face into the wet sand. His

nanny approached slowly, as if to allow herself to enjoy a few moments of his cries. John was reciting one of the less overtly phallic lines in his head when the woman finally spoke to him.

“Hey, are you trying to pick me up, or something?” she asked in a Boston accent tinged only slightly with the tones of some Asian language.

“Uh.” John’s first instinct was to deny it. Then he remembered the bet. “Yeah.”

“How old are you?”

“18,” John said in the deepest voice he could manage.

Her eyes, light as his, scanned his hairless face, the folds where his wet swim trunks clung to his skin. “Okay,” she said at last. “Let’s go.”

They rode the Red Line to her place. There weren’t many commuters at this time of day. When the train descended to its underground tunnel past Broadway, their reflections came into view in the dark window opposite them. John stared at his face in the glass. He looked younger than he imagined himself, rounder. He tried to catch the woman’s eye, but she was engrossed in her dog-eared paperback. He could only read a few words over her shoulder: Bodice. Breasts. Horse.

At Ashmont they got off the train to wait for the streetcar that connected the Red Line to Mattapan. They stood silently on the platform, one foot apart, staring in the direction the streetcar would come. John hadn’t waited on this platform since he was six years old, when he and his mother lived in a cramped corner of the sprawling Mattapan projects. By the time he realized that they were retracing the path to those projects, they were already there.

The woman’s building wasn’t the one where John spent the first six years of his life, but her place was similar enough that he felt like he could find his way to her room without her help. They passed the empty reception desk, climbed the stairwell, dodged the larger puddles in the hallway. When she opened her door, the lived-in smell burst out like gases from a can: fish sauce and charred meat, mildew and a stronger concentration of the

musk he had noticed when he got close enough to her body.

After closing the door behind her, the woman finally started to play the role that he had imagined for her when he first saw her on the beach. She turned around and smiled, scanned his face from his forehead to his lips, held her gaze there. The half-second of eye contact was enough to send the blood back into John's penis. He leaned in and kissed her—his first. She took control of the kiss and of his body, pulling him backwards towards the bedroom. Halfway across the living room John stepped on something small and jagged, with a sticky give that recalled Kira's legs. He yelped in pain and looked down reflexively, but the woman pulled his face back to hers before John could see what he had stepped on.

The woman's bed was sedimented with layers of bolsters, throws, tassels; the decorative buttons on her duvet pressed into his back when she straddled him. This was uncomfortable, but it didn't last long. None of it lasted long.

John awoke to the morning sounds of clattering pans and sizzling oil. He could smell garlic and meat; his mother must be cooking something better than Pop Tarts this morning. He stretched out as long as he could, taking pleasure in his stiffness, and opened his eyes. Then he shrieked the way he had before his voice changed.

There was a child staring at him, leaning almost close enough to lick his face. John tried to make out the face hanging inches away from his own. His eyes couldn't lock into focus. When he looked directly at any one of the boy's features, the details seemed to fade, like dim stars in a city sky.

"Get out of there, Bao," the woman's voice called from the other room. The boy scurried away like a cockroach.

John remembered where he was. The light was lower now, the gauzy curtains closed, and it took some effort for him to find his clothes on the floor. He didn't want to touch the light switch; that seemed like too much of a trespass. While he was stepping into his shorts, the woman looked into the room. He covered himself, but she didn't seem to notice his nakedness.

“*Đói bụng quá?*” the woman asked.

“*Da,*” said John, before he could check himself. Yes, he was hungry, and also drained, like someone had stuck a tap in him and dripped out his vital fluids. He didn’t want to expend the energy required to have a whole conversation in Vietnamese. His fluency was confined to the kind of interactions he had with his mother: eating her food, scrubbing her floors, and cursing back at her while she chased him with a slipper.

The woman, however, continued in English when they sat down at the kitchen table. “So you’re Vietnamese,” she said, handing him a plate of chicken scattered with stringy pickled radish. “You don’t really look it. Where’d a Vietnamese kid get a name like John?”

“My mom said it’s her dad’s name.”

“Oh yeah? That’s supposed to be my dad’s name, too. But I guess all the white guys are Johns over there.” She paused to do the math. “So your mom’s a GI kid? One of the *bụi dờ?* Came in on the Amerasian Act?”

John hated getting into this. It was easier to let people assume that he was just a regular kid with one white parent and one Asian parent, like Victoria Kim-Smith at his high school. Tall and bronze with a perfect ovoid face, she was both captain of the field hockey team and salutatorian of the class. Whenever anyone asked her how she did so much, she would laugh and say “Hybrid vigor!” Her parents showed up for every event, always together, trim and healthy and brimming with entirely explicable love. When Victoria herself fell in love, she could tell her beloved a sweet, clean story about how her parents met, maybe at the supermarket or a town hall forum. She would never have to think about dusty teenage parents who met on a refugee boat, each drawn to the miscegenated features of the other, parents who bred as thoughtlessly as shiphold rats even though they in all likelihood had the same father. “I don’t know,” he said to the woman.

The woman wasn’t listening to him. She mashed at her rice. “Get a visa for a face. If *Ba* John hadn’t swung his fat white dick all

over the place we wouldn't be here, right?" She looked around her public housing dining/living room, along the walls splattered with years of food debris, the cardboard boxes pushed into the corners like she'd just moved in.

Suddenly the kid reappeared. John didn't know where he could have been hiding in the one-bedroom unit; maybe behind one of the stacks of boxes. The woman pushed a small bowl and spoon towards him. He ate with one hand while clutching something in the other. John recognized the toy: a Jungle Tunnel Rat G.I. Joe. He'd had the same one when he was a kid. Those rippled abs and realistically nipped pecs must have been what dug into his foot on his way to the bedroom.

The woman got up to wash dishes in the cubby-like kitchen, leaving John alone with her son. He didn't make eye contact, but John could feel a familiar energy emanating from the boy. He'd felt it emanating from himself every time his mom brought home someone new. This empathy created a tenderness in John. The boy needed a dad. Maybe John could be that dad. Maybe he'd ride the Red Line here again, become a presence in this one-bedroom unit. He could teach the kid to play cards and use the bet money from Phu to take him to a game at Fenway Park.

Just when John was imagining catching a fly ball for the kid and giving it to him to cherish forever, the boy looked up from his doll. For the first time John, could see his eyes: a sickening toilet-bowl swirl of colors, set in a face that had no racial markers ever associated with any human community. "You fucked my mom," he said a voice that had neither place nor age. "Fuck you."

John stood up and left.

When he got back to his house in the last lingering hours of the summer afternoon his friends were all lounging on the stoop, passing around a blunt and eating his mom's homemade sesame candy. Phu was the first one to see him coming down the sidewalk. "Yo, it's John!" Suddenly the boys were whooping and cheering like he was the hero at the end of his movie.

"How was it, man?" said Phu. His wallet was already out.

The inside of John's head felt as dry as if someone had split it open and laid out the halves in the sun. He tried to recall the sensation of the woman's vagina closing around his penis but could only remember the boy and his placeless face.

"Got my dick wet," said John, grinning. The boys ruffled his hair and patted every accessible inch of his body and followed him into the apartment, where his mother, sensing a beginning, had prepared a special meal.