



TWO

OF US

STORY BY Rosamund Burton PHOTOGRAPH BY Simon Schluter

A chance meeting in Vietnam between Kirsten Albrecht, 62, of Melbourne's Kozminsky Studio, and jeweller Dat Van, 45, led to a friendship that has since – despite an interview wardrobe malfunction – sparkled into something deeper.

KIRSTEN: In 2013, my husband Johnny and I were on holiday in Vietnam's Hoi An, where we found this bar-cum-jewellery store. Sitting speaking English were two uber-stylish men. They looked like a lovely couple, so I asked them if they'd like to have a drink with us. Dat and Darren said they lived in Sydney and were in Vietnam celebrating Dat's 40th. Dat designed and made jewellery and worked at night as assistant manager of an Italian restaurant, and Darren was sales director for a travel firm. I told them if they came to Melbourne to look us up.

Dat was in Melbourne soon after and showed us a ring he'd designed that signified his family's escape as refugees from Vietnam in 1980, when their boat was attacked by pirates. I knew instantly that he was a jeweller of great capacity.

In 2015, when Darren got a job in Melbourne, Johnny and I interviewed Dat for a position at Kozminsky, our family jewellery store. He arrived wearing shorts. I thought, "No one comes to an interview in shorts," so initially I offered him one day a week. But he was so charming that by the end of the interview I wanted to employ him full-time. He did our visual merchandising, including window displays, and a small collection he'd designed was sold in the shop.

He's an incredible aesthete, self-effacing and gentle. He'd come to meetings and take notes in his Moleskine journal, like a school kid. We developed a closeness as we both adore Japan.

Several months after Dat started, Johnny died. He had a heart attack, aged 62, while in Hobart for work. We'd been together for 20 years and were indescribably happy. Dat was amazing. He took me out for dinner and helped decorate the apartment I bought after Johnny died.

My father bought Kozminsky in 1969 and moved it into a large Bourke Street edifice in 1975, the year I turned 18 and married for the first time. I worked there for more than 40 years and it's been an integral part of my life. However, when the building lease ended in 2017, I decided to close the business. Dat was incredibly supportive. After I went to New York to visit two of my sons – I have three sons and a stepdaughter – and their families, then went on a cruise.

Back in Australia, I knew I needed a *raison d'être*, so I decided to relaunch Kozminsky as a small, above-the-street business with a strong online presence, selling antique, vintage and contemporary jewellery, some of which is designed and made by Dat. I wanted Dat as my work partner. Being frightfully impatient, I was saying, "Come on. What is there to lose?" But he took a month to say yes.

The level of trust I put in him I've never put in anybody previously, and there's no decision I make without him. He's the yin to my yang. I'll run an idea by Dat and he'll say, "Maybe not that one." Most people can't get away with that, because I'm very determined and can be

petulant. He's serene. If I get a bit hysterical, the loudest thing he'll say is, "Calm down."

He's a minimalist and I'm a maximalist. I'm forever wanting to put more into the studio and he's saying no. Dat and Darren's home is beautiful and incredibly measured, whereas mine is like the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Sigmund Freud said, "Work is love." Work is the best thing I do, and working with somebody I'd be happy to live with is amazing.

DAT: Darren and I went to Hoi An for my 40th birthday. I was born in Vietnam, but my ancestry is Chinese. We were in this bar and heard people talking around the corner. I said, "I bet they're Australian." Then Kirsten walked over and introduced herself.

When I went to Melbourne to see my family at Chinese New Year, I showed Kirsten and Johnny my "pirate ring", which honours my family's journey to Australia when I was eight. Pirates boarded our boat and divided families, making Mum, my brother and me walk across two narrow planks to their boat. They strip-searched everybody and took their valuables. Dad hid his wedding band in his mouth and sold it in Kuala Lumpur to buy a pen and paper to write to my grandfather in Vietnam saying we were safe.

I grew up in Melbourne and lived there until Darren and I moved to Sydney for his work in 2008. When I rang Kirsten to say Darren had a job in Melbourne, she screamed, "Come and work at the store." The day of my interview was really hot, so I wore a linen jacket and shorts. It's become a joke. When we tell people about how I came to work for Kozminsky, Kirsten says, "He came in shorts."

I liked something on Facebook that Johnny posted the night he died. The following morning, I had an uncomfortable heaviness on my chest and thought about seeing a GP. At work, I went to the meeting room and Kirsten was collapsed on the floor. Though I'm not superstitious, I felt my chest sensation was a message from him, but I didn't tell her until later.

Knowing Kirsten hated being alone, Darren and I often had dinner with her, or she'd come to us, and she enjoyed that. When the shop shut, I went to work for another jewellery store before Kirsten approached me. I didn't want to let her down, knowing that relaunching Kozminsky would get her out of bed every day, but didn't think I had enough experience.

In the old store, there were 10 staff, but now it's just the two of us, which can be challenging. If I'm unwell or overwhelmed, I become businesslike, which doesn't gel well with Kirsten. Normally we're both very carefree.

Kirsten gives me so much creative freedom, and tells everyone I'm her business partner, which is very generous, but, really, I manage the business. We disagree on buying stock: I'll think something is too busy and she'll think it's beautiful. I've learnt it takes both our tastes to make Kozminsky Studio work.

She's a complex thinker and full of ideas. She's also an overly generous person and a constant giver. I often have to say no to gifts she wants to buy me. When we opened two years ago, I came up with the Kozminsky Studio phrase "Live life, wear beauty", because Kirsten is full of life and lives each day to the fullest. ■

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