

Nguyễn Văn Sâm's Short Stories
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Nguyễn Huỳnh Điệp

A Self-Deluder
(Người huyền tưởng)

Holding the bamboo stick that had been made for him by his nephew-in-law some days ago, Uncle Tư Chụ knocked it slightly on the iron gate and carefully stepped out. The wind in the early morning was a little bit cold which made him hesitated for some moments and he stopped after some familiar steps. Attentively holding the stick between his legs, Tư Chụ raised his hands up and down and he breathed some fresh air in the early morning. He then took the stick and was moving it in the air like a man practicing his martial art. He stopped moving the stick and turned round to the direction of the middle quarters from which someone was approaching him touting lottery tickets.

The lottery ticket seller's voice sounded rather sticky and somewhat familiar to him, but he couldn't know why he felt it familiar. It was probably that he often heard the voice twice a day which made him feel so; the first time was in the early morning and the second in late afternoon when the sunshine had become less tense and the loudspeaker over there was about to start its stentorian evening broadcast. "Is it that having listened to his crying so often makes me feel familiar to it?" he thought to himself.

He had been living here for a month so far. Nobody seemed bother to give a hoot about an old overseas Vietnamese like him. He lead a frugal life with his niece and the niece's husband, this couple was to prepared him his daily meals; besides, he could take care of himself. It was quite simple; everything would

come out right in the end. You have to take care of yourself, and should not depend on the others; if you rely on the others to have everything done you would become a languid man. "A man who is physically and intellectually intact can usually achieve whatever he needs," he told himself, and he also said so to anybody who praised him for having done his daily routine which should have been supported by others.

The lottery ticket seller stopped in front of him.

"Would you please buy some lottery tickets, sir? Number 43 and 77 will really do count this time. I have only these some tickets left."

"No, thanks, but I don't buy lottery tickets. Buying them is tantamount to casting your money into trash can. Purchasing them in the morning only to discard them in the afternoon," he said smiling with a friendly manner.

"Just try this time and you may win and make a bundle this afternoon. You look so radiant; you may be visited by the goddess of Fortune today, who knows? The fortune will be in your hand this afternoon for sure." He put more weigh on his words, "It's life. If you meet with good fortune, take this ticket and you'll win. The other, who doesn't meet with it, even if he has taken that very ticket, will never get a penny."

"This man is much too glib," he thought. "Such a glibly talkative man maybe insincere"

"Previously I used to buy a lot," replied Uncle Tư Chia. "I bought in sheaves every week. It's not necessary any more now. I've abandoned it already. Whether winning or losing it'll call off my attention, so I don't buy them any more."

"Trading is like pulling teeth, you know," the vendor said. "I'm a defeated soldier so I have to be in abject misery like this. If I were as lucky as somebody else I could have been a *Việt kiều*

now, and not have to weary of walking selling these tickets to lengthen my miserable life.”

Uncle Tư Chụ felt it interesting to have a talk with the man. While keeping the stick between his legs, he said:

“Now chose for me two pieces of tickets with the numbers you’ve mentioned about. If I win this afternoon I’ll give you a half. It’ll be no good to keep all the gain for oneself.”

The ticket retailer put the cigarette onto his lips; he puffed deeply at it, and cast the cigarette butt away. He blew out a long breath and didn’t seem to take the customer’s promise into any account. Uncle Tư Chụ pulled a wry face against the smoke the retailer breathed out.

“Do you really enjoy smoking cigarettes? Its smell gives me the creeps.”

The lottery ticket seller did not answer the customer’s question. He has his own intention.

“I have only five left. You should take them all. There’ll be no need to make change. Fifty thousand đồng. That day I had only three pieces left, and I offered them to that man. It turned out that all the three won the first prize. He was so lucky.”

Tư Chụ shook his head. He took out from the wallet two pieces of ten-thousand bills:

“When you’re really lucky, you’ll win even if you’ve bought just one or two tickets. If you have no luck, you’ll go belly-up even when you’ve purchased heaps of them.”

“You’re right,” the retailer said. “That time I managed to get to the small boat with my samsonite full of dollars in hand, yet I’m now staying here to get through the hard time. If you weren’t destined to be rolling in dough, you’ll never be rich. Even if the wealth has come onto you hand you’ll fail to grasp it.”

Uncle Tư Chụ recalled his own situation. He gave a sigh. Arriving in the States does not mean you’re in good spirits. It depends on who you are. After twenty years of hard work, he and his children had got some real property under their belts when all of a sudden the accident happened and everything went down the tubes. It was lucky that he was on Medicare, but for which worse would have come to worst.

“Why, bring it home to me, will you? I haven’t got the picture. If you had gone aboard a small boat, after some half an hour you would have been able to reach a larger one in the open sea and becoming a *Việt kiều* would be duck soup. Why couldn’t it be?”

The ticket seller didn’t reply. His hand was waving the lottery tickets, persuading his customer:

“Buy some more tickets, will you? I might be in luck today for having talked to you and my tickets would be sold out early. Confidentially, I’ve rather aged now, tired of walking with these weary legs.”

He patiently showed the tickets in front of Tư Chụ but it seemed that the man was distracted and did not see them, so he had to press the tickets into the man’s hand.

“You know, I had jumped aboard a small boat with a close friend. But as too many people jumped into it the boat could not move, and finally it went down. I had to try my best holding the suitcase of money and to help the friend, afraid he could be drowned, all that made me exhausted. Finally...” The ticket seller stopped telling his story. He took out a cigarette, lit it and puffed a long breath; while he was stringing out his enticing; his eyes were running around looking for some customers. His eyes and his gestures combined in a professional manner. Uncle Tư Chụ said nothing; he kept waiting

patiently. He was fumbling around when his hands touched the lottery tickets. He took two more pieces.

"Finally I managed to come ashore. Staying here since then, it makes me fed up. I walked along the beach looking for another boat, but it was too late. It was a great chaotic crowd of people of all ranks. Too many defeated soldiers there, I was unable to bring myself aboard any other boat. Thus going home."

"Could you manage to rescue you friend?"

"Yes, but it's rather disgusting to mention it."

"Why"

"He snatched the suitcase out of my hands and disappeared into the crowd. I was staggering, down in the mouth. Sometimes I wanted to fire a shot into my head and go out of this world. I'd been defeated in the war and now was deceived by a friend. If he had been a stranger it would be not so bitter."

Uncle Tư Chju shuddered strongly as if a gust of cold wind was blowing over him while he was not warmly dressed. He prompted the man to say his piece.

"Perhaps your friend was jostled by people in the crowd so you two were lost from each other, hah? At such a time it was easy for people to get lost from one another, wives from husbands, children from parents. Friends should be easier to lose sight of one another, as they never hold hands."

"I see. But it was not so. With that guy, vice was his second nature. He was a robber, a footpad." The man's voice was louder and upset.

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In the afternoon of the 28th April, Lieutenant Bả, the subdivision deputy, assembled the staff of all sections and ordered them to confront the strong pressure from the enemies.

Sergeant Chju was walking to and fro in front of the meeting room to check security as he used to. The meeting room was almost deserted, it was not noisy as it used to be previously; only some souls made their presence felt. Few people could make much of the lieutenant's speech. "The situation is very serious. We are responsible to hold this position to the last minute. But we will try as much as possible... Everybody has his own family, his wife and children and even his own life to protect.... If worst comes to worst you could take care of your dear life, but under no circumstances shall you release the prisoners, as they might turn to kill you to take their revenge, or they might rob you something. It will be very dangerous.

Sergeant Chju thought of Chòi, his schoolmate from a primary school. The latter was in custody waiting to be sent to the province to be sentenced. He was sent here from the hamlet long time ago. He had been arrested in an operation in the area under "*their*" control. "I don't know what to do for him now," Tư Chju thought to himself. "When coming across me, he was looking at me indifferently, but I feel very sad, because he is the only schoolmate from primary school I've ever met again." Tư Chju still remember Chòi's right hand which had only three fingers. It was the result from an accident when the two boys competed with each other using their left hands to cut grass to feed their cows. They used to be a close couple in their childhood – Chju and Chòi. Wherever they may be or whatever they may be doing, both of them were seen. Whenever seeing Chju or Chòi somewhere one would ask where Chòi or Chju was respectively.

"I remember that he told me let him hold the suitcase," the ticket seller continued his story. "I didn't agree. Later, when we were jostling the crowd, he snatched the suitcase from me strongly and determinedly, saying that in my

hand the suitcase could be lost and that only in his hand could its security be secure. With the suitcase he snuck away while I was still stuck in the crowd," the man explained. "You see," he added, "I had rescued him why did he have the heart to act like that?"

Suddenly uncle Tư Chiu raised his stick, thrashing it in front of the ticket seller, then he gave a sigh and put down his hand, saying:

"Your story sounds very sad," said Tư Chiu. "Let me shake your hand to express my sympathy to you for having incurred bad luck in the past, and I congratulate you for having risen above misfortune to survive."

The little finger was missing on the seller's hand which Uncle Tư Chiu could sense clearly through the handshake. He shrunk back. He had been to many countries in the world, had experienced lots of ups and downs in life, but he never had a sensation like this, a strange sensation of hatred and loving, of pity and anger. He swallowed hard that the poor man was looking at him surprisingly.

The ticket seller commented philosophically, "Life is a damn thing, you see. I'd rescued him from the jail. On 30 April I opened the door of the jail to liberate him while the fire was spreading fiercely and the jail was about to be gulped in it and guns shot everywhere... Having lost the war lost the country and additionally I was to be robbed. My sadness is rather hard to stand." He gave out a sigh and walked away staggeringly.

"Lottery tickets! Lottery tickets here!" His touting sounded sticky and familiar.

Uncle Tư Chiu whispered quietly:

"That's Chơi. God's punished him. It might be OK if you told lies to anybody, but how wretched you shall feel when telling lies to yourself! He was living in an illusion. He hates

betrayal and deceit, yet he is deceiving the others. He was the very object for his hatred. Self-deluding that he's been betrayed doesn't help make him feel happier, innocent, and thus being acquitted of his crime; quite the contrary it made him resent himself, and accused himself of the crime he had done in the past. He despised himself permanently without being aware of it." Uncle Tư Chiu raised his stick waving toward the lottery ticket seller, called out loud:

"Sell me some more tickets, *chơi*", he emphasized the word "*chơi*" (¹).

The seller stopped, surprised:

"Why, do you know my name?"

"I do not know what your name is," replied Uncle Tư Chiu. "Just want to buy one more tickets and ask you what happened to the money suitcase. Just asking so. Your story was so interesting. Can't stand with just half of it."

"... Eh, somebody might have snatched it from him, or he himself might have spent all of it in gambling. Nobody can be rich, nor anyone can be happy all his life with their loot," said the man.

"If you came across the old friend of yours now, how would you do?" asked Tư Chiu.

The ticket seller seems to hesitate:

"I may cock a snook at him and after that each one will go on his way. That's all. One should bury the hatchet instead of bearing resentment. Let his conscience punishes him, and God would make him suffer."

Uncle Tư Chiu drew out a VND500.000 bill from his trousers' back pocket to pay the ticket and he intentionally showed no awareness of it when he turned round to go away. The ticket seller's eyes glittered. He was trying to figure out whether the customer knew that he had

given the wrong amount of money. Being sure that the old man was completely unaware of it, the seller hurriedly turned and left.

Uncle Tư Chju slowly groped his way into the gate entrance; his stick was probing the gate like a mischievous kid playing his sword against the door. He talked to himself: "That's Chòi. An unchanged man. He is still what he is. Greedy. I need not let him know who I am. What for anyway? It's regrettable that I've lost my sight and I can't see how wrecked he has become. When you've despised yourself, certainly you'd become a loose person."

His niece coming out from the house worriedly looked at him and she said quietly, "You went out so early in the morning. You cannot see the way, it would be very unfortunate if you fell or tumbled down."

Uncle Tư Chju whispered to himself, "A self-deluder, a self-deluder!"

The loudspeaker at the other end of the quarters was sounding wearily. Its cracked sounds lengthened for some moments before it came to an end.

(Written at my schoolmate Lâm's)

¹ *Chòi* was the given name of the lottery ticket seller, but the word also means "to play" or "to do something for pleasure". In this context it is used ambiguously as a pun with both shades of meaning. In their following conversation, the word is also used intentionally and ambiguously by Tư Chju some more times which cannot be rendered into English.