

FALLING OFF THE SLOPE OF LIFE

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from Vietnamese original text,
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I told the taxi-bike rider to stop. He asked me why I came home from work so late at night. "It's very stinky around here," he said. "Those who're living here all get rhinitis and anginose; it's risky of you to live at such a place." I was lying through my teeth, "I've been living here for ten years and nothing of mine has ever been harmed – except my wallet." He was smiling said, "Oh, everybody's wallets must be "harmed" these days, unless they are those godfathers and their children's". I paid him lavishly and with the bag under my arm, I started to walk along the pavement. The deserted street was quiet in the small hours, even dogs seemed to be asleep; not a single one heard barking aimlessly or seen wandering and rummaging in trash bags as they used to in late afternoon.

The wind was springing about. The stronger the wind, the higher the stink rose. Stinky. Strongly pungent. Hence the name Stink Canal. No wonder someone had given the place the name. I changed the way of carrying the bag and held it against my breasts. So much love I felt to it. What a pity for my child who had barely been able to breathe the air of this earthly life just for less than an hour before giving it up for good. How do I love thee! Yet now I'm going to be parted from you for ever, my dear child. I felt a sensation of cold touching my breasts from the bag, and it frightened me. It left my legs loose and flaccid. There, it was the margin of the Stink Canal. Just swing my arms and it would be done. But I hesitated. I overheard for many times that this canal was a sneaky "grave" for perinatal deads. I

faintly understood that the term "perinatal deads" referred to unwanted infants that died of any cause unfair and fishy. Now I came to know that it was not easy to swing an unwanted and dead child unto that stream, although nobody would see it, nor anyone would know about it. The water in the Stink Canal was as dark as that of Nại Hà, a river said to be in the nether world. As it was so thick and so dark that it mixed with the darkness of the night, the water in the canal didn't seem to flow. I still was not used to its stinky smell. The lights from some houses on the margin of the canal were reflecting here and there in the stream merging it into more terrible colors. My child shouldn't be left in that stream. Thou were human anyway, Thou should be discharged in a way different from those dead mice and cats and other waste and dirty things people usually discarded there. The wind became colder now. I held the bag against my chest when the tears were running on my face. A taxi-bike came over. The rider offered me a ride if I wished to go somewhere.

"Could you take me to the Eastbound Bus Station?" I replied him absentmindedly and didn't even know why I had had the idea in mind.

Pushing the door open, a man stepped out of the toilet. An extremely strong smell hit Chín Tươi's nose. The smell ran to both of her temples and almost made her vomit. She frowned making her way in and tried to pull the door close. The door was old, damaged and rather heavy; it hung down on the warped hinges. The lower part of the door was ragged to shreds so it could not shut completely. Chín Tươi hesitated a little bit, but as she saw a number of people behind her ready to push themselves forward to take her place, she braved it out and put one foot

onto a place relatively clean while looking for another place for the other foot. The trashcan in the toilet was rather high and full of oodles of dirty paper; she didn't see it fit to put her dead child into it. *My dear child shall be lying out of it. Mom loves you so much but can't do otherwise. Even my life I can't manage it, how can I help you? You shall return to the life through another way rather better off or at least better than your mom's life.* From the bag she had been carrying under her arm Chín Tươi took out something wrapped in a towel and gently put it down beside the trashcan against the wall. Unwrapping the towel at a corner, she looked through the opening and wept quietly. Time was silently fleeing away. The smell that had made her feel headache when she got in disturbed her no more now.

A stentorian voice of a woman rising from outside accompanied with the loud knocks on the door. "Anyone in the booth seven, do get out quickly. It's time to do the cleaning. Don't sleep in there. Come and sleep at your home. This is not a hotel for you to sleep in."

Chín Tươi hurriedly stood up. She got out of the rest room trying to avoid the eyes of the cleaner. A manlike woman in a pair of high rubber boots which were covering almost her shanks, with a trash-gathering broom in one hand, in her other hand was a trash picker, looked rather violent as if she was ready to run anyone into trouble.

Chín Tươi walked quickly, wiping the tears with her hands. She was aware that it was in early morning and there were many people around here. *If I had known it would be crowded like this I'd have been to somewhere and would have waited until noontime,* she thought. She barely came to the booth two when the woman cleaner suddenly and urgently voiced after her:

"Hey, that girl, just stop and I'll tell you what. Why are you in a hurry as if you were fleeing?"

Chín Tươi gathered pace, pretending not hearing the call, but she had to stop as the woman's threat sounded firmly:

"If you don't stop I'll call the guards to deal with you."

"You called me?" she asked.

"It's you and not anyone else. You think I'm crazy enough to call myself? I'm not that foolish."

The woman seemed to like grumbling and throwing someone a curve. Chín Tươi asked her softly, "What's the matter, big sis?"

"Don't pretend ignorance. You've had it with abandon and then cast your child off in the toilet!" Not letting her interlocutor to protest, she stepped forward, adding, "Now, come on, I'll show you this." She grasped Chín Tươi's hand pulling her back into the toilet. Chín Tươi was petrified with fear. *The thing has broken like this, how can I do now?* She thought to herself. Chín Tươi tried to justify herself faintly, "I know nothing about this, you shouldn't out of the blue shift the misfortune to me, you know."

"How dare you deny it?" the woman challenged. "Your face is so pale. I bet for sure you've just given birth to a child. You did it alone and by yourself and was bleeding so much. You've sampled sex at too young an age, hah." The woman moved out her lower lip when she was speaking. "Having enjoyed pleasure with abandon and then threw your child away, without a bit of concern whether the infant is still alive or dead." With that, the woman grasped Chín Tươi's hand and pulled her toward the booth seven. On hearing the matter, people, men and women, who were awaiting their turn to get access to the toilets, were swarming

around the two. Still Chín Tươi kept denying faintly, "It was not me who did it. I don't know anything about this. Don't be so unjust, big sis." She was crying softly like a child being treated unfairly.

"Hey, the baby seems to have died," the woman declared. "It's very serious to have committed infanticide, you know. If it died for being delivered prematurely, your crime might be tolerable. Otherwise, it had been normally born and in good shape and was killed by the mother, you would be the murderer." She added, "In this year, there have been at least a dozen infants being discarded like this. Some among them, when discovered, were swarming with ants in their eyes and navel; it's really a heartbroken sight to behold."

Oh my dear child, Mom didn't want this to happen. You died immediately at birth, it was not your mom that had impacted on your death, was it? You should prove my love for you.

"What'd happened to the bodies of those unlucky babies you've mentioned?" asked someone among the crowd.

The woman replied, giving the one who'd asked a look as if he was a stupid that didn't know beans: "What a question! They all were collected and brought to the Đông Thạnh garbage dump in Hốc Môn, of course, like all other garbage. Otherwise, do you think they would be cooked for food? Nobody is idle to inquire what had happened to them. The results from hundreds cases of curettage in Từ Dũ Hospital wouldn't be any different." She stopped for a moment, casting her eyes around, and then she continued. "Anyone caught to have got rid of her child shall be brought to the Ward; they'll have the case solved to set an example for others."

Chín Tươi struggled drastically, "Don't accuse me unjustly. I haven't given any birth..."

"Come on, you're going to say so with the police. No one is ever a criminal on his own admission."

The two kept crossing words with each other. More and more curious people bunched up around them.

Chín Tươi became out of arguments and she was also exhausted. She started to cry out loud and wanted to give up the struggle, no matter whatever it would turn to be. She was too tired and could stand no longer. At that very moment, there appeared a man whose dress looked cleaner than that of the onlookers around. He jostled into the middle of the crowd.

"What's the matter, my darling?" He asked the girl, and then he turned to the woman cleaner, "This is my wife. You shouldn't be unjust to her any more. She's so meek; being treated unfairly she could do nothing in self-defense but cry. Take this money, and please go and buy some incense and candles to offer to the dead baby and pray it to be reincarnated. Doing so you will enjoy must blessing than having build lots of pagodas. You're the first one having discovered the infant, if you don't worship it, you won't be able to lead a safe and sound life. It's a forsaken spirit, you know." He put much weigh on the words 'forsaken spirit'.

The woman cast a quick glance at the money in her hand. It seems quite a worthwhile cause. It was wrapped outside with a VNĐ500,000 bill. She lowered her tone, "I didn't know she's your wife. Anyway, that a number of young girls unmarried, giving immature birth or procuring an abortion and then getting rid of their infants here is anything but rare. However, it's not so terrifying here than at the Stink Canal of

Sóng Thần EPZ. Only God knows if something was discharged into the stream there in the darkness.”

The onlookers now turned to discuss where those unmarried moms often chose to get rid of their unwanted babies, the Stink Canal, public rest rooms, rubber plantations, or public parks.

Chín Tươi had been pulled out and pushed into a taxi. The man gave the taxi driver an amount of money and told him to take the girl to where she may wish to come, and with that, he walked across the street, got onto a taxi-bike.

Chín Tươi was still stunned by what had happened. The tears of humiliation were damping her sleeves...

Having parted company with her boyfriend, Chín Tươi stepped onto a taxi-Lambretta. She smiled recalling the words Tư Thiện had gently entreated her, “At nine o’clock tonight, I’ll be waiting for you at our old place, the grove of banana of Ms. Tư the sticky rice seller. Please come and don’t let me weary of waiting for you as you did last time, darling.”

This time Chín Tươi didn’t want to make a date, but she loved the sweet word ‘darling’ Tư Thiện had addressed her. The word followed her all the way home from the market place, giving her a warm feeling that nothing could be in comparison with, specially in the hell of her family now. The Lambretta came to a halt at the alley, Chín Tươi got off the vehicle, trying to walk with steady stride avoiding the stripping eyes of her brother’s friends who were sitting drinking at the end of the alley. She hoped her elder brother wasn’t among them. But she was stunned when Chầy, her brother, called out loud with authority, “Tươi, come home and cook me a bowl of duck meat porridge. The

duck was tied and left in the kitchen. And make it snappy, you know.”

Chín Tươi kept walking without giving a word in reply. Talking to that drunkard would only end up with trouble. Chầy might feel losing face in the presence of his buddies, he called out after her: “Do you hear what I said? Are you dumb? Why don’t you answer me? I’ll be home in some moments, if the porridge isn’t available, you wouldn’t be long for this world.”

Chín Tươi swallowed hard. Her sibling acted as if he were her master and she his slave. And with his threat.

“Why don’t you stop and let me talk to you? Or you want to be beaten?”

The sister stopped. She stood motionless, keeping her distance from the brother.

“I’ve borrowed some million đồng from aunt Hai in town for you going to the city to have the paperwork made and go marry a Korean husband. Prepare yourself to show up tomorrow and let them take a look. I won’t have money to repay the debtor.”

“You won’t be able to repay why dare you spend their money? Do I want to get married far from home? Dad is rather old now, he might depart this world at any time, how can I stand leaving him at home and get married far away?”

“Never mind him. He’s too old and decrepit. It’ll be OK if he dies. I have to take care of myself. If you go marry a Korean I’ll somewhat benefit from it. Otherwise, I’ll get damn all out of you. You shall not oppose my words or Tư Thiện, your boyfriend, would have his guts seen out of his belly some day. What I’ve told you I would do it, not just I threaten anybody. I’ve not yet told you that I know where you both usually meet each other.”

I fled my home early that morning. If I hadn't, Thiện would really be gutted one day. As for Chảy, nothing could make him balk at. Once to get money to pay one of his drunken orgies, he took my motorbike to put in hock without having to present any owner's card. Scolded by my dad, he argued against him, and then he overthrew the family altar and end up like a derelict leaving home for days. Not just that, however, he threatened that if dad kept grumbling he would kill him and do porridge then.

I could do nothing but weep quietly, and my father was as silent as a shadow. Now this brother of mine was going to pick fights with my boyfriend. If I hadn't fled my home Thiện might have come up against unexpected dangers. Showing myself up without a stitch on and letting foreigners caress and examine my virginal body with their impudent choosing would be something unacceptable to me. Would they be expecting a wife or buying a pig or a dog? Well, there should be some way to settle. Linger on at home would be like being suffered in two hells. The City might give me shelter. With the addresses of some friends of mine in my pocket, I went out on the last date with Thiện.

In the faint moonlight, and in such an emotional state of going to part company with my boyfriend without knowing whether we could see each other again or not, I became rather accommodating to such a degree that I myself hadn't expected. Thiện's hands were going at my body leaving not any area unexplored. My flesh enthusiastically responded to his caress. I could just hold my breath looking at the moon; now and then I took his hands and put them onto my cheeks trying to avoid falling off the slope of life. I was too young then – just seventeen. Thiện hands were rather wet. I felt too ashamed to bear but Thiện was

breathing hard pressing his face to my body. Just thinking of the difficulties I might encounter in the future, I tried to stand up against my will and I was determined to leave. "It shouldn't happen, Tươi," I told myself, "Men in general don't look farther than where they're. But you must be careful to protect yourself."

While Thiện was still bewildered by my attitude, I got into an early taxi-Lambretta bound for the City, leaving behind the country life, in my effort to prevent myself from falling off the slope of life.

Chín Tươi arrived at her lodging house at about nine o'clock in the morning. There were two rows of lodging rooms, one opposite the other. They were just bustling with lodgers' activities in early mornings and late afternoons. They all looked deserted now. Two clotheslines were extending from the farther end to the gate thick with cheap clothes and underwear hung onto them. Normally, Chín Tươi didn't pay attention to them, but now she had to walk under those things to get access to her room and open the door which made her feel disheartened. Chín Tươi's hands were trembling opening the door. Once inside, she pulled the curtain separating the two beds; casting the bag onto the ground, putting off her shoes, Chín Tươi threw herself strongly into the bed. She was lying closing her eyes to relax. She was glad recalling the benefactor who had appeared on time to rescue her from the difficult situation. She recalled the wrinkled face of her child who was blood-red when being born then quickly turned livid. She thought of Tư Thiện and felt pity for him. He was her good boyfriend, now she felt sorry for having refused to respond to him that night. She thought of her dad in his poor cranky barbershop with the sign reading

“Thanh Bần” (Honest Poverty); day after day he was always ripped off to the last penny by the very evil son of his, so he would never be better off with such a son. How much pity I feel for you, my dad!

Someone was knocking on the door; the sounds were like those she had heard at the restrooms of the Eastbound Bus Station:

“Dear Tươi, do open and let me in. I want you so much.”

Tươi buried her head in the bed mattress as if the mattress could help her from hearing those sounds she didn’t want to listen to.

“Dear Tươi, this is me. I miss you so much. Let me have you one more time.”

Chín Tươi got up. She spewed up onto the mattress all what she’d eaten the previous day. She pressed her ears hard as if to make them stuck to her temples. Her face turned red like that of a gecko.

On the outside, the knocks on the door sounded more and more urgent. The entreating became obscene scolding and threatening:

“I still have HIV-infected needles out here awaiting for you. You don’t let me in now, so whenever I see you later, I’ll thrust them into you and you’ll know what HIV is. Motherfucking, you’d fought against me, you’d avoided seeing me, yet you’ve got pregnant from me just like the other girls in this neighborhood...”

Then the silence went on outside for some five or seven minutes while in the room there were the sounds of heavy puffing and huffing as an extreme anger was being restrained.

“Open the door for me, dear Tươi, I’ll take you only this more time, I promise on my honor.”

Chín Tươi burst out crying:

“I’ve refused to bestow my favor on the man who really loved me only to find later I have to close my eyes submitting myself to this rogue in such a vulgar way many times. How miserable I am!”

“Dear Tươi, this time I just really wish to caress your belly and listen to the child stirring. I know you’re near your term...”

His child! Should he mention his child? One’s child should be conceived with love. A child resulted from a rape would never have a father. He or she only has mother. The infant that couldn’t be supported by its mom has departed this life, it would normally return to life in the love of a couple of parents. Is that the way? Is that the way, my dear child?

Chín Tươi burst out laughing. She continued to laugh and was in fits of laughter when at a sudden she heard as if something had broken. She felt herself falling down from above the clouds. Blood was slowly spreading all over the mattress.

On the outside the knocks went on noisily accompanied with scolding and threatening, while it was the death still silence in the room. Chín Tươi was lying motionless, with an untroubled and relaxed expression on her face, the expression she had tried to acquire so far.

Chín Tươi had turned eighteen not long ago then.