

## LOVE FOR SOIL

### Short story by Nguyễn Văn Sâm

*The greatest sorrow in the world  
Is not as bitter as that of losing one's homeland.*  
(Thái Tú Hạp)

The night dew was still lingering on leaves at early dawn. The air was so pure and fresh; everything was lively and full of energy, ready for the new day whether it would come rain or shine. The pineapple field across the road was displaying its straight beds; each of the plants spread its green spiny leaves and its stem bore one small fruit which was as large as a man's wrist, in all its tender freshness. It was pleasant to stand at one end of the field and look at the spectacular scenery as if thousands of huge flowers with their dragging calyxes were taking a loving care of their green fresh fruit.

On this side of the road were spreading immense fields of jasmine. The scent of jasmine was wafting softly in the fresh air of the early morning. Slender sprigs of jasmine with white flowers on them made the whole immense field look like being inlaid with jade. Birds were hiding somewhere asleep while waiting for the first rays of sunshine to wake them up to sing welcoming the morning.

At times a horse drawn carriage appeared then disappeared in the shade of night; its lamp which was surrounded with four pieces of different color glass, produced sort of weak and mysterious light. The horseshoes struck klak-klak against the asphalted road creating a series of vague monotonous sounds which grew louder and louder and finally the sound was sinking between the two fields on both sides of the dew-wet road.

Lining up along both sides of the roads were Dipterocarpus young trees which were bound to small pieces of plank to keep them stand up; they looked quite pretty like soldiers were standing in lines in a royal ceremony. Some

three-compartmented houses on their concrete floors with their huge pillars on their verandas were looking toward the bed of cotton-white flowers at waist-high which looked like clouds of dreamily soft kapok.

Miss Út took a very long breathe comfortably. For many years, since she was able to carry half a bucket of water, she got up early in the morning to water flower plants in the garden, and every time at it she felt as if it were her first time to do this favorable job. The garden was as pretty as that in the fairyland; on the jasmine field, the flowers were so white, and the scent was soft and it seemed rather vague as if there was some fairies hiding themselves around; on the pineapple field it was so green with the wafting scent of the sap running in the plants' leaves which were bringing out the vitality as of a group of valiant men full of vital force. Drops of dew were sparkling on leaves, flowers, and fruits, like myriad of tiny diamonds around a big gem. All the space was tranquil at a standstill like a mythological garden in the sleep of time.

Út was caressing a spray of flowers, thus awakening drops of dew which were bustling toward a lower place and bumped against one another to become bigger drops and ended up running down the stems to fell down to earth. The spray of softly fresh flowers remained in her hand under her caressingly tender look. She let go this spray and took another one; again the tiny gems were running along the stem and fell onto the earth. Her eyes were wide open to follow them with joy. On the surface of soil in the early morning there were small heaps of tiny balls of earthworms' excrement; the balls were like those of some medicine her mother had bought and entreated her to take when she had got wind. She took her feet off the wooden shoes to trample slightly onto the soil. She felt it pleasantly cool when the morning dew in the soil touched the soles of her feet. The feeling was running pleasingly along her backbone to the scruff or her neck. She smiled satisfactorily to her childish gestures.

Putting her feet back to her wooden shoes, she started with her daily routine. She raised the

bottom of the watering can to a reasonable height lest the water streams would do any harm to the sprays of flowers. Water provided vitality to the whole garden but a strong water stream might destroy many matured flowers which were to be gathered soon. She had learned this principle since she was a child coming to the field to watch her father watering the plants with great care.

She raised her voice toward Aunt Tám Sang who was working on the patch of field on her right.

"They'll come to collect dried flowers tomorrow. Do you think that the flowers we gathered last week are dry enough? Last time they claimed that the flowers were not properly dried and that we are not reliable and they subtracted a full bucket from the total amount. If it's necessary, please have the flowers exposed to the sun one more time today, will you?"

She recalled the last sale. She had to suffer a loss in turnover and also had to receive those purchasers' reproach but could not argue it away to defend. Especially she was afraid her father, who was being ailing, could hear the matter and got sicker. Old Bảy, who was watering the beds on the left, voiced his indignation:

"Why didn't you check with me and I would give them a low blow? The flowers are dried enough; more sun would drive them parched, and you would lose buckets of flowers for that. Those customers were counting on buying wholesale with large quantities and imposed their terms on us. They were dilly-dallying when making the payment yet they turned their noses up at the flowers. Who could live with it?"

Aunt Tám was deliberately speaking:

"They all behaved that same way. They might be smiling and speaking sweetly while they were squeezing the last buck out of us. If you can't stand doing business with Hồng Ký, try considering Phát Ký enterprise then. Their tea product labeled "*Sheguanyin qizhang*" is very sweet-smelling and much in demand. They may need our flowers. Those small fields beyond Bà Lớn's may not suffice them." She gave a half-

smile cheerfully. "How about the man from Giồng Ông Tố who has suggested acting as an agent and buying all our flowers sight unseen then he will sell them to tea producers? Have you contacted him? I think that's a good way of doing business; you won't have to take pains to deal with any buyer individually."

Miss Út refilled the watering can, brought it toward the end of the bed and replied softly:

"We try to figure out our way, but those men must be in cahoots with one another. This one may be over particular about something and the other may be picking off something else. They all must have been cast from the same mould. Being dependent only on one buyer alone, when any trouble presents itself we'll surely be on a sticky wicket."

She raised the watering can higher, and tenderly watched some water streams falling on the leaves and flowers on higher branches.

She flicked a glance at the other workers, afraid they could see her lugubrious countenance. "Lots of difficulties are looming ahead," she thought to herself. "Those Indian and Chinese immigrants want to buy up the garden. Elder brother Năm always urges dad to sell it off in order to do other business. Asked what business he wanted to mean, his answer was uncertain and ambiguous, but it seems that he wants to get his share of the family wealth right away. The pineapple price continually declines. The turnover from ten thousand units of the fruit this year isn't equal to half of that earned last year. Permanent customers who are in the neighborhood still come to make their purchases, but those who are far away all cleared out without making up the money they have owed." The money lost to those people was quite a large sum; it would make her feel giddy when she thought of it. Some customers were either not very tactful or intentional when they vehemently commended that Lái Thiêu's pineapple was tastier, and that Bến Lức's pineapple was favorably sweet. "Dad has been ailing since he got a slight stroke on the day he went visiting and redecorating mom's grave," she continued her thoughts. "The home has become more and more gloomy and it looks

dolefully funereal. No one except me worships mom. My brother takes possession of those horse-drawn carriages, not only he doesn't contribute his share of the family expenses, but he also borrows money from me and never gives back. As for Tôt, his dad wants him to go study in French, at first he objected it, now he seems to be at his dad's discretion. He's bound to go sooner or later, leaving me to stand alone against all the difficulties to come." She raised her hand to wipe off tiny drops of water brought by the wind onto her face.

"Whatever might come," Old Bầy's voice was full of emotion, "you should stand firm in the face of adversity. If you let things run its course now I really don't know how we'll manage. .. What's more, it'll be regrettable, since it is not easy to have set up a fortune like this. It's hard to build such a thing but so easy to destroy it. For my money, you shall maintain at any cost what you have acquired. Cultivating land is at a premium now." After a long silence, he added thoughtfully, "It seems that regions down there are no longer safe, people keep rushing to Sài Gòn..."

Aunt Tám Sang was speaking quietly to old Bầy to make sure Út wouldn't be able to overhear:

"It's so pitiful that she's gone paler and paler since the old man fell sick. We love her but can do nothing to help. You shouldn't say any more lest her cry."

It was very quiet in the morning, Út could make out vaguely but she guessed and understood Tám Sang's words. She was moved and her tears were going to fall down. She wanted to cry to get something off her chest. "These properties were left over from my forefathers," she thought. "My dad has spent his life making them prosperous; my mom had her illness here; fatal accidents happened to my eldest and my second elder brother here. Now my dad is lying in sickness here, how can I not worry? For one thing, as I am just a girl, without relatives around, as much as I try, I am afraid I can't take care of everything like someone else. I try my best after all; the rest will depend on the destinies."

She put her hand to the tap and rubbed her face. The fresh water in early morning made her felt relieved. The water running through her lips gave the feeling of freshness to her throat. She forced herself to cheer up while washing her feet under the tap. Some earth was splashed onto her wooden shoes making as if it wished to caress her white and velvety feet. Some sand was stuck onto the back of her heels. She was washing and watching her feet. They were really pink. "Would they stay this pink longer through the coming ups and downs of life?" she thought.

She splashed water stronger against her feet while she was rubbing one foot with the other. She rubbed the wooden-shoe straps forcefully. The water eroded the earth around the two wooden shoes.

Still there were some grains of sand on her fresh skin. She took the watering can toward the well. While walking along on the other side Ms Tám Sang was speaking quietly to old Bay:

"Tôt's father has invited his friends to a party throwing on early next year to congratulate his son for having received the pass-port to go to France studying medicine."

The watering can was put down rather strongly.

"I've known it for two months now," replied Út. "What's bound to come will come. He won't have a future staying here. His father urges him to leave everyday. He's very likely to be drafted into the military service. He's the only child. That's why his father has to worry."

"So what's your plan?" asked Tám Sang.

The tears were now dropping themselves off her eyes where they had been welling up.

"What plan can I have now?" uttered Út. "One who's bound to leave will leave; one who must stay will have to. It's every man for himself. It'll be quite a chance of happiness if we can reunite in the future; otherwise each will lead one's own life. We don't promise anything that might bind us together and disturb each other later. That a river may fork off in two directions is normal. Even you regret it but no one can help it."

The woman put down her tools, looking at the young lady emotionally:

"How great it would be if Tôt stayed to help you rehabilitate the garden. Every night I pray the gods of the land decide him to want to stay. There're too many things to be done, how can things be completed by you alone? Your brother never takes care of a thing, but he wreaks all kinds of havoc."

Since the subject had been pushed too far, Út put an end to it:

"Well, dawn is breaking now," Út told Tám Sang, "please go and wake up Cúc, won't you? Then she and I will take flowers to the market. Since today is the full moon day of the twelfth lunar month, the flowers may have a good run. We shall be ready or my brother would grumble about our tardiness."

In the dim light of the early morning, dozens of vases of flowers were skillfully loaded into the horse-drawn carriage, ready for a trip to the market on a day near the Tết. The young girl Cúc, having already washed her face and combed her hair neatly but looked sleepy, was sitting across a shaft of the carriage; she looked at her young mistress with a slight greeting smile. The two lanterns were dangling under the cart; they swung strongly throwing the two dancing shadows onto the surface of the driveway as the carriage managed to reach the main road.

The sun was slowly rising on the horizon. The noise of a new day that was breaking seemed to start.

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To be fair, my sister Út doesn't hate me at all. Each of us has already had one's own share. Family properties have been divided equally between us. I took four horses and two carriages; I utilize them and also rent them out, I spent all the income at my will. She took the jasmine and pineapple fields. Jasmine is sold to the Chinese in Chợ Lớn for scenting their tea. Pineapples are sold to customers at some small markets. Her income is higher than mine so she assumes responsibility for all the family

expenses, including food and the bills, and she pays the workers. My sister and I have not got married yet and our brotherhood is quite warm. Two or three times a month I help her carry the flowers to the market, thus giving up my first drive of the day, but I never think I have suffered loss for that. Neither does she think so; she generously provides the whole family with the best food instead of being stingy and restraining the family expenses to save her money. Our dad has been ailing for two years as yet which costs her a pretty penny. Sometimes, when feeling the pinch, I borrowed some money from her which I would pay back only when I was in the pocket or after a long time I would forget it. When she needed the money and wanted to get it back, I could but show her my bare face. She would grumble something and finally gave it a miss. It all came right out in the end. When she'd got it out of her system, I entreated her to lend me some money again. Siblings are to have come from the same blood. I know that she puts much weight on brotherhood. Sooner or later she would offer me the money.

I'm not superstitious to believe in gods to mention this matter, but honest to God, I love my sister very much and I want to save our family's fixed assets. The two large fields in the urban area where the land price is too cheap that those French, Indian and Chinese residents wanted to possess. Previously, someone had buried some dead bullets and grenades in the garden and then reported it to the Police and cops came to dig the things up. That cost my dad a large amount of *douceur*. Next, three or four men were caught in the act of secretly talking about political affairs in the pineapple field, my dad had to grease someone's balm one more time, and this time my family fell into debt. My dad has been confined to bed with his illness since then. Út alone can't take charge of the situation. I have to seek to do something. Money. Who could help by lending us money to pay off debts? If we failed to pay the debts, those creditors would foreclose on our land and we would have to get out of it empty handed some day. Foreseeing such an upheaval, how can I

remain impassive? Having considered all possibilities I've supposed that there'd be only one way: gambling on "đề," that is, a kind of raffle of which the players bet their money on a specific number they have chosen. Đại Thế Giới casino keep selling such raffle tickets everyday. Each day is a piece of my hope. In a very near future of twenty-four hours to come we would be no more unhappy, unfortunate, or desperate. If I fail today, my eagerness is to be postponed until tomorrow. Chances of success are always foreseeable. After a sleeping night, running the carriage until lunchtime and I would be able to square account with all our creditors. From fixing on a specific number I've turned out to bet on every number I thought it would appear on the day. I've spent time conjecturing from my dreams and the others', or inferring something from the caricatures on the papers such as "Tiếng Dân" or "Ánh Sáng"; when any number appeared to be "reasonably available" I'd empty my pocket on it to ensure my hope. I've been pursuing those ruffling numbers like a hunter chasing his prey which was running in front of and so close to him that he could extend his arm to catch it, yet he can never make the catch.

From ruffle, I've fallen for other sorts of gambling among my acquaintances, to rip money from one another. I don't miss out any way of card playing, and I never have enough courage to refuse any suggestion to join a game of cards. The more I lose and fall deeply in debts the more I become addicted to gambling. I cannot take pleasure in anything, nor do I have free time in my life. I always busy myself inquiring how to make a buck to burn it at a gambling-den. All that I usually think of is the pleasure of spreading the cards on my hands and raking in money from other people. Retrieve my losses. Retrieve my losses. That's the reason that has urged me into gambling; also it's the same reason that has pushed me into the abyss of interminable troubles and worries. Little by little, the debts have eaten away respectable factors from me. People may glad-hand me but they will talk ill of me behind my back that I am a gambler. I don't care. What can I do now? I've gone the length of it.

Tốt has been knocking around with Út for almost two years; they are known to almost everyone in the village to be as thick as thieves. Previously, when happening upon me at my home, he stood up to glad-hand rather bashfully while Út was getting cold feet. Later on, he found himself at my home all the time. When coming on me he just acknowledged me after a fashion and turned to chat with Út, as if I were someone boarding here or just a servant without any rights, not a member of my family. Út is a grown-up now; I can dress her down no more, so I can but blink at it. Tốt is a good student. He passed the first part of baccalaureate last year. He's studying the second part now. He behaves in stately manners like educated persons usually do. He never wants to extent a talk to seek acquaintance with me. Don't I know what he thought about me? He takes my name in vain, and he thinks little of me. It's my gambling habits that have had an impact on his attitude toward me. There's no other way I can do than pray the Heaven and Earth and the spirits of our forefathers to help me win the double of lottery, then I will give up all sorts of gambling to turn back as a good man. Út is a nice and up-and-coming girl. Both of them are a well-matched couple, a well-assorted pair. I wish them all good luck. By any chance she wouldn't need the garden as she would follow her husband to be daughter-in-law of a well-off family. That would be an opportunity for me to save my skin and clear of my debts. I'm head over ears in debts now. If I keep running my carriages like this, starting in early morning and calling it a day in the dark evening, day after day, even to the generations of my children's children's children would my debts be paid just a little. Poverty and the jail are like the sword of Damocles hanging over my head.

So I have to find a way.

However, man proposes but God disposes. Út seems to be devoted to her boyfriend but at the same time she may also be indifferent to him. She loves the soil, not the money. She may drop the young lad but never abandon the land. She keeps watering flowers every morning enthusiastically year after year without a break,

like a young man with his date. She caresses each bud and takes a loving care of the flowers as if afraid to hurt them. She earths up each plant every late afternoon. Every other or third day she comes to the pineapple field to snip leaves. No field owners ever do these petty jobs. But she loves doing them. She can sit for two or three hours in the field, looking at a bird hovering, watching each butterfly flying, engraving on her memory where the soil fell in, or a plant stunted or an ant-hill in the making. On a free day she goes scrutinizing every bed of plants in the field. Not only does she take care of jasmine flowers and pineapple but she also notes the color of soil at a specific place, whether it is rich soil or sandy, which flower vase is broken, which branch is withered, which bed is in need of water or fertilizer. The soil has become her blood and flesh or even her soul. She loves the garden very much. She's sort of a soul that was born here, is living on the land and when dead will be buried in this land, nothing could be able to move her away. It's not the income, nor is it the money however little or much that counts. The garden's worth a fortune to me, but as for Út, after she gets married to Tót, the garden will not mean much. It would be like changes left at the bottom of a safe. Those who are rolling in dough sometimes may forget small money they have left in some corners.

As the saying goes, land abounds with ghosts, rivers with water demons. Ghosts must be recognized as the gods of land. Those land gods have overpowered her. There's nothing in the way between her and the land. Even though having gone to anywhere she would finally come back. Whatever she does, everyday she always takes time to come and look at the field, caressing flowers, looking at leaves, breathing the same air with plants. She's like part of the field, or she were a deistic tree that has trained for years and evolved into human being to love and protect her subjects.

Since Tót with his mind full of knowledge always dogs her footsteps, I can hardly nag at her even if I wish to. At times I managed to borrow some petty amounts of money from her to tide me over at the moment but could not square up the big debts. Those petty amounts

of money are like a pill to cure an earthquake. It's lucky that Tót's dad forces him to go studying in France and he'll leave early next year. Some ten years later he'll be back as a medical doctor if he wouldn't have been bound by a "green-eyed and long-nosed mademoiselle" there. Are there ever any medical doctors fresh from school that wish to marry a girl from a family who does not have any influence to help make his career a piece of cake? I bet they will bust up at the very moment they arrive at a parting of the ways. I shall be patiently waiting for the day my father going out feet first. That'll be a bird in the hand then. No more being afraid of anyone taking headachy potshots at me. I'll have money to square up my debts then, without having to do anything. I have to take care of myself first. Being a good man but if welching on my debts I'll certainly be brought to book.

As for the garden, it's so strange that I was previously casting around for ways of saving the day, now I'm the one that advocates for selling it at any price to save myself. It's all because I've fallen for gambling. That's the result from my mistaking the way. I wish I had chosen another way, for example, trying to work hard and didn't take a short-cut. The short-cut was my hope to be a good brother to my sister, and I thought it would lead to an easy future of a field owner possessing horse-drawn carriages for rent. But sure enough, the short-cut will bring to my sister no end of misery and it's likely to damage our brotherhood too. Accidents happen, anyway.

Is it possible that I had become addicted to gambling beforehand and the idea of saving the family assets was just an excuse presented from my inmost heart to cover my gambling addiction? Very likely it was so. There are too many things people have done in life because of something that had gone to their heads but they cover them with very good reasons. Gambling addiction has been absorbed into my blood like the scent of jasmine flowers to my sister's. It's very reasonable. If not so, since my childhood I was punished badly by my father for having gambled, why didn't I give it up?

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Thìn grasped the money Út had given him, jumping over those vases of marigold and cockscomb reserved for selling on the full moon day of the first Lunar month to come, and he was strolling along a short-cut crossing the flower garden toward Cây Điệp Market. Út was smiling showing her set of fascinating teeth and speaking to him sweetly, even if she had told him to climb to heaven he wouldn't have had the heart to not obey. It wouldn't take a long time to run from here to the market and back, but the boy didn't run. He was walking in a slow relaxed way although in his mind he was in haste. He was muttering under his breath cursing little girl Cúc who had disappeared to somewhere in this early morning hence the mistress saw him and sent him on errand. "I'm a boy yet she sent me to the market place, especially on these days near the Tết. How bizarre it is!" he thought to himself. "They are getting together for the 'dice shaking' around their gambling site beside the well and are quarreling noisily. It sounds very joyful. Yet I can't join them. The dice of Hai Chí have been 'dead'; however shaken they keep showing their faces of hen and deer. I should calculate and lay my wager to win some money in order to eat a bowl of wonton noodle at the noodle stall of Ngân's father on the first day of the new year to get some good luck, to say nothing of the fact that after the three same faces have appeared at the same time, the next round one or two of the faces may appear again; putting a wager at that I may break the bank, and I'll put on new clothes and go visiting the zoo to watch some girls for good luck, or make for the Bến Thành Square to catch some breezes or look at foreigners in the afternoon of the first new year day.

He was moaning, grumbling but he kept walking regularly. He knew the weigh of the young lady's words. His dad was weird and acting peculiar. When he punished his children no one except only lady Út could advise against him. Uncle Năm was so fierce, never believed in anyone's words, but when lady Út was voicing to defend him for having lost half of the wage to

be paid for aunt Tám Sang's work of cutting grass, he kept his mouth shut and opened his wallet to get other money for the payment. She rarely reported any child's faults to their parents, but if she dropped a hint against one, that child would surely be brought to book. Last year Cúc did something wrong and on the lady's report the girl had to get her comeuppance.

Cây Điệp Market place was rather tiny although in the early morning of the twenty-ninth day of the last month of the year it was quite crowded. "It's like the Underworld holding a market on the last day of the year." He remembered his dad's strange saying though he did not know how the people in the Underworld held their market and why it was so crowded. In a sudden he remembered something important and got flustered. He was probing the back pocket on his trousers and went deadly pale. Oh no!... and he smiled. "Thought it was lost. Holding it in hand while searching desperately for it! Being in haste I'm like a hermit crab. As if I've gone clean out of my mind."

He ran his eyes over the place looking for fruit sellers. At this poor market few salespersons owned their own stalls. Most of them sat wherever they thought convenient so that the buyers had to look for the sellers. "Buy two Siamese coconuts and two soursops. Chose the soursops with moderately sparse pricks – not too sparse – so we can show them off until the third day of the new year. But don't buy if their pricks are too close: they're immature and won't be ripe in time. As for coconuts, chose the ones whose outer skin was removed, then flick its upper side with your fingers and listen if it sounds clear 'cock, cock': its meat is suitably soft; if its sound is dull – don't take it: the meat has turned hard, difficult to take it off." He smiled quietly to himself. "Women are the same," he thought. "They like to roil the water. The fruit, after being offered in worshipping rituals, will all be eaten, then why make it so important? I'm tired of hearing those nonsense sparse pricks and hard meat." He nipped down at a woman who was selling some soursops and a basket of figs displayed in front of her. Clusters of figs in dark red color look like

Chinese mulberries, with some strange-looking yellowish points.

"Buy them please, little uncle Ba. I'll sell them off at reduced prices so I can go home to prepare for Tết. Alas, these soursops are excessively delicious. They're all "tree-ripened". Their pricks have just stretched out, can be shown off until the fourth day." He was hesitating when the woman added, "Truly speaking to you, my little uncle Ba, I see that you have a good taste in fruit and know which's which so I'll tell you the truth. My husband grafted a branch of soursop to the wild apple tree planted on the edge of an irrigation ditch so the fruit is very sweet, not as sour as the others' common soursops. Those gourmets should be looking very hard for this sort of soursop. One should be living beside a dry ditch and also must know how to graft tree to do it..."

Thìn did not know what to say. He was fingering the big soursop. The fruit peel was rather pale in color and not in dark green as he usually saw at this kind of fruit. Anyway, its skin was smooth, not stunted, nor was it damaged by insects and the pricks were steady. Well, I shall buy it.

He picked up a cluster of figs and took a good look at it. Some aggressive red ants took the chance to run onto his hands and attacked him at his soft flesh. He put down the figs and scratched where the insect had bit. He was not at all amused and was about to leave. The woman was flicking off the ants for him with alacrity: "You like these figs, little uncle Ba? They're quite big aren't they? This sort of fruit means 'affluent' or 'abundant'. Buy them and I'll reduce the price for you. To make good the purchase."

He caught all her words albeit the crowded market, the noise of loud sounds was almost drowning out nice people's gentle voice. He did not reply the woman as he didn't have a decision as yet. "Mistress Út is nice," the boy thought, "the money she gave is more than enough, but she didn't tell me to buy figs. It's probably that she won't blame me if I bought them, but uncle Năm – who knows what he would say! If I decided on my own this time he

may send me off with a plea in my ear. These days he seems to pick hole in my behaviors and pours scorn on me."

His mind was haunted by the two ideas: buy the figs – don't buy them. He hung back. The more gently and sweetly these salespersons talk to their customers the stronger they rip them off. You catch more flies with honey than with gall. How could there be someone to be so kind to strangers at the market place without any reason?

The woman harped on about the fruit as a psychological means: "Everybody worships their ancestors on these days of Tết. Offering fruit to our ancestors during the Tết is like expressing our wishes to them. We don't wish many things, do we? Soursop, figs, coconut, and papaya. Fig soursop, coconut and papaya "I wish to be affluent enough."<sup>1</sup> Enough is OK, isn't it, little uncle Ba? Acquiring more than enough will flaw the soundness of our happiness. Everybody buys those fruits on this occasion of Tết but I don't have enough money to collect Siamese coconuts and papaya from the others' gardens. Anyway, they're rather heavy and prone to contusion, if they can't be sold out before Tết, I'll drop short of capital in early new year. I'm just selling off these things to earn some money to buy tidbits for my children. After Tết I have to take care of my children. They're just little kids. How many fruits would you like? These two are very tasty. After Tết you'll eat them and you'll feel how delicious the taste is in your mouth. You'll hold it in your mouth and listen."

He burst out laughing. "This woman is speaking rather fluently," he thought. "But the things she comes out with are so funny! *Hold in the mouth and listen!*" The woman seemed to be disappointed as it appeared that he didn't want to buy anything from her stall. He felt sorry for her, and also he felt proud of himself since she always addressed him repeatedly as 'little uncle

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<sup>1</sup> The Vietnamese names of these fruits put together would form a "wish" meaning I "wish to be affluent enough"



Ba' and explained many things to him. Her sleeves were badly torn and repeatedly mended that touched his heart. He offered a price without caring whether it was high or low. The image of the gambling site was lingering in his mind. "Hands off, three deer. The dice are propped against one another. Ended in draw. Don't argue." The noisy argument of his peers in the same neighborhood took his mind off the advice "charging high price to sell, offering low price to buy" he had learned long time ago.

The seller diligently helped him put two soursops to the bottom of the basket. She carefully filled the space around them with dried banana leaves to keep them stay put; she repeatedly thanked him. He felt quite pleased. Carrying the basket to leave he thought he had been overcharged and he regretted a little bit, but he shrugged his shoulders and left as he turned and saw the woman with her torn sleeves was arranging the remaining soursops. He was walking to the other end of the market looking for Siamese coconuts. There rose the heart-rending sounds of a woman crying somewhere around the butchers. There might be someone whose necklace was stolen or she might have lost all her money to a shell game. He jostled for the scene. A woman whose cheeks were streaming with tears and her eyes were red was seizing the shirt of a man who looked so ferocious. He cast his eyes around, being half and half, wanted to beat a retreat and to weather the storm by argument. By his countenance one could see that he had many accomplices around. Just because the event didn't turned worse as yet so his abettors didn't feel it necessary to show their faces to back him up with action. Not any normal person that was seized at his shirt by a woman at the market place would be laughing unblushingly like a fool. His laugh held out his attitude to wait and see where the upshot would turn to.

Thin jostled out of the crowd. Such a thing could make anyone feel indignant about. At the end, the puny woman could do nothing but crying for some moments and went home, trying to snatch up something from everywhere possible to make good the lost money.

"It serves her right. That's for a woman having been greedy to fall into their gambling tricks," he thought. "She must be an addict. 'You wanted to sweep the board, then they did the same to you'; 'having sold out all your land, the next step is to find yourself chained in jail'. What that uncle Nãm keeps murmuring everyday may be true." He smiled enjoying himself. "Listening to people talking is quite useful," he thought. "I've learned from there many interesting phrases. Why is there such a woman that has had her wager on the outcome of a shell game? It would be too late for her to learn the lesson and she would have to face the music if she failed to make good the loss."

Thin was upset as the ruffian was addressing the woman grossly as 'thou' and 'thou'. It was regretful that the policemen were so tardy with their arrival. The ruffian's cohorts were about to extricate him from the trouble. Thin held it against himself that he had not been bulkily big to interfere and give the hoodlum a kick to see him fall down "and I would trample onto his chest like Zhao Kuangyin had been trampling on Hangshen", to make him give back the money to the puny poor woman. He was very angry with that deceiver. He thought of the castigation foisted on him last week for he had lost much money to spinning dice game. "Those cheaters in gambling are certainly distasteful, but those who cheat and rake in players' money when winning and bilked out of theirs when losing are more distasteful."

He spat when passing some spinning dice dives. "Getting into there I may lose to the last penny one more time. 'I'd rather go home and play "gourd and crab game" with Hai Chi's group". He was touching the pocket again. The money was still there. Safe. He felt secure. He dangled the fruit basket on his hand, forgetting his sadness. The two coconuts were moving from side to side, bashing against the soursops. The latter were contused and almost spoiled but he didn't bother to notice. The clusters of figs he had decided to buy on his own became disintegrated now, and were no more becoming as they had been when he bought them. He was hanging about the confectionery stall which had been set up last week. A boy of his age

cast a glance over him and kept touting aloud through a cardboard speaking-trumpet, producing a piercing blast against any one standing nearby. "Make your purchase, please, please. We're selling off confections so as to go home to receive the gods of the kitchen. Sesame candies three piastres one kilo. Please be quick to get an excellent buy, otherwise you'll ... also get it! Please be in a hurry!" Thìn creased up his eyes toward the sales-boy – the way he had learned from uncle Năm to express his feelings to someone whom he might wish to make friend or to ask for help – conveying the message that 'you made it quite funny. It like it.' The other boy smiled as to confirm both of them were on one side.

Thìn picked up a piece of candy, unwrapped it and bit it broken. The groundnut flavor and medium boiled down sugar tasted fresh and crispy. Just the grating noise from his mouth could suffice to say the piece was really delicious. White and black sesame candies looked quite attractive, but he was too thoughtful to try any more. Having had a look over candied wax gourd and candied ginger whose prices were rather high, he ordered:

"I'd like two hundred grams of black sesame candies.

He thought of Cúc. The girl seemed to love copying the others and wore make-up these days. When going selling flowers she wore grossly coconut-oiled hair and put on ironed clothing as though she was going to a party. She was shy when coming across young men. She spoke loudly and openly to rouse attention. What a girl!

It would be great to invite friends to a place beside the marigold vases to enjoy a small tea party with candies tonight. A smile with dimpled cheeks appeared warmly in his mind. The girl had been growing in beauty for a year so far. Her arms and legs were round and plump. Her breasts were bulging attractively under her dress; looked from her side, the twin mountains seemed to be so smooth and favorably soft; she looked no more a child. Out there at the market people all addressed her 'miss'; no one

called her a little girl as she had been addressed a year ago.

The boy at the confectionary stall wrapped the cookies for Thìn, and by the way he peeled a date and invited Thìn:

"Now try this date. Indonesian dates are very sweet. They just arrived yesterday. Before that they were sought in vain for."

Thìn didn't know whatever the "Indonesian" is; he tried the fruit and nodded in appreciation:

"That's delicious!"

"You said it," said the seller. "Try another one, good buddy. Every date here is the same, no one undeveloped or unripe. They all are overflown with sweet fluid and they look desirable, don't they? Or you could say that I've chosen the best one for your try."

"That's OK," said Thìn. "Let me have half a kilo. Give it in good measure, will you?"

Thìn became generous because he had been addressed as "good buddy" and treated with respect. "If this boy had met me at a gamble dive," thought Thìn, "he would have addressed me 'that guy' instead of such a polite term 'good buddy' like he does here. My dad very much likes dates. He must be very pleased seeing them." Suddenly he had the sore feeling on his bottom as he had gotten a bitter spanking last week. "Had I had bought him a kilo of dates when having sold the models of flying planes and running horses on the day the Gods of Kitchen reported to the Heaven before I lost all the interest earned from the selling to the spinning dice game, there wouldn't have been such a tragedy," he thought. "It's regretful. I've forgotten it. Additionally, Cúc was standing at the doorway to look at me being beaten then. What a thing!"

Thìn put the two packets of candies he had just bought into the basket and left the stall.

People at the market dispersed gradually like the fog thinning out in the sunshine. "The market is rather weird on the last day of the year. It is being crowded like that in the underworld, but when at noontime, it becomes

deserted; only a few souls are seen here and there like on a normal day. You shall notice to see whether my comment is true or false," once said his father. "My dad is an experienced old man!" he thought to himself.

He walked to the main road and took a shortcut home. The sun was almost at the zenith. There were only some poor people holding on to the market trying to sell off something, and some gambling dives where bands of children enjoying the Tết in advance were gathering together around, offering their money to the banks and quibbling noisily like the bluebottles flocking to a mango seed someone had cast away on the road.

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I was on my way, passing the well, hurriedly to Hai Lé's when there was some light flickering at the marigold area; it must be those boys getting together to gamble there.

It was rather far from where I was but I could hear Cúc's voice coming from there, though not very clear:

"Someone is lurching falteringly over there - looks like that damned guy "uncle Năm"

A silent moment. If I kept going straight on my way I wouldn't come on them, but their whispers drew me to their place.

"Hide the lamp. Quick, quick! It's dangerous, dangerous!"

"Don't invite that damned guy, you know? We don't waste our stuff."

"Ha! I often saw you smiled gracefully to the guy."

"Why, that guy's the one that gave me his amorous glances."

"Keep quiet!"

So in their eyes I was not worth a bean. They referred to me as 'the bad guy or that damned guy'. They said I was walking falteringly. That was probably the result from the "white nights" I stayed awake to play cards plus the sadness from having lost my all. They didn't want to talk to me. I like Cúc. She knows that. And those

little friends of hers, the striplings craving to get married, know that too. Cúc mentioned my name with a disdainful tone of voice and she seemed to be shy since her slender figure and her piquancy has made me fall in love with her for months so far.

What makes me feel awkward is that she came right out and said I had given her amorous glances. She's the child of the servant working for my family; it would be very indecent if I flirted with her. Anyway, she is just sixteen years old. Three or four years ago she still was with her casual shorts on clinging to me around. Now that she has grown up it would be possible for me to bring her home to be my wife. Dress her with beautiful clothing and she may even prevail over those girls in town. *Left unnoticed it's something mediocre to spare / Spruced up it turns out to be crystal ware.* With the lips pricking up a bit, and the eyes a little wet, once had she become my wife I could be fooling around with her three or four times a day. But I should marry her decently. My love is not a sudden short blaze or a brief dalliance.

It was in my intention that if the raffle number I had been pursuing for ten days now came out in the result, I would give all the money I'd have won to old Bãy and asked him to be my matchmaker. Matchmaking to arrange someone's marriage is something he very much likes doing. If the two families seem to be suitable he would prod the man and the woman involved into going through with marriage. In addition, he was my teacher: in my childhood I used to follow him to learn a number of folk poetry verses that I can still apply at parties. The girl has grown up. Her family is in poverty now. There may not be any difficulties for me to ask for her hand. When having got married I'll mend my ways and work hard to support myself and family; I'll not keep following my "old ways" *"like a horse running amok everywhere / Absorbed in gambling one would leave one's wife in despair"*. But she seems to run me down, whereas Thìn, the snotty nosed long-backed boy, whose limbs are always dirty, two or three years younger than her, with an unkempt hair and continually caught it, seems to be an intimate friend of hers.

Well, sesame cookies, and cinnamon tea. The other boys' presence made the party a full event and an inadvertent background for that couple to give each other the glad eye, and to open their heart. "*The clump of reeds is withering in a sad tune / whereas the rabbit is hiding here waiting for the waxing moon.*" So I have been defeated by this stripling. Bitterly defeated before fighting. Having thought it's a good thing to be addressed daily as "younger uncle", and having thought that it's a good thing being a son of a landlord, possessing two carriages and four horses, I am falling down to earth now. They are whispering sweet nothings to each other just before my eyes but I dare not say a word.

I came up, unfazed:

"Hi there! It's so pleasant to enjoy Tết early, huh?"

The band was holding out on me. Some moments later Cúc raised her voice:

"We're going to have some sweets and chat with one another while awaiting the new year."

I joked around to make friends with them:

"It's a pleasure to have a talk about worldly matters, what the hell should you chat with one another about?"

"Cúc talks about worldly matters, and we just shoot the breeze," one of the boys objected. "Since we don't have any experience about life, how can we talk about those matters, uncle Năm?"

I came across as a senior member and also a friend of theirs:

"Do continue to have fun. You guys should take it easy."

As the last night of the twelfth lunar month it was so dark that old Bầy's small lamp with an egg-shaped light-bulb didn't seem to stand in the open. I said:

"The lamp gives so poor light. Why don't you go take the petroleum lamp in my room to get lighter, Thìn?"

Thìn replied equivocally after his father's way:

"Because of the moon the light of the lamp is reduced; if you put the moon behind the clouds, this lamp will shed its light brighter."

So daring a boy. It was difficult to pick hole in his equivocal words, however, but I understood. How could there be the moon in the last night of a lunar month? Cúc raised her voice loudly as if she wanted to save the day:

"You all seem to have a gluttonous appetite. Why doesn't anyone of you invite uncle Năm to help himself to some candies? We have plenty."

Two or three of them kicked up a rumpus:

"Uncle Năm is an adult man; he doesn't want this stuff of ours. Don't bother to invite him."

"Cúc – if you take pity on him," one of the boys said, "do invite him."

I kept silent looking at Cúc. "*Though hungry I would pretend full to be / Silly although wise just to know if you love me.*" The girl didn't say anything. I didn't know whether she was discontented with the one who had rejected her idea of inviting me or she just didn't want to speak. I poured myself a cup of tea and said:

"I'll leave after having finished this tea. I won't eat sweet stuff."

I stayed on just to indulge myself beholding Cúc's face. In the quivering light of the lamp her plump face looked more ethereal. Her lips were fresh and wet that I wished I could give them a bite. But she kept talking and smiling with the other boys as though I wasn't there. Had she given me a smile I would surely break the bank tonight. Then and again... "*I regret having prepared the fishing rod and prey / Preparation is yet to be done when the fish has swam far away*". I emptied the cup of tea and put it down. I was about to leave.

A boy, probably Hai Chí's younger brother, these adolescents whose faces I remembered but I could hardly recall their names, was speaking:

"Hey, Cúc, what did the other day you go and buy the medication of 'Nhành Mai embryotrophy' for? Is your mother bearing your sibling?"

"I bought it for your elder sister," retorted Cúc. "She is having a Chinese rat in her belly."

The boy didn't back off, he pretended to redirect his aim:

"Or did you buy it for the old woman Tư Lé?" (This old woman usually helped Cúc cut grass for my horses.)

"Don't speak badly," Cúc shouted him down, "She's too old to use it —she needs it to worship your ancestors, doesn't she?"

"Then you bought it for yourself," concluded the boy. "Since uncle Năm is here, you'd better admit it and we'll drop it."

It really turned my brain. By saying so the boy had rubbed me too much the wrong way. I coldly warned them:

"I'm not the one that you kids can joke around. Don't think that once you had an inch you could demand a yard."

I sadly wound my way through the beds of jasmine to get access to the road. My body was intact yet I felt spleeny as if I was about to fall ill. That was clear. Even a stupid could get it, while I knew them inside out. They were guessing and insinuating that I was favorably disposed toward Cúc. But I didn't have got what I was named about. "Who knows what that damned girl is up to? She is like an animal on heat." That she and Thìn didn't have had a roll in the hay would be like someone lying in a hammock without swaying or sitting on a swing without swinging. "Forget it," I thought to myself. "I'll look for another one — someone at a distance lest people might get my number. I give her up to you, Thìn. Chinaware will never fights against earthenware. Oh Cúc, *"Fireflies are swarming and shining on the cork tree / If we can't get together, the fault is on thee."*

Hai Chi's house was so brightly shone with *Lampes à manchons* that it could be seen from afar, unlike when there were no gambling to keep it was dimly lit with small toad-shaped lamps that looked like "torches of ghosts"<sup>2</sup>. I

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<sup>2</sup> ignis fatuus.

would probably lose my shirt tonight. The first ill omen was that I came across a girl on my way. Second, the one whom I loved cut me dead, and the boys threw out innuendoes against me was the third. But why did I keep going straight to that firewood barn? Gambling gods were quite miraculous. Once addicted to gambling you wouldn't find a way to get out. That was what I usually told myself after a gambling session.

\* \* \*

Út gently shook off drops of water from the fruits when she was arranging them in order onto a plate. The plate which was as large as a brass tray but seemed to be cramped. On the base were three hands of unripe bananas in a circle, leaving enough space for a coconut. Other fruits were displayed one upon the other: oranges, mandarin oranges, plums and pomelos.

She planned the place for every fruit as carefully as when she was holding the hose to water her plants every morning. Heavy-handedness in the garden would cause flowers to drop; on the altar it would make all the fruits fall down from the displaying tray. There were no children in the household, but she knew her brother was rather stubborn who often eat the food or fruit being offered on the altar. It could be tolerable when he took a fruit from the displaying plate but the action might leave the fruits off balance to fall down.

She talked to Cúc's mother who had finished cleaning the wooden trestle bed and was standing by awaiting other orders from the mistress:

"How do you think, aunt Tám? Thanks to Thìn's purchase of the figs this morning that the fruit tray becomes meaningful and its colors harmonious. Even the two largest plates are not roomy enough for the fruit. I think I should take some of these fruits for another plate to worship the heaven tonight. It's the new year's eve already. Do you see it alright? This hand of banana is the smallest at the end of the bunch; it'll be fit for the heaven altar."

She turned to another subject:

"Our neighborhood of Vườn Lài may thrive this year. The fig tree on the way leading to the school for the blind was in fruit. Its fruits were too many that they covered entire the tree and its root. Knowing that fig trees bear fruit on their trunks but it still appeared to be quite strange to me."

"You made me remember," replied aunt Tám, "that passing by the tree last month I saw too many figs having dropped onto the ground around the place, I thought if it had been on the Tết I would have asked the tree owner for some clusters to display on the altar."

Út gave a coconut to the maid:

"Please take the coconut to the back yard and cut off its upper side, aunt Tám. If you offered it intact, the spirits of our forefathers wouldn't be able to taste it. My brother Năm is very much like my dad in saying that the spirits wouldn't taste the things we offered. Just remove the outer skin and keep the nutshell in one piece so its milk won't spill on the altar."

Then she smiled slightly: "Offering to the spirits must be like to those alive. The dead are like the living: we can eat so can our dead forefathers."

Aunt Tám was smiling walking to the back of the house. As a simple person she could not say who was right or who was wrong. Cutting off the upper side of the coconut or not cutting it of, she didn't mind whether the spirits of forefather could taste the fruit. Only when having completed the task did she talk to her mistress like a comment:

"Since your father is sick, just you and uncle Năm stay active in the family, but your opinions seem to be different from each other like the sun and the moon."

Rubbing a mandarin with a towel, Út said gently:

"That's what his character is like. He usually speaks at random. Those who don't know him may feel very angry. Knowing the way he usually behaves we should tolerate him. What's the point to argue with him, anyway? Never mind him and forget about what he says. That's

my own flesh and blood, I don't see him a stranger."

"It's very kind of you to say so gentle about him," said aunt Tám. "I'm just your maid but sometimes I feel very resentful about what he says." She was looking around watchfully. "What a man... He can't be anything compared with younger uncle Tốt who is so gentle, so knowledgeable about the right and the wrong, and so talented: he speaks French so fluently."

Út put the last mandarin onto the tray; she stepped back, looking at her work. She changed the subject:

"How do you think, aunt Tám? Would it look better if I put the mandarins to this side?"

The maid was bewildered, smiling:

"You mistress have asked the blind to tell the way. I see it beautiful however you display them. You're a talented one at that. If I were to do it, it were not until tomorrow would I have finished it, and it would look very awkward. I've tried it once."

Aunt Tám went to the back compartment to get a broom and started to sweep the floor from the doorway back into the inside of the house and ended up collecting the trash by the rice jar when her mistress Út called for help.

"Knowing that you respect certain taboos, I dared not sweep outward from the inside; I did inward from the outside instead."

"Taboos help us avoid bad things," replied the mistress. "Anyway, it's not good to go against our forefathers." She changed her joyful tone of voice: "Look, aunt Tám. Someone at the market has cajoled Thìn into buying these two Siamese soursops said to be nicely sweet as they are results from wild apple grafted trees. Fruit of this sort may look quite nice but it is insipid and very cheap."

The woman was smiling without giving any opinion. The two were trying to raise the big tray of fruit and put it onto the altar when uncle Năm came straight in from outside.

"Ha! It's beautiful," said Năm. "The two of you are very skillful. Once these fruits are put onto

the altar, even our forefathers would like to eat them."

With that he took the best mandarin from the tray, causing two or three others to lose their balance and fall down. He was hurrying to pick them up and gave them to his sister with a fawning laugh:

"Excuse me. I forgot that the fruit had not been offered to the spirits of our ancestors yet. Well, presume that when at the market you haven't bought these ones."

Having tidied up the place, aunt Tám Sang took the unused plates into the kitchen and she stayed to work there. As his sister kept quiet, uncle Năm was speaking to break the sulky silence.

"Worshiping is a way to express our respect to the spirits of our forefathers, and to tell the neighbors that it hasn't come to pass that we have left our altars coldly uncared even not an incense stick burned. It's not that we have to offer these mandarins or oranges to our ancestors."

The young lady tried to smile:

"It's difficult to discuss about these ideas. Who can tell whether they are right or wrong? But why do you come home so early today? There aren't passengers on the last day of the year?"

"Before the sun reached its height, everybody had gone home," said the brother. "No one was buying or selling over there any more. Let me borrow five hundred piastres to enjoy the Tết, Út. I don't have a penny this year. I did a rather poor business. Yet I have to pay two three dead shares of tontine."

"You're kidding," replied the sister. "Do I have money? I've earned 800 piastres selling the flowers on the fifteenth day of the twelfth month, and another output on the Tết and I'll have to make payments to our workers, for fertilizers, and for dad's medication as well as to square up the debts dad had owed before, just a little left for daily expense, where can I fetch money to lend you 500 piastres?"

"I just borrow and I'll pay you back," the brother insisted.

"You did," answered the sister. "You've always dragged out the loan, paying a little now, and a little then. I've never got the sum back in full as when I gave it to you. For two years so far I haven't made any savings. At times I didn't have money to pay old Bãy and aunt Tám. They're our family's worker and maid, and I feel it's a shame when I'm unable to pay for their service in time."

"You're so long-winded. Forget your worker and your maid. Just give me 300, I'll try to work hard after Tết to earn more money and pay you on the never-never. It'll take one month to be paid off, won't it? This is my word of honor."

"One hundred fifty may be available now, you may take it or leave it. Even selling me off you won't be able to get any more." A stifling silence existed for some moments. Then there was a rash fawning laughter, a sigh, the low and stifled sounds of money counting and the rustle of the brand-new bank notes being counted. On the altar was the picture of a woman sitting up straight in an armchair; her two open hands with all the fingers seen were laid on the arms of the chair, three of them wearing three jade rings. Some gold chains were running down on her chest. Her kind face seemed to frown, and there might be tears welling up in her eyes.

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There are many things in life that can make you see red. That's the reason that I can understand why those generals in Chinese romances have thrown up their blood to a basinful and died the death. Many times I wish I were like Chou Yu who has said 'God has sent me to the world why has he sent Chuko Liang to fight against me?'<sup>3</sup> and then fell down to be dead and gone. That'll be no more miserable. No more worrying. No more dishonored. So far, whatever I dealt in, I lost; whatever I did I spoiled it. That my dad usually blames me is

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<sup>3</sup> Chou Yu and Chuko Liang are two heroes in a Chinese noted romance titled San-Kuo Chih Yenji.

reasonable. My sister works so hard. She tries to salt away some little money but I borrow it and almost never pay back in time, or I even have never paid the debts in full. It's a matter of course if she grumbles about that. But even those servants in my home often give me the cold shoulder. If it were in other families, they must be obedient servants to crouch their backs before their bosses. However, when happening upon me they would look straight through me. If I have them do something, they would say 'yes, yes, younger uncle' but they never do it. Asked, they would put the blame on my dad or on their mistress. If not asked, they would quietly drop the matter.

The poor is so hard-pressed. I want to get my act together but it seems impossible. I've intended that on this occasion of Tết I would offer each of them about five piastres to buy their sympathy, but last night I lost all the money I had saved from running my carriages this month. What's more, I've lost on loan and have to receive some more debentures. Until now those creditors haven't had a word but I feel worried anyway. I don't know whether they would change their tactics. However, it's not interested to play on loan: if you win they would write it off on the debts sake. It is so dull to play for nothing, but I can't give it up. I'm always itching to go to the gambling den. Being addicted to gambling is a more pressing problem than to alcohol, or even to opium. If the den started but you didn't come, your addiction would play up and you wouldn't be able to stand it. You can't work or do anything else. You would feel anxious and become confused and look half-dazed. In addition, the wish to recoup myself for my losses also pushed me to the place. Late afternoon yesterday, no sooner had I released the horses from the carriage when I had just come home than that boy, Hai Lé's child, let me know that there would be someone coming from Chợ Rẫy to play cards that night. Learning that, I didn't have to race the horses, just put them into the stable. I didn't even see whether Cúc had provided the horses with enough grass and water; I hurriedly took a perfunctory shower, came into the house to

grab a bite to eat, quaffed water and ran to the playing site.

While eating I appeared to be out of my mind; old Bầy said something but I didn't catch it, nor did I hear what Út was asking me. Perhaps she told me after having dinner help her to chop off the top part of some coconuts so she would be able to put them on plate to the altar to venerate our ancestors on the New Year's Eve. I had denied doing it for some reason unclear. I would cut out as soon as I finished the meal. 'Time is money' as a saying goes.

Looking at old Bầy's hand, with three veins standing out round like string beans, raising his chopsticks to pick up some boiled pumpkin flowers, I imagined Hai Lé's trembling index finger rising slowly over some playing cards among the groups of blue or red general-official-elephant and chariot-artillery-horse. Thinking of such a game I felt very happy. If wishing to win you must have a hold over the keeper. As to me, I knew the number of Hai Lé: if his hand was trembling over a card, I would never offer the same one, but a different card instead. On the other hand, if his hand was gliding over a specific card, I would hundred percent determined to wager my money on that one. I could read his countenance very well. When the flesh under his left eye jerked, oftentimes he would put out again the same card he had offered just one or two goes previously.

Holding their secret I won a lot. I often won ten times the number I had wagered. But finally I lost to the last penny because in the small hours of the morning they changed to fan-tan game and the way of fan-tan this guy was playing was too complicated I could not guess at all. It could repeat the throws tens of times. I lost heavily last night due to the four times the game had repeated its casts. At the first repeating series, five-point was repeated five times. After some throws its four-point appeared repeatedly six times, then the series of five-point turned back with eleven times of appearance. Someone might have become bankrupted at the way the game ran. Near the morning the six-point presented itself ten times.



Finally the bank raked in all the money. All players lost their shirts. Bitterly lost, I entreated them a more loan of 300 piastres only to see this amount of money gone to the game keeper. When the bells of Chợ Quán Church chimed, everybody was staggering home.

The morning star appeared in the East. I was trampling through the beds of flowers of my sister. My legs were so weak as if they were made of paper that I was within an ace of falling onto the heap of dung which Út had covered with straws to keep in reserve. I had to go to sleep and didn't care whatever might come. I was too exhausted. My heart beat strongly as I had had a white night. The fog of the new year eve's night was rather cold. I shuddered of cold and blew the nose for a couple of times before falling between the sheets in bed. I should get a long sleep. Even an iron man couldn't stand staying up all night like this. No sooner had I lied down than nothing became known to me. When I woke up it was late in the morning. I went to the main house to see how things happened with the new year. If conditions appeared amenable for me I would try to coax some more money from Út to retrieve my losses. I couldn't bear staying home just because of the reason that I was out of pocket. My dad had been being confined in the inner room by his illness for two years; during this time Út was taking care of everything. Whenever I came home meals had been prepared already. Aunt Tám or Cúc took care of the clothes I released; at the end of the month I would tip them some money, but if I had burned all my money in gambling I would simply ignore it. They didn't open their mouths to complain but I knew they could be resentful about it.

The fact went beyond any shadow of doubt when I was passing the house and overheard aunt Tám speaking ill of me. On the things she came out with, my saying often raised her hackles. Did I raise people's hackles that much? Or was it that I didn't have money to tip them? She praised Út for being skillful – that meant that I misbehaved myself and got into evil ways of gambling nights and days, and that I always wasted all the money I had earned without thinking of saving, and that I never

cleaned up my act and worked well. That was to know that people may glad-hand you but they wouldn't flinch from talking badly of you at your back. That was the way people were. Overhearing her saying I knew that the love-and-marriage between Cúc and me was impeded already. With the would-be-mother-in-law speaking ill of her would-be-son-in-law like that, I should not expect her to marry off her daughter to me. Even if Cúc loved me but her mother didn't like it, our marriage would be like castles in the air. Well, problems about Cúc should be left aside. If I didn't weigh in her mother's favor, it was because of the way I lived and behaved. Anyway, her girl wasn't of great beauty. Her complexion was rather dark. Since she was in her early girlhood she was a little bit good looking. Girls of her sort were numerous in town. Plenty. There might not be many girls fairer in complexion, taller and prettier than Cúc, but those like her were anything but rare.

"What I need now is money," I thought. "I need money to go retrieve what I lost last night. Other things must be put aside. They will be dealt with later. I should be wise; should swallow the affronts. *Even when you're indignant, stay indifferent / don't let the contempt in your look and smile be apparent,*" I told myself. Although I had heard all their saying but I pretended ignorance, and took a mandarin from the tray.

I thought Út would blame me for having done the wrong thing eating the fruit. But I was wrong. She didn't say a word. She was phlegmatic. The 'would-be-mother-in-law' Tám Sang retreated to the back house. I said something one more time just to make sounds heard. My sister still kept silent. I was disappointed worrying how I could open my mouth to borrow her money. Fortunately, she asked me why I came home from work so early. I simply told her a lie that the year end market had closed early, my carriage could pick up no passengers so I was out of pocket. And I required her to lend me money. I had to entreat her so much. When giving out the money she looked very sad that I felt rather ruthless. And there was a strange thing: the eyes of my mother in her portrait on the altar always seemed to follow me wherever I went to which I

already got used to. A coach driver was usually afraid of nothing. But when I took the money today I felt as if someone was pouring icing water into my spinal column. I shuddered and felt chilly. I looked to the altar. It seemed that my mother was frowning, just in a second, to berate me as she used to when I was a child. It set my teeth on edge. Tears seemed to be welling up in her eyes in the portrait. The eyes looked like those of some women who were abandoned by their husbands, those who had an accident, or those whose children had turned spoiled failing to respect their parents. I vaguely heard a sigh. The sigh was very familiar, I could not mistake it. It sounded heartbroken. Five years ago, whenever hearing that sigh I would do whatever she told me to do. I no longer heard it for five years. Yet I just heard it sounding from the altar, behind the portrait. I felt I was very guilty. I had lost heavily in gambling. It would come to pass that I could do nothing to help myself, I might do something bad then. I would fall into ruin and become a beggar, dragging myself along streets or at a market place and went on the bum. Thus my mother rebuked. I intended to give back the money to Út and tried to get my act together but, having a second thought, I put it into my pocket. I should let myself go in abandon on these days of Tết. After these holidays I'll quit gambling. I went straight to Hai Lé's.

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Wearing a dazed expression, with hollow eyes, and with a red-striped washed-out towel covering her head displaying some strands of hair which were no longer very black, Ms Út was walking to and fro in the old garden since very early morning. It was so strange. It was so cold. There wasn't the coziness as she used to water her flowers every morning in the old days. She didn't feel the familiarity and emotion as she had felt it when roving in the pineapple field to remove dead leaves or, together with old Bay, to harvest the fruit to supply the customers with carriageful of pineapple for transporting to the Bình Tây Market.

The scenery was changed as a matter of fact, but even the air didn't seem the same either. It

felt stifling as if there was not enough fresh air to breath. Her eyes reddened, she felt like she was going to cry. The woman looked at the unrecognizable road which was asphalted plainly and straightly, much better than it used to be. Previously, along the both sides of the road were two lines of young Dipterocarpus trees, each tree was put in a case and bound to a small plank to help it stand; they were now fully developed trees, with each trunk as big as that of a man, raising their top high into the sky to play in the air. In the area which used to be the pineapple field, houses were crowded together and looked like they were trying to mount upon one another; there was a lateritic soil paved road running through to the place where Thín used to hunt for crickets after the rains ended.

The garden was more difficult to locate. Those low-roofed houses were still there. The wooden storied house, which was the tailor shop of a couple coming from North Vietnam, was still intact, only its tailor shop sign had been removed. But the garden next to it disappeared already. Instead, there was a row of three-storied terraced houses enclosed by high walls. Its huge iron gate was close shut and it seemed there were guardsmen. By and large, houses here were somewhat like those in the old days and also seemed more affluent. There were more many people going around but the woman could not find any of her acquaintances. She knew for sure that walking from the Six-comers, and passing some five hundred meters from the pagoda, on the other side of the road was her former jasmine field, and on this side was her pineapple field, but in the meantime she was confused and felt it was uncertain. She was staring at the terraced storied houses for a long time as though she was looking for answers for the questions that might be appearing in her mind, and then she looked down to the earth and gave a sigh.

Many people were coming in and going out of the terraced storied houses. The place was resounding with the laughter of those girls-of-the-town who looked down upon the woman as though they were roiling her. Next to the iron gate, a one-eyed man whose bare head

exposed to the scorching sunshine, was sitting by a small cigarette retailing cabinet. On top of the cabinet was a number of empty cigarette packs for advertising which, had been exposed to the weather, lost their colors and miserably wrinkled.

The disabled man was staring at Ms. Út for a long while as though he wasn't quite certain about something or he was about to utter something but he just swallowed hard and looked down upon his right leg which was developing a large purulent scab. The man was caressing the scab which was being applied with some herbal medicine, and it already turned dark red.

There came the sound of a young woman in a room from the storied house parodying a currently popular song, (roughly):

*These two ladies, the ninth and the tenth, which would you like"*

*Take either with you and don't let her parents know.*

Two men clinging on each other's shoulders were lurching out of the house; one was talking to the other:

"Damn! I wouldn't take just one, I would take all of them. 'Money makes the world go round', you know. But that was the way of a long time ago. Coming here you can see that pretty girls are thick on the ground these days. I wonder where they could pick all these awesomely beautiful girls. Anytime having visited this place I came to want to abandon my wife. That's why when learning that Binh Khang brothel was going to open lots of people were looking forward to visiting it."

The other one seemed to be in the know saying:

"This place used to be the Jasmine Field Neighborhood. Coming over here in its time you could smell the lovely scent of the flowers. As for pineapples planted on this soil, they were even sweeter than the fruit coming from Bến Lức. All those fields were owned by one sole person. However, that person must be too stupid: he couldn't make much money by

cultivating those kinds of plants. The new owners of the land are much wiser. They are making a bundle doing this kind of business. There are no men in the world that don't like enjoying having fun with those beauties!"

"Why," claimed the other man, "You're a man about town but you don't seem to have got it. The new owner is a hoodlum ringleader. Don't you see that his guardsmen are all policemen? As a result everything has gone well so far. He must be a really big fish to have purchased the land and got rid of the old owner. And he must be greatly powerful to have acquired the license for this lucrative business."

Ms. Út pulled a corner of her towel to dab at her eyes. She felt her heart broken. At the back of her mind now appeared the images in which she were winding her way through the flower beds; she was raising the watering can to supply vitality to the fresh flowers; images of immensely large patches of flowers like natural carpets inlaid with diamond-spars in the early mornings. The images were also of the event when her eldest brother was killed by a cobra; he was foaming at the mouth as the medical practitioner with his venom reliever and dumb cane leaves showed up too late. Another image was of her second elder brother who had happened to step onto a rusty nail beside the stable and some days later he died of tetanus. All these images were like running pictures moving slowly on a grey background and they might burst in on her face. As if being overpowered, she was mumbling to herself:

"Have you recognized it, brother Năm? Since you was up to no good our family has bust up. The garden, which our forefather had worked hard for forty years to create, was the provenance of our lives. Our father spent all his life building up the home and it was you who threw it into other people's hand so they have been doing these monkey business on our homeland."

A bus plying the route between Bình Tây and Chợ Lớn came to a halt across the street. Út was hurriedly walking to it. She got on the bus, looking around for a seat. Having lived in the field for years she came to flinch at the urban

life. The man retailing cigarette was staring at Út one more time. He blinked his eyes and sprang up. He wanted to call her or even to run after her, but he sat back when she had disappeared into the vehicle.

"I wonder if I would come back to visit the land some more times," Út was talking to herself. "It makes me feel heartbroken. I've missed it so much, but all the changes that have occurred on it give much sadder a sight to behold."

A little schoolgirl in her white "bà ba" outfit was surprisingly looking at the woman next to her on the bus who kept mumbling to herself.

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For years so far I often saw in my dreams that I was living in my former house. I saw myself watering the flowers in the morning. I really sensed the smell of jasmine flowers wafting gently in the air, the familiar scent I cannot experience anywhere else. I saw myself washing my feet and rubbing them at the place where earth worms pushing up soil. I saw my father, my mother, my eldest and my second elder brothers but I did not see brother Năm. I saw myself stooping down to turn up soil into new beds. In the dreams I told myself, "Ha! Brother Năm forged dad's will leaving this entire land to him, the sole legatee, then he sold it to other men long time ago. More than ten years already." In the dreams I also reminded me that I was living in Mỹ Tho and no longer at the Vườn Lài Neighborhood. But I was still cheerfully watering and fertilizing each bed of plants. I was working diligently and was happy with my work. My father called his children to get together around him. He rubbed my head and said this garden was the common property of all of us, my brothers and I. Keeping the garden for ourselves we would be living in our united family, otherwise we would be drifting away each a direction and would never be able to see one another again.

My dreams kept repeating the old episodes we had experienced at Vườn Lài Neighborhood. Cúc and I were going to the market place to sell our flowers; we were drying flowers in the sun; we were collecting pineapples and selling them

to customers; Thin caught a big cricket and gladly showed it to me only to be disappointed as I told to him to let go of it... Any time having such dreams I felt sad for the whole day, wishing to go to Sài Gòn to have a look at my former garden.

Why, the man retailing cigarette there resembled my brother Năm. But if that were him why was he a one-eyed man? Could it be that he'd got an accident? Well, I don't care whether that was him or that was not. I wouldn't bother to recognize him. There's no more affection nor relationship between us at all. Well, after so many years why does this place still have the sweet smell of jasmine flowers? Does that aroma linger on the lines of Dipterocarpus trees waiting to welcome me back? It might be so. It smells as sweet as in the old days – the gently wafting scent in the early morning when fog was not dispersed yet.

Seeing the streets humming of people I think of the time I was selling flowers. When someone asked jokingly whether this jasmine flower should be put unto a lump of buffalo dung<sup>4</sup>, it would be certain that Cúc would retort bitterly to such scoffing taunts. At such a time I would be smiling and remarked that one shouldn't think buffalo dung was just excrement but it was also fertilizer which would supply vitality to jasmine flowers. There are few men teasing girls that way nowadays. By now I am like a sprig of jasmine flowers which has not only been stripped of the buffalo dung but also being pulled away from the place where I have put down roots and started to produce the first leaves. I miss the soil, I miss the fertilizer. I've been wasting away until the day I would lie down like a withered scentless plant. No one bothers to dance attendance upon me, let alone someone would give a tease to the flowers.

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<sup>4</sup> A pair verses of Vietnamese folk poetry saying: "A wise girl getting married to a stupid man is like a sprig of jasmine flowers being put unto a lump of buffalo dung"

The bus was revving; it belched out a plume of black smoke and moved slowly forward before pulling ahead, like a pig walking leisurely without having to hurry up. The rain in late afternoon was pouring down obscuring the scene around. Through the opaque and scratched glass of the bus windows, Út tried her best to take into her mind for the last time the images of the lines of the developing Dipterocarpus trees, the row of walled storied houses, the Pierre Pasquier Street, the Hưng Long Pagoda, the Frédéric Drouhet Street, the Ice plant and the Tiger Brewery.

The rain became heavier and heavier. It was pouring now.

A corner of the red-striped towel was raised to slide slightly over the eyes of the poor middle-aged woman.

*Translated from the original version by Thiều Khanh Nguyễn Huỳnh Điệp*