

MOTHER'S LOVE (Như Nước Trong Nguồn)

By Nguyễn Văn Sâm

Translated by Thiều Khanh
Nguyễn Huỳnh Điệp

1.

"All male and female members of your family from the farthest branches of your ancient clan up to now shall listen to me cursing you in verses..." The entire ambience around was in silence. The voice continued to rise. *"Waves are breaking upon fishing boats, bindweed's winding around a ramshackle house; you sons-of-bitches are following the evil way to be louse. Down with your goddamn forefather. Playing with monkey, monkey will scratch one's bottom; playing with children, children will cause much problem. You god-damned greenhorn - having made my family badly torn..."*

When calling someone names the voice of the village teacher's wife, Ms. Hải, sounded so melodiously like that of those divas Ba Bé and Tư Sạn from a phonographic disk that was being played over there resounding in the afternoon breezes all over this end of the islet; it particularized the characteristics of the living way of the group of households which my mother said it was unique in the world. Every time the teacher's wife demonstrated her skill in insulting someone, everybody in the neighborhood and I were pleased to listen to her: It was kind of live entertainment and also a way of changing the boring living style that had been going on in the tiny area of land on this wide river. Middle-aged but with a melodious tone of voice, when calling someone names, the woman sounded as though someone was lulling a baby to sleep in noontime, and her voice sounded as sweet as the piece of traditional music of "dạ cổ hoài lang"⁽¹⁾, *"since a precious sword was bestowed on my husband urging him to go fighting..."* which was more

1 "Hearing the drum sounds at night and thinking of one's husband (who was fighting far away)"

interesting to listen to than to those girls at the other hamlet who, when singing, often raised their tone so high at their last favorable words that it sounded as sharp as needles pricking into your nerve, causing you to feel your flesh rippling all over your body. It might sound excessive but I preferred listening to her to those couples that were cajoling one another in a flirting way while they were pounding rice in a moonlit night. I might feel like looking at and hearing them flirting with one another when they gave amorous glances and sang loving songs to each other, but in my mind I didn't like it. I thought of my body. Other boys were giving me the cold shoulder as if I were not of the same kind of human being as theirs but just a hybrid or a Chinese temporary resident in the neighborhood; girls simply ignored me, they made believe I weren't there. No one among them ever looked at me and felt ashamed or puzzled, whereas they were like being enchanted by other boys of my ages when happening upon them: they wouldn't know whether they were coming or going; they would speak with a stammer while stroking their own hair or toying with their dress; and they would blush looking at their feet. Looking at their gestures then made me annoyed. Some girl pressed her big toes over and over the ground almost to wreck where she was standing while her mind seemed to have palsied that she might have eight or nine wrong answers out of ten questions asked. A hundred girls like these were the same, they could go pass me as if they were stepping over a tree trunk or walking around a puddle of dirty water on their way; they looked at me phlegmatically as though they were looking a termitary, or a block of rock. Even if I greeted or asked them something, they would answer me perfunctorily, or they may be palsy-walsy with me, but through the way they were blinking while thinking, I'm sure that they might have felt something like pity, or the neighbors' compassion, just like brotherhood love for me.

They and I were of the same age, although my body was not as big as Quang's but it was not that I was with a shapeless atrophying body. It was just that I was involved with my pair of

crutches. But how could there be such pure brotherhood love between boys and girls without blood relationship! When a girl who might be in a far relationship with me which was too far that you could hardly trace the common ancestor - such as my mother and that girl's paternal aunt were offspring of the father of our grand great father - was talking with me, just after the second sentence, she would insinuate that we were in a blood relationship, and she would make believe we were in close ties of blood. What an annoyance! Sometimes I wished I could give her a kick or a thick ear that would cool down me.

That was why when those boys and girls were singing lovingly with one another, I heard but I didn't like it very much. That the teacher's wife is cursing someone is another matter. It sounded fantastic and even arresting. I enjoyed listening to it with peace and without feeling a bit of angry or envy. I was fully minded gulping the sound of every melody she introduced; I was amazed at the fabulous richness of the human articulation she acquired and managed to produce her beautiful tone of voice, let alone the meanings of her cursing words which seemed to present something special flickering that delighted me so much that sometimes I wanted to dance around and laugh loudly. If she didn't curse anyone for a long time, I would bet ten to one that everybody would feel missing something pleasant, like my grandmother, whenever she was going out hurriedly without taking her betel nut tray along with her, she would smack her lips for missing the quids.

I went to the doorway to sit pricking up my ears toward the woman's house. I didn't have spare time for a month up to that time. Every day was the same: it was not an hour chatting with one another after dinner when I was urged to go to bed by the women in the house. In bed, under the mosquito net the light was rather weak, I could but sneak reading a chapter of a romance when my eyes were unable to keep open, I dropped the book and fell asleep.

I didn't know what my dad was chafing under that he kept staying in Mỹ Tho for a month and did not take the ferry home to look in on my

grandmother and my mother at weekends. My mother left the house there unattended to come and live with my grandmother here where I had been living at. My mother looked saturnine and angry. My grandmother and my mother were all the day talking to each other in a low voice. Out of their routine, neither of them bothered to pay any attention to me. The house looked like in mourning; every member sat quietly. It was so unpleasant.

Previously, whenever in a good mood I gave a performance or I sang parodying the contents on those phonographic disks and the house became so clamorous as though there were many people making noise in it. Now I kept lying all day on the trestle-bed, read and re-read until tens of the front pages and five or six rear sheets were torn off from the volumes of such classical romance as *Gia Long on His Flight*, *Prince Cảnh to France* and *The Drop of Faithful Love Blood* by a mister Tân Dân Tử; often I kept silent for hours or I just hummed and hawed when asked. My brother Quang disliked the two women of the house; to avoid showing himself up in the main hall, he was lying in a hammock in the rear hall. He swung it creaking and at times he would scratch his feet crunching and sigh heavily as if he were a tontine honcho who went bankrupt and was bemoaning the loss of his fortune as he had been bilked by the holders out of their shares. He had had a thin time of something for just a couple of days, yet he looked like an uninterred body; he always kept a bottle of medicated oil in his pocket and after five minutes of half an hour he took it out and applied a little bit of the substance to the nose on his sorrowful face. He no longer boasted that he had done everything to all the girls in the locality, as said in a folk poem, "*as the wind blows in wide fields one may enjoy having either sister / when in joy with the elder, in sorrow with the younger*", even when the girls' breasts were just starting to rise to form under their dresses. I was curious to know what was happening in this house and I asked him by roiling him why he no longer roamed around and sneaked into someone's

garden to pluck the whole bundle of flowers ⁽²⁾ missing no single one as he used to brag, but I kept lying in a corner like a lame duck. Despite whatever I asked, I said or however I roiled him, he turned away and did not respond at all. I had to tease him, reciting *"A fish disappears leaving no trace in long rivers..."* ⁽³⁾, I paused and played for time. He looked at me waiting for the next verse. I wasn't a fool, was I? I changed to *"Sài Gòn is far away and Mỹ Tho Market is too..."* ⁽⁴⁾, and then I paused again for a very long time. I slowly poured me some water and drank it slowly while enjoying the delight in my mind ignoring the opponent's expectation and agitation. I knew he was observing every gesture I might have, but I made believe I didn't know. I should be bold with my speech. I wiped my mouth with my hand while glancing at him and reciting the next verse so close to home: *"You've fled to Hue – the old capital / like a fish in the ocean seeing you again is impossible"*. The young man had been roving much enough; he felt my comment hit home. His response was terrible. He quickly grabbed a sapote wooden shoe, which was quite heavy, and threw it strongly toward me without caring whether it would hit me or not. What a close shave! If I had not quickly fended it off with my crutch, my nose could have been broken and my head injured. So my guess truck home. I was laughing in my beard then: he was disappointed in love with Nhàn as she had fled away!

Today Quang left for somewhere very early this morning after having had some fried rice for breakfast. It was very likely that he went gambling at the houses of some widows of leisure who were living on the yields from their

2 A Vietnamese expression meaning one gets married or has sexual relation with both the elder and the younger sisters of the same family.

3 The whole folk poem goes *"A fish disappears leaving no traces in long rivers / If we're to be husband and wife I'll wait albeit a thousand years"*

4 The whole folk poem: *"Called water-daisy since on the banks of a pond it grew / Sài Gòn is far away and Mỹ Tho Market is too / I ask after all the folks in the family / First I pay regards to your parents and then to you."*

gardens. My mother had taken the ferry to go back home to see if she could supply my father something as he could be in need of. She didn't have the heart to leave him alone unattended. The house seemed deserted now, but I felt free. It was a great pleasure to get some fresh air in the early evening and by the way listen to the village teacher's wife calling someone names. I had just had my dinner but in order to sit long there without hankering for something to eat, I limped to the kitchen to search for something. There were several hot sweet potatoes. I grabbed casually some pieces of dry banana leaf to wrap them up, but the purple skin of the tubers could still be seen. I bit slightly into the purple peel of a tasty and sweet-smelling tuber. I broke the tuber into two halves, looking at the wisp of white smoke rising from the white pulp. I bit off a small piece and closed my mouth to stand the piping hot slice. That was it. There was a kind of painful pleasure in life that people were odd enough to always pursue. My elder brother ate the bread of affliction as he was cleaned-out by gambling swindlers and cast away by his girlfriend; as for me, I loved such trivial things as eating hot potatoes, listening to someone singing or cursing someone else, and watching those girls and thinking of something pleasant until I got a tightness in my groin that I had to cup in my hand and stand it.

Bảy Nhàn was a mortar maker. His wife took her big bowl of rice to the verandah. She sat eating and smiling of something by herself. Children were swarming up by the fence of the village teacher's house. They were jostling around and crying and shouting; it was more lively and bustling than at the market. I was not the only one who fancied listening to someone cursing someone else, people in this Cây Dứa Neighborhood seemed to like it too.

My grandmother heard the sound my crutches crunching on the floor, she looked out and saw me sitting out here she hastily called me into the house. She was anxious like those who were having one foot in the grave. You may be angry only when hearing someone call you names; it wouldn't matter to you at all if someone was insulting someone else, would it? Ah, now it came to an interesting episode: the

teacher's wife had turned to the main topic. She was speaking metaphorically so much that I thought no one could remember to write down, all was aimed at "her husband's daughter-of-bitch officious sister". There must be a tremor under the sister's ancestors' graves that she denounced her sister-in-law to her brother, the teacher, that his wife had responsibility for the fleeing of Nhàn, their own daughter. The woman had a very good voice, her wording was quite surprising, and she was speaking in parables relating to kinds of cakes, fruits, and even fishes... that many a time I almost blurted out my appreciation, but I had to keep my mouth shut or my grandmother would hear it and she wouldn't spare me some reprimands. Everything was due completely to Nhàn. I'd seen her knock around with Quang for quite a long time. They often had their trysts at the banana grove behind the main house and near to the clump of taro. They waited until the moon set that they would be lovey-dovey with each other. I didn't know why suddenly she fled away leaving my elder brother eating his heart out for her, and her mother was cursing the whole neighborhood.

That was the way of this residential neighborhood. Even when just two villagers were at loggerhead with each other, they would be ranting and raving as if it were a big fight. Last month there might be something wrong when Ms Năm Tý delivered plums to Ms Hai Rê, the two were quarrelling on the number of baskets of fruit delivered and received, and neither knew clearly whether the number was thirty or fifty. This one accused the other of having deceived or feigned forgetting. Thus the whole neighborhood had to hear them insulting each other noisily. It was almost the way people in this locality practiced when they trusted one another insomuch that they didn't have any documents for proof in transaction; therefore, when it came to a debate, either side would insist that it was right. But it was lovely that after one or two weeks the two would become friendly with each other again. On this tiny islet, however, there were not too many people. Although no one spoke out but every person could have thought that they would always see

one another in daily life however they might hate any one. Moreover, their ancestors might be friends if they were not relatives. You'd see this trouble wouldn't last long. Everything would come out right in the end. It was regretful that Nhàn had gone away and no one could say when she would be back. How regrettable it was. Looking at her out there from inside the house where I was sitting, I could see her bust so bulging that her dress could burst open to release the big breasts, and I felt a great pleasure at that. My unlucky life found some relief.

My grandmother held my arm to pull me back into the house saying that: was it any good that people cursing each other and I had to come to the yard to listen? What's the matter grandma? What's the difference if I was here in the yard and if I was in the house? Hearing some bad curse would spoil no one. As my fate was now, what was I afraid of being further spoiled? The dice were loaded against me, I was not spoiled but neither was I of any good. My life was almost wasted. It had been wasted since the first time I wept at night for self-pitying as I recognized that I was inferior to my peers. There were too many things those boys of my age could do easily but I could not however hard I tried. I was unable to climb, to swim, or to play running, football, shuttlecock, and so on. Alas, I was inferior to people in very many things.

I smiled showing my teeth to pull myself against my grandmother. It was not that I wasn't obedient to her. I just wanted to prove myself that I was grown up already and I should have rights to enjoy some essential freedom. My brother Quang, two years older than I was, why didn't you blame him? He learned every way and everything one could enjoy doing. His body was better than mine, but he was involved in lots of bad things. Every day he was roaming from this end to the other end of the village and it was not until mid-night would he be back home when having glutted himself with all sorts of pleasure. At times he fell asleep in the house over there, the other times he was back to this house looking for something to eat, asking for some money and then went out again. No

single one blamed him. He was better than I with the body, but he had every possible bad habits. Everybody knew he was a shameless liar, but they kept silent to it and they took it as a matter of course. That I made little of him didn't mean that I was of any good, but I was too upset to not think of the different fate of the two brothers, one came to life just two years earlier or later than the other. While I never had as much as five piastres in my pocket, he always came by three or four "peacock" bills⁵), otherwise he would pester the folks until his require fulfilled. If I compared myself with him, everybody would say that he was different from me. Why different? I was also human being or was I a tree or an animal?

Thinking that fact I pulled harder against my grandmother while I was still smiling. She gave me a fright making believe that she could hit my arm. I could say that if she had hit me it would be like dusting me off. I knew it so well but I pretended to entreat her to make her pleased. I said I preferred sitting in the yard to get some fresh air, that it was too hot now to go to sleep, and that human beings were not like poultry which went to their coop right away at sun set. Moreover, how could you sleep when the cursing voice kept hitting your ears? My grandmother let go of me without failing to threaten me something such as "woe betide you, as you're already grown up, you should take care of yourself"; and that sitting out here might be carried away by mosquitoes; and that it wouldn't be any good to listen to bad cursing words... I stopped in a sudden. Was I grown-up? Was I still childish? I was not sure. But I wanted to be always a child. What to be grown-up for?

But it couldn't be so. *"Green bananas tastes acrid though induced ripening forcefully / a young man craving for a wife keeps weeping nightly."* I didn't weep nightly but two year so far I was like a tiger that had tasted human flesh. Before I knew it, I had been affected by something bad, I indulged myself in carnal pleasure. Many a night, when I was in bed, it

was not until my self-abuse had driven my disabled body exhausted would I resign myself to sleep.

Suddenly the cursing voice stopped like the spring of a phonograph was broken unexpectedly, or like a burning stove was put out by splashing a bucket of water. There must be someone warning the woman that her husband was coming home. Anytime learning that the village teacher was approaching, she ended her course abruptly. But if having overwhelmed someone with insults she would slowly lower and lengthen her flabby voice which sounded like that produced by a run-down spring phonograph then she would take some breaths and start again. I waited for a rather long moment and it was quiet. Probably my guess was correct. I felt some pity for the village teacher who was living all his life beside his wife who was apt to curse someone in verses rhythmically but did not have a chance to enjoy her talent. This was like my dad who had possessed a set of phonographic disks of classical drama, "San Hậu - Nguyệt Kiều the third", but he didn't have time to listen to since he was busy all the time with boxes of French books shipped to him every month.

Many times I was pondering on something and I burst laughing all on my own. The village teacher tried to behave himself quite well to earn the respect of the neighbors since, after all, he was a member of the local administration committee, hence he missed that great pleasure of listening to his wife verbally abusing someone in rhythmic verses. I know that if someone had told the teacher that his wife often heaped abuses on other people he would think it hard to believe. He heard her insult nobody for tens of years. That would be strange if he was the last one to know what had happened in his house. As about Nhàn, once he said that when marrying off her daughter he would throw a big wedding party to entertain all relatives and guests for three days; three cows would be killed to cater to the banquet, and the number of pigs, fowls lobsters and crabs to be consumed would be uncounted. Now that Nhàn had eloped, even if he wanted to entertain someone with just a common meal he wouldn't

5 The five-piastre bank notes issued in Vietnam in 1926 with the image of a peacock on one side.

be able to do so, as his daughter was no longer available.

Thinking of Nhàn I remembered of Bông, the daughter of Bảy Sứ, one of my grandmother's tenant farmers. I didn't know why last week she walked back and forth in front of my house for many times. On seeing her from afar, I managed to move to the door to have a look at her. She might be upset with someone. She sulkily mumbled something; her lips were screwing up a little which looked lovely. She wasn't like other girls who usually retorted rudely when being teased by someone. With round eyes and rosy plump cheeks she looked as attractive as a ripening plum with some tiny veins on it that made you want to take a bite. She passed the house at a distance yet my eyes almost fell off following her in spite of my grandmother's effort to adjure me to come in. Oh, she was so nice and fascinating. Oh, her arms were moving so softly when she was walking. Oh, the great misfortune of my life. I resented my parents for having failed to take care of me when I was a baby and they entrusted me to the servants who were so ignorant about medicament and treatment for a sick child, so it turned out that....

Bông was the daughter of a poor family. She was not swankily dressed like those girl students in the town of Mỹ Tho, but she was a nice girl. And also a keen-witted one. She spoke so politely that everybody loved her. Her father, Bảy Sứ, a hard drinker who had stumbled down when he was deep in his cup and he got sick and had been flat on his back since then. Her mother sold sticky rice all the day at the northern bridge. I was told Bông was very good at her daily routine and her younger brother and sister were well looked after that she received a pat on the back from everybody for all that. She was a kind of woman that "when at home she does everything to help her parents; in marriage life, when going out she will tell her husband to let her carry his sword so that he could go freely" as goes a folk poem. Her look was worth a fortune, plus that conduct, she was the only pebble on the beach and deserved to be loved by those young men made of money in the town of Mỹ Tho; a

nonentity in the back of beyond was but nobody. Thus, just looking at her sufficed me. Looking at her back. I didn't want to be so flippant to look at her directly from the front like someone else. Since my crutches hindered my feet, I could but stand from afar to nurse my wish. A pole could extend your arms to pluck ripe fruits on branches; an oar helped you moving easily on the river in your boat. The crutches, on the contrary, put me in an awkward position and enlarged the gap between my peers and me.

It was strange that for a month so far, Bông's mother often came to talk whisperingly with my mother. Every such a time she left with her reddened eyes. My mother said Bảy Sứ's wife had come to borrow money to pay for her husband's medical treatment and also to buy an eatery at Northbridge; its owner was moving to Sài Gòn and wanted to sell it at a low price. But it was rather bizarre. If she borrowed money she might have come once or twice, whereas she came every day and behaved as if she was protesting something or claiming damages. And she came empty-handed while previously, she never came to my house without bringing something special for presents such as a fat fish, or longans, or unstuck-seeded rambuttans.

There were too many mosquitoes; I continued to swat my hand onto my face and thighs. While I was thinking of those things I was unaware that the teacher's wife had already stopped her insulting course. My grandmother adjusted the lamp dimmer and she kept grumbling that I was like my mother always dilly-dallying with everything, and that I should have got in the house instead of staying out there to swat mosquitoes, and moreover, I had left the door wide open allowing the insects to enter the house. She was wordy about the Gordian knot that Bảy Sứ's wife had introduced which she said she would cut it right away. She advised to offer the woman some money and let her do whatever she wished at her will instead of lengthening the matter to cause conflict between my parents. Those were what I heard from my grandmother but I was like someone going in the dark I didn't know beans about the thing, all I could do was just staring at her.

Perhaps she blamed my mother for having failed to solve matters smartly, or something. I caved in to her reasoning. I never dared to say anything against my grandmother to support my mother. But on mature reflection, I thought it might be unjust. Chances were that my mother was trying to convince my dad to lend aunt Bảy the money she needed. Aunt Bảy used to be my grandmother's domestic servant when she was young. She cooked, did the washes and kept my mother company. It was probably that she and my mother had been very close friends then, now mother sympathized with her like my grandfather had sympathized with her family and he offered them a piece of land at a corner of our garden so that they could build their house. The problem was that my father usually turned up his nose at Bảy Sự's alcohol addiction and he rarely talked to him. The help seemed as in vain as I often dreamed of everything but when waking up I found nothing was real.

2.

Guests were crowding while I was sitting tight as though I had been stuck to the chair with my hands grasping firmly the arms of the chair or I would have flown off this world if I let go of them. It was hard to imagine there would be a day like this. I was the bridegroom. Bridegroom, not just groom. I had just scolded someone who had addressed me simply 'the groom'. The word 'groom' sounded rather vulgar and mediocre which could lessen the solemnity. That beautiful and prudent girl, that was Bông, was the bride. The reality was too far from my dreams that I had been living with for two or three years since I grew up. It was also beyond all the fantasies of all people in the neighborhood who were very keen on poking their noses in the others' matters. For a long time all I could do was stand at the door of my house looking at those joyful girls and after that I would lie all curled up in bed, closed my eyes and drew them in my mind one after another. Oftentimes, when having drawn the second girl I was exhausted, my heart beat strongly and I fell asleep. Many times I woke up finding my left hand between my thighs, wet and smelled

something unusual. Bông, Nhàn, and many other girls had passed my life through my morbid imagination. I knew I had kidded myself about something I could not get. It was like a poor man who was proud of being rich and self-satisfied with beautiful wife and nice children in his dreams every night where he was living in great style. Bông or Nhàn, or any other girl was close or on intimate terms with me only when they were imaginary products of my mind in a short moment. In reality it was a distance, visible and also invisible, between them and me. I was born under an unlucky star in a clear sky. I was like a defeated cock that dared not see face to face and talk to any girl, let alone dating any one to have a chance to hold and caress her on my lap like my elder brother or any other young man.

Nevertheless, from now on, and until I became long in the tooth and died, Bông would be my woman, she would live in my house, would rub shoulders with me every day; she would prepare our daily meals and would take care of me. I would be totally free to caress, kiss, tease and even reprove her. I would have the full authority to take her to the neighbors', to parties or to death-day anniversaries. I would have the full authority to not allow her to go anywhere I disliked. I had the lofty pride that it was me like this but could get married, and my wife was so beautiful. There were lots of other young men who were better than I was, but the ripe fruit didn't fall into their hands whereas I was waiting for a dead man's shoes and I got the fluke. People said I was enjoying the bliss my forefathers had bequeathed to me. Someone buttered up my mother saying at her presence that I was benefiting from my mother's virtue. I hadn't used a courting word neither I bothered to pursue anyone; still I won this pure and beautiful flower...

I had been sitting here for a rather long time yet nobody mentioned me. Bông, the bride, was in the newlyweds' room. Those who had accompanied her should have stopped outside but they entered the room with her and until now no one got out yet. Before leaving my house after the ceremony this late afternoon, my mother-in-law, leading the party of the

bride's extended family, with tears welling up in her eyes had politely requested that my parents allow someone to stay with the bride to keep her company till the last minute lest she feel lonely. I saw that my father's eyes were protruding as big as the bottom of a bowl and he looked at my mother with anger. My mother gabbed out something unclear and nodded her head but looked quite indignant.

Since then my parents became taciturn; they spoke very little and barely laughed. My grandmother now looked at me then cast a glance at the newlyweds' room. She might be surprised why the bride's party kept badgering at the last minute. I didn't have any opinion; it was that I got bored sitting by myself and I was thinking of all things aimlessly. Let me see, except Bông's aunt, in the room now there were two bridesmaids, and three of the bride's friends whose house were as far as at the water edge of the islet. I already took all these girls into my imagination for several times when they had been talking and laughing suggestively as they were passing my house by daytime. Their black silk trousers were so glossy that just looking at them could cool me off; their shirts, featured press studs, were tight enough to display their well-developed bodies; and their juicy eyes were so attractive!

As they kept staying in there too long against the customs there must be something wrong. It might be that Bông requested that she wouldn't live in her husband's house, instead, the newlywed couple would settle down separately or something. This girl was asking for the moon.

Last year, my elder brother quoted from an unknown source saying that Bông had declared she would rather live unmarried than be someone's daughter-in-law and live in their house. Who loved her should, from scratch, allow her to settle down only with her husband. A troublesome daughter-in-law. The matter struck close to home. It must be it. This girl could give up everything, take off all the jewelry and return to her home. I prayed God she wouldn't do so; otherwise, there would be nothing able to help relieve us of our humiliation.

It took a rather long time. They must have persuaded her as best as they could. What could you achieve without spending a bit elbow grease anyway? I was good and ready to wait. So far, I had been an underdog confined in the house, I wouldn't mind waiting for some more time. I was ready. On the altar, the melting wax running from the candles was so much that the plates of the glossy candlesticks couldn't bear, and it was flowing unto the top of the table...

Boring, I looked out through the wide opening which had been cut out next to the door to widen the hall for the wedding ceremony full of guests. Opposite my house, the village teacher Hải was squatting on his verandah with a bottle of rice alcohol in his hand. It was so bizarre and nobody had ever seen the man in this position before. He had always tried to behave to be worthy of his official position in the village. His wife was walking in and out from the hall to the verandah and back; with a scowl on her face she gave a glance at my house in a fit of pique. In a sudden, she raised her voice, the rhythmic curses resounding through the space drowned out the voice of the guests who were staying late talking with cigarettes, cakes and fruits were served free.

"The sky is high and blue (it was dark, not blue at all, ma'am), birds are chirping, water is murmuring... Fuck you who have ripped even the rags from my home; you have even eaten the cunt of my daughter. You have seduced my daughter and brought her to the mountains to the forests to the markets to everywhere to sell her as servant or slave and get the money to feed their whole family... The heaven shall come down to see them living on penis and cunt."

I had liked listening to her cursing other people for years, but this time I was extremely tired of it. It kept dinning in my ears and made me flushed. Her curses might be tolerable, but her obscene insults were unforgivable. The village teacher's wife betrayed my feelings and made me disappointed. I had never thought besides delicate and rhythmic expressions such obscene words could ever be released from her very mouth. It was strange that she was saying the curses in the presence of her husband who

remained impassive drinking his alcohol as if his wife behavior was nothing unusual. The two houses were within the easy reach of each other, had a fart made here the folks in the other could even hear it, as some women who were rude enough to say. I was sure that the village teacher's wife had been loathing something for some tens of years so far, like someone who disliked washing their hair on the full moon days or the first day of a Lunar month. Thus, the cause must be an important event.

*"Yellow pistils, white flowers, green leaves; celestial beings appear behind the curtain that heavens; if love has been predestined and is inevitable, we'll marry her off as normal. Your son is **immoral** lusting for **beauty** / that has ruined the life of my daughter badly. Fuck your whole family. I'll curse you to hell..."*

Now I understood it. She was insulting my parents since my mother's name was Sắc (beauty) and my father's was Nghĩa (moral), even a child could see that she had an axe to grind. Their girl had fled in advance and the young man nicked an amount of jewelry from my parents and went away with her. I was sure the couple must be enjoying themselves somewhere while my family was to bear the consequence as being insulted with extreme obscene dirty words on my very wedding day. Terrible! Thus it was always a twist of my fate. The others had benefited from something and consequently I had to suffer. But due to the incident I could discover a new truth. Previously I fancied listening to those flowery and poetically rhythmic insulting words. I was burning with curiosity to prick up my ears and swallowed all of them including the up and down tune of voice as she began her course. By now, those words became numerous ten-centimeter long nails knocked into my ear and it hurt me to my mind and heart. I came to know that when I had enjoyed listening to her cursing I wasn't aware that her melodious and rhythmic insulting words were causing a family's sorrow, sadness and even anger. This old couple's oddness had possessed me that I could not get rid of it to think other things. That was I was

sitting tight here like Jiang Shang⁽⁶⁾ biding his time. Why could the woman release those dirty insulting words in front of her husband and wasn't scared of him? Why was the village teacher squatting on his verandah drinking alcohol out of a bottle like Bầy Sợ the drunker? There must be a reason. You could abandon yourself to the sorrow and mind nothing about criticism when you were extremely disappointed and having loved your child so much? It was likely so. Nhàn might have been seduced into being pregnant and she had to elope without being married. The village teacher's family was well-known in this islet for tens of years, yet they weren't able to receive a betel quid⁽⁷⁾ and weren't able to be duly connected by marriage with another family. Whereas, aunt Bầy Sợ, an former servant, was in abject poverty, and head over ear in debt, with a permanently ailing husband, in her house there was barely anything worth looking at, yet she now became in marriage connection with the family of a district commissioner and hence in equal terms with Mrs. Commissioner's daughter..

It was possible that the teacher's wife was cursing because she could have foreseen the unpredicted future of her daughter. Those who had a loose tongue could certainly have kept her informed of my father having abandoned his eldest son, the most on-the-loose young man in the neighborhood. Being on-the-loose with his parents' money. He was used to being a good-for-nothing and jobless dude, yet he was venturing into strange grounds, he would certainly find himself in great trouble. How long that amount of jewelry could sustain him, the young man who used to spend tens of piastres at the pubs or even hundreds a night at gambling dens? Nhàn must have been predestined to suffer. Dreadful woe. You'd followed him and you would experience an abject misery.

6 Jiang Shang, a character in a Chinese romance, living in the early Zhou dynasty which he helped to establish when he was 80 years old.

7 In Vietnamese old customs, to receive a betel quid meant to agree marrying off one's daughter to the one whose family had offered the quid.

The village teacher was now sitting flat on the ground, looking toward my house. At his, the flat-wicked kerosene lamps were so bright but his eyes were brighter. It was a ghostly reddish brightness. It was lucky that I was sitting here far from him, and it would be horrible if I were sitting there next to him. I was afraid of those drinkers whose eyes reddened like that, as nobody could tell what they would do next, arguing, quarreling, or holding a knife to chase someone running for his life. It was lucky that the incident had left no proofs, otherwise he could have come over here to claim compensation for his daughter which would cause a lot of trouble. I know the way the teacher usually behave. He wanted to maintain his prestige but sometimes his nature was revealed. The teacher's wife was now sitting behind the door but her insulting voice was still resounding and spreading through the space. There were the light of kerosene lamps flickering from some houses at the end of the hamlet. Did her insulting voice set them up or did they want to put on their lights on for better hearing? I was too tired of it; it was not interesting to listen to it any more. My mother looked rather uneasy while she my grandmother were talking quietly at the light brown round table in the makeshift tent in the front yard. Everybody must have understood what the object the teacher's wife was aiming at was; and my parents had to suppress their resentment as they had to be responsible for their son's misbehavior, although my father was one of the top bananas of the District that even the village chief and village security officer should have regard for. Naturally I reminded myself of the fact that I was marrying Bông. It should be very difficult for me to marry any girl, and anybody knew it. Whereas Bông was a beautiful and well-mannered one. She would be the woman of the house and manage this family fortune. My parents would leave the better part of the family properties to me if they saw that my wife capable of managing it. Parents always love their children, but should my mother have wished so high to involve herself in anxieties? Had she asked Bình, daughter of Ôn, a road worker, to marry me, the matter would have been hundreds of times easier. Her family

would completely agree at once. Her aunt often dropped hints to me, saying she just would like to enjoy being offered a pig head⁸); but deep in her heart she tried to angle a good family for her niece to be married in. As for me, I'd be ready to give the OK to any girl, provided that she wouldn't be disabled as I was.

About my parents' asking Bông's hand for me, her family had given the nod long time ago, but my grandmother didn't leak it. I didn't know what she could be afraid of that she kept it secretly. It was not until being brought up to date on the matter did my mother come to Bông's family to arrange everything for the betrothing and wedding ceremonies. Everything was made at her expense. I loved my mother, and I and felt uneasy and grumbled about what she had done: why bothering to contrive so many things to sweat over? My mother gently rationalized that the wedding should be carried out anyway, she rather had it done stately as to achieve three or four benefits at the same time. My mother was a woman of few words and she rarely spelled out anything. A daughter of a commissioner she was! Although being aged, she was still subject to the living style she had imbibed previously. She was very good at taking care of everything in the household chores. Three four benefits were that I had a beautiful wife and she had a skilful member to preserve the huge fortune handed down by our forefathers. Had she known that my elder brother had been involved with Nhàn, she could have solved their problem with wedlock, and they wouldn't have to elope and pushed themselves the hard way, and she wouldn't be sadly sitting to hear someone curse. Children had done all kinds of wrong things and parents had to pick up the ball and run with it...

I had been sitting here for a long time already. I felt out of sorts and wanted to throw a fit, whatever it could end up; but seeing the furious look of my father who was sitting alone at a table, I got it out of my system. One more time,

8 In old Vietnamese customs, a matchmaker was usually offered the head of a pig by either the groom or the bride's family as an award.

I didn't know what time it was, I poured me a glass of water and sipped at it.

3.

At dusk, some an hour ago, someone had said it was time the newlywed couple shared a cup of wine according to traditional customs. Now lamps were lit everywhere; the *Dipterocarpus intricatus* torches my grandmother's tenant farmers had set up around the house were shining with their flickering light; frogs had been making their croaks heard for a very long time, yet nobody told me what to do. Since I was engaging such an event for the first time in my life, how could I know which button to press? I was groping to the room, leaning against the door pretending to look at the words "Wedding" and "Bridal Suite" made of flowers and leaves when those bridesmaids and Bông's friends were coming out of the room to go home. They looked at me shyly. There were sniffing sounds and the discontinued whispers in the room. It was nothing to be surprised at. Every girl would weep a little on their wedding day. But listen, it sounded so woeful. The laments sounded like an ice block was melting in the sun, or it was groaning for being cut by a serrated knife. You could also say it was the weeping sounds of a jelly-fish which had been drifted ashore, exposed to the sun on hot sand. It was not the frustrating sound about the future; it was a desperate sound of being mutilated. That was like the laments of queen Tu before the Six-killer Sword was unsheathed⁹; it was like that of spirits of untimely dead people coming back to look for help from their alive relatives. I felt hot in my heart as if it were put on fire. How dilatory was the aunt who took a rather long time in there. It was time she should have left already. I wanted to have a go and dismiss her. Then I should stroke Bông's hair to comfort her and I would give my nod to whatever she might wish. I wouldn't care the fact that both of us hadn't exchanged a word to each other so far. I wasn't afraid that she would deny me which would spoil the happiest day of my life. I wouldn't care.

9 An episode in the Chinese romance Feng Shen.

"Stop weeping.... crazy... conspicuous... Don't think little of the matter," was the aunt's voice.

"I'd rather bear the blame... how ugly such a husband... It's awkward, anyway. I've second thoughts... No... What the..." was Bông's response.

I couldn't make out their last words as they were speaking them so quietly.

"You're wrong," convinced the aunt. "You'll enjoy this fortune... Saving face... a raft put down stream... the village administration has forewarned... Twigs mixed with grass are easy to be consumed in cooking... Leaves will fall to the foot of the tree.... Your parents are indebted to them..."

The silence lasted rather long, and the weeping sounds gradually died down. Everything seemed to be at a standstill, even the sounds of a song "Educating one's daughter for being married" produced repeatedly from a phonograph since the daytime had come to stop. A tranquil ambiance. There was only the sound of my heart beating quickly.

"That'll be all right," Bông voiced. "For the child... But he must promise to love me... Whether we will be living well with each other or not will depend on him... His hard words might hurt my feelings..."

I turned back to sit at my old place. My hands were wet with sweat. The sections where my hands were holding on my crutches were also wet. I poured another glass of water. I emptied the glass and my hands were still shaking. My ears were ringing with the sounds of my crutches striking on the floor which had been newly retiled for the wedding. I felt great anguish. Deep in her heart she decried me – even though she herself had been "spoiled." Our ancestors were right when saying that "the cheap is usually the nasty". Beside the fact that my family was quite well-off, this was the main cause of her parents' agreement to married her off to me. No wonder... *That now you have become a woman / The tray of alcohol and betel quids stands to no reason.* Otherwise, they would never agree to do so. A

pockmarked-faced girl decried a disabled man: *My pockmarked face might become smooth someday / Your hook-like arms will forever stay*, let alone Bông, she was so pretty; if she had been “intact,” and not perforated, how could her parents agree to marry her off to me? Thus it was a whole month so far I didn’t make out that conspicuous truth. Her mournful weeping was because of the dilemma she and her parents were in. But why did my mother agree to take on board such complicated a thing? That was awkward. She could know whether a fly flying pass was a male or a female one, why didn’t she know that Bông had shared her favor with someone else and was having something in her womb? I reached for a crutch, set it against the ground and rested my chin onto the rubber pad on top of it to breathe. I was getting browned off with the situation. The familiarly sour smell of my sweat from my armpit hit my olfaction. The flickering light of the torches were dancing ghostly out there like ignis fatuus. In front of me was a band of children, some among them were from as far as the other river islet I rarely had chance to see them, was standing astonishingly looking with curiosity at the staggering groom. A girl of about twelve or thirteen years of age was carrying her six or seven months old brother. The baby looked lovely chubby. He waved his hands as though he was greeting me. I was smiling and making faces at him.

On reflection, everything was all right. Either side had its own defects. If this one had been strabismic, the other could have been harelipped. We should make good what was lacking on each other. That could be OK. It was a case of any port in a storm. The deal didn’t make profit but neither did it cause any loss. I accepted it. It could be not fresh with someone else, but it was fresh to me. I accept the mock from people if there were any. I would take something that had been discarded by someone and I would refurbish it for my use. I thought of many time at nights I had imagined Bông’s firm and smooth body. I should be a generous and lenient young man. I should understand that if I had enjoyed something in the past, the enjoyment would become an

illusion at present and it would be all right whether I deemed it to be real or to be unreal. On the contrary, enjoying something imaginatively in the past, as I did, could be deemed to be in reality. Especially when that “reality” was existing beside me, and it would from now on and forever - why not? – not to mention the sweet words ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ Bông had spoken just moments ago, would lead me to giving my nod to everything. Those words had in themselves the magical force that immediately changed me into another man. From a strange and cold-hearted man, I became a part in our marriage life with her. I became a part in her happiness and sadness and she became the most intimate and inseparable part of mine. Now I turned out to be a trustful support for her. And what else?

I decidedly stood up, and rushed forward the door of the bridal suite and called her name gently as a way to keep her informed that I accepted her wishes. I was about to tell her that her child would be adopted as mine and we both would take care of it, but I hardly opened my mouth when I was staggering and about to fall down. It was lucky enough that I managed to take hold of the door before I could pitch backward. I became aware of my defect then; and I recognized that we should live leaning to each other. At that very moment, and before I knew it, the loving sounds I was raising by my ears and my ‘awareness of creating pride for my lover’ immediately helped me stand right up, brightly, happily and naturally like a normal man. And, alas! Bông, still in her bridal gown, with her lower belly bulging a little bit as though she had just eaten to her full, and her face was streaming with tears, hurriedly drew up the curtain and rushed out, quickly, not as timidly as a new bride, and held out her arms ready to help me get up. And so fresh a hand of a fairy put on my back; through layers of the wedding costume I could feel the warmth running happily in my heart when she asked:

“Do you get hurt, dear? You forgot your crutches?”

I looked at my wife and I had the tingling feelings of blood running in my face and I couldn’t answer her. We were standing there for

a very long time. The lines of *Dipterocarpus intricatus* torches at the gateway was blazing up much brighter than moments ago. Some torches were crackling and sending up showers of sparks to greet us, while grasshoppers and mole-crickets were performing their greeting dance. Bông was shyly smiling. I knew that we both had whole-heartedly combined our lives to each other from that minute. Well, 'the fish in my basket is mine'. I no longer queried whose child was she bearing. Just accept the reality as it was with an open heart, thus I would be happy later. It was regretful for the damned guy who had abandoned his happiness and fled away. For me, I was happy with what that guy left behind, not Bông's body which I had wished for long, but with the worry and care she had just intimated to me. From now on with the help of those loving hands of hers I'd really get rid of the misfortune from my life.

I pushed her slightly into the suite; she turned and went in unobedient and depending way. Taking the crutches given by my mother, I could see her smile, the smile of a person who was desperate with worry, in a sudden she knew she had escaped a danger. The smile seemed to sympathize with something which was not very good, as she used to ignore it when I had snatched a cricket from the son of a tenant farmer, or when for no reason I had punched someone and almost bleed his nose and then stood laughing. A lightning flash flared up in my mind, all the facts which had seemed to be loose and separate were united: Quang and Nhàn had eloped, although in tandem to distract people's attention; the village teacher and his wife were too disappointed to be cautious about their reputation which they had created for themselves so far; latent squabbles had arisen between my parents as they had to eat crow receiving all the insults and finally had to eat humble pie to jointed in a marriage connection with the someone who used to be their old servants. Bông was pregnant and her aunt's advice "leaves will fall to the foot of the tree"; my father decided to renounce Quang as his son, and my mother's equivocal words about "three four benefits"... Now I became aware of everything. I came to learn that my

mother had spent many nights enduring humiliation to think of a good solution for all those complicated matters. Oh mother! Your heart was as immense as the sky and your love as profuse as water from an endless source that it was not until now could I recognize. I was looking at my mother gratefully like I usually did in my childhood when I fell down she took hold of me in her bosom to caress and comfort me. My mother smiled gracefully and leniently and her eyes brightened a sky of love.

4.

I opened the curtains and entered the bridal suite. Bông's big eyes were telling me that she was expecting me to say something. The hands of the self-confident husband were patting on his wife's shoulders. *With our love we can never be spitted asunder; in any twist of fate we'll stay fast to each other.* I was happily enjoying the two sound delights, forgetting the ill fate that had been always following me, forgetting the crutches which were so heavy as blocks of stone on the back of a hard-labored prisoner so far.