

SCENT OF GRASS

(Hương Cỏ)

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Sister Cỏ let go of me and her voice was choked by tears, "Tuấn, may you be living well after arriving there; you should try to study, manage your time, and write to me only when you're really free."

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I was angry at myself for having difficulty to unlearn the bad habits I had acquired for a long time. Having arrived here for half a year but I still kept swearing badly. It was so bad that even at the presence of adults beside, I couldn't help spitting four-letter words I had acquired in my previous street-urchin's life when starting to speak something, or letting out a swearword in the middle or at the end of an utterance. Every time. Once as I was angry with a black guy in my class when standing in line waiting to go to the mess hall, I told the matter to some of my fellow-countrymen who were of other class without being aware of a Vietnamese lady who was standing behind the counter. It was not until I was conscious of those rude uncontrolled words that were getting out from my mouth did I feel embarrassed; I blushed and wished I could fly to my room to hide myself under the sheets least anyone could see me. It was grateful that this Vietnamese lady just looked at me disapprovingly, but also understandingly, and she gave me some slight advice. I was speaking in my beard, "I'm sorry... I know I am rather foul-mouthed and rude... I'll try to improve myself gradually." The lady nodded slightly, and she ladled out much more food into my tray than usual.

Those boys behind me must be very surprised seeing that.

I liked eating chicken skin. Reading those supermarket tabloids I learned that skin of any animal is its fat deposit, not good for health. In a long term, fat in your blood would be deposited on arterial wall and it would block the arteries and harm the heart. Now that you were young, diseases wouldn't appear, but the trouble would come one day with your old age. Having learned that I thought I would give up eating the stuff. But any time chicken fries were on the menu, all chicken skin from other trays were gathered and forwarded to mine. I took it all. What would be would be. You shed no tears until seeing the coffin. Months ago there hadn't been anything to eat; now how could I dump all this heap into a trash can? Since the long craving for a kind of food had been absorbed into my blood, it was hard to be quitted overnight.

I also like sipping coffee and smoking 555-brand cigarettes. Every morning, when my dad got a cup of coffee from my mom, I also had the same from her. But one thing, my dad could smoke inconsiderately at the dinning table, blowing out clouds of smoke up to the ceiling and even into my mother's and my younger sisters' faces, while I had to take small puffs stealthily at the back yard or in the bathroom. At a rare occasion when everybody was out I could be free to take very long and deep puffs; I kept the smoke long in my lungs, then blew it out and took it back immediately by nose. This was extremely arresting. The pleasure beggared description. It was more pleasant to smoke sneakily than to do it openly in the school yard, or on the way home, or in those dark coffee shops which were ubiquitous around here... One good thing was that I didn't like beer, nor did I like listening to adults' talks. I very much hated bad-mouthing

someone behind his back and listening to ribald tales from those who gathered to amuse themselves drinking.

My uncle and his friends threw a party at home noisily every week-end. Cans of beer were opened generously and displayed invitingly all over the kitchen but I left them untouched, I also turned a deaf ear to their noisy and funny jokes, unlike my peers who, had just arrived like me, were ready to take any beer offered to them, and to prick their ears to adults' talks – so as to retell them to the others later – and sometimes they even joined with their laughs and comments.

Again they threw a party that day, but it was not on week-end. It was a holiday. All the same. It was their day-off, and they took it a reason to get together for a drinking binge.

As adults, they took themselves the right to do all the things that they banned us young men to. It was too noisy. I was about to put on clothes to go to a coffee shop when the door opened. One more man came in. I trembled when seeing his face. That was a lumpish and ugly man but he looked familiar. Additionally, from his body there was a whiff of scent like that from a girl that I could not verify. I inhaled deeply. The strong smell of cigarette smoke and the slight fragrance from Vietnamese-styled dishes which were usually wafting on the air here had given way to the slight scent of a kind of human flower that was blooming. It could not be of any special perfume. However special perfume must be artificially made. But this was a kind of heavenly scent, the pure scent that it even took the Creator more than ten years to apply to the body of a virgin.

I had this feeling many times when seeing the man. The scent disappeared some minutes later. Once it was so strange that when the phone rang, I took up the receiver, and as soon as the

caller told me his name I felt the scent wafting in the room. I answered him more sweetly than I ever did before. And I smelt the heavenly scent of thousand kinds of flowers from the heaven plus the thousand-year old aroma from highest mountains. The smell of peach leaves falling around the ways in paradise, the slight waft of Saussurea root, the sweet waft of aloewood in smoke, the scent of the sap exuded from a padauk tree that was freshly felled down. All this scent which was so light and soft was lifting my soul slightly; at the same time, it pressed on my heart with the feeling of disappointment as I knew that the scent would disappear in some minutes. I was really surprised. Was this man a deity or a ghost that possessed such a super-ordinary ability? As a matter of fact, I was not only absolutely dazed for hours to analyze the scent, but also spent more hours looking for a way to explain that mysterious phenomenon. All explanations were not sound enough. Of course it was a kind of scent, but it was so light and smelled sweet. It was like the freshness of an early morning which was rather cold and foggy with some dewdrops on the tips of grass leaves. It was also like the gentleness of the immense space after an afternoon rain. I was thinking of some royal jelly that had been refined with the scent of young girls, then desiccated and blown into the air by the early breezes in the cold morning of the first day of the Tết. However, I was unable to say what the exact quality of that fantastic scent was. It might be that the light mysterious heavenly scent covered a small space that the man was able to move with and within it.

I kept this secret for my own and expected my dad would move my family away so that I would no longer see this old queer man, who had given me the special feeling of disappointment – I

could not stand the feeling of being caressed by the satisfaction in some minutes and then followed by hours of great disappointment because of abrupt loss and regretting – and expectation of seeing him again so that I would be able to enjoy the rare heavenly scent, an experience that I might not have another opportunity to encounter again until the end of my life. But my dad could not find a good job, and every day my mother lodged her hope on impracticable promises by someone around about some job she would be hired for in a near future. We had to reside in my uncle's so I would feel both happy and wretched with the mysterious scent wafting from the lumpish, ugly and over-the-hill man.

Once I held back my habits to listen to their conversation as soon as the man entered the house with the scent I mentioned about.

"Oh, long time no see," someone greeted him. "It must be a month so far. Just being back from Vietnam? You look quite emaciated."

"I just stay in the States," responded the man, "and didn't go anywhere. As my business turned worse so I haven't come see you fellows as usual."

"And you've no longer been to Vietnam so frequently?" the other man asked.

"Sitting pretty no more," said the man. "So I'd better restrain myself. Just stop going for some time... Well, to see how the land lies, you know."

"Who'll take care of your girl then? She'll go mouldy."

"Oh," the man laughed. "She's staying there waiting for me to come back to sharpen her for a couple of weeks, and she'll be free of mould as usual."

All people present, including my father, were in a fit of the guffaws. Their laughter was a pain in the neck that

caused me in a fit of pique. I deliberately listened to their next conversation. The more I listened to them, the more the scent I was aware of through my nose and my heart was fading away.

"She had been brought from the countryside to entertain some Taiwanese and then was transferred to you, right?" someone asked. "You were the second one to take her, hah? The way to the paradise must still be very excitingly tight, and the heavenly cave is marvelously tiny since not many earthly men have visited. How interesting!"

"You need not refer to it with such a literary style," the man explained. "I've rented a house at Trương Minh Giảng neighborhood behind the Cambodian pagoda for three years and made her the lady of the house. She lives there waiting till I've earned enough money to come back. After a long drought there will be good showers."

I startled. The Cambodian Pagoda neighborhood was where I was living since I was born until I left for the States. It was the place where I picked up the ball of unluckiness in my childhood and experienced some sweetness when undergoing adolescence. The phrase "Cambodian Pagoda neighborhood" caught my attention.

"Vietnamese people are rather queer in the head," the man went on explaining. "They've ever named a girl Nguyễn thị Cỏ Thơm! I had to change it into Phương Thảo⁽¹⁾ when introducing her to my acquaintances. Phương Thảo always smells fragrant and sounds elegant wherever it comes. Cỏ Thơm can't be compared to it. It sounds rather uncouth."

¹ Cỏ Thơm or Phương Thảo, means "Scented Grass." The latter, a Chino-Vietnamese, is usually used in literature.

I startled again. It turned out to me that the man with the scent of a girl was the dirty old Việt kiều that sister Cỏ had often mentioned with a sad and rather scornful tone. I caught a glimpse of him last year while he was bawdily taking liberties with sister Cỏ, and she frowned to intimate her indignation. It was not very long time so far why had his countenance changed so much? He was a different man. Decrepit. Swarthy and ugly. He was going too much bald. His eyes were no more very bright and intelligent as they used to be, and he became rather slow.

I entered my room and slammed the door to show my angry.

I found the answer to the riddle that had been torturing me for almost three months. The scent was the virginal scent from sister Cỏ I smelled when she hugged me on the day we said our goodbyes and she wished me to live well and try to study hard in the States. "I'm full of pity for Rờm, my younger brother," she lamented. "Rờm was of your age but he didn't have an opportunity to go to school and now he's not living any more. He died some years ago. He'd waded into a puddle to pick up used polyethylene bags and he stepped onto a rusted milk can. Seeing you, Tuấn, I miss my brother Rờm. I miss him so much."

I'm sure that when sister Cỏ was hugging me, I did not have any unclear idea in my head. I felt her soft and gentle arms around me in a pure love. Even when she pressed my head against her soft and warm breasts, I felt just the feelings of sisterhood she gave me.

So, where did the scent that I thought to be heavenly come from? I can never figure it out, really. Thirteen years old, I had neither knowledge nor words to decode such a mysterious phenomenon with abstract terms. I had to forget those futile wonders of my age in order to live well and study hard as sister Cỏ had advised me before I left for the States.

Since then, any time I came across the "dirty old man" I could no longer smell the virginal scent from him. It had disappeared – for good. Sometimes I even wished I could smell it once again. But nothing available. It was lucky that the scent wasn't replaced at any time by something unpleasant as the result from the way the man spoke and behaved. There is one thing that since then I have no longer sworn when speaking anything. I only use those foul words when it is very necessary, to curse the life. Writing letters to sister Cỏ I never mention this scent of Grass; of course no words have been used to refer to the man. Not even a word.

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