

## A SECRET ADMIRER (Người Bí Mật Chiêm Ngưỡng)

By Nguyễn Văn Sâm

*English translation by Thiều Khanh Nguyễn Huỳnh Điệp*

*Nguyễn Văn Sâm was a teacher of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu High School (Mỹ Tho) and a professor of the Faculty of Arts of Saigon University and other universities of Cần Thơ, Vạn Hạnh, Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo. He is the author of a number of books on literature and especially on the resistance literature of people in southern Vietnam.*

I was quite stunned when waking up in a strange room. It was more stupefied when I felt it was wet and hurt between my legs. I put my hand down there and the horror engulfed me. I pulled my hand out of it and didn't know what to do with my dirty and sinful fingers. The stinking smell that I experienced for the first time seemed spark like a flash of lightning thrusting into my heart. I closed my eyes and I screamed in my mind in an immeasurable desperation. "Oh dad I want to die, oh mom I want to die."

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The occasion started on that day. It was like every day when I was mooning about at home. My parents were, as a matter of routine, at their shop; it was not until 11pm would they come home. Their only daughter could not see them for the most part of time. From the time I was home after school to bed time I was free to discover everything in life through my technical devices available. There was no one else but me in this large house with all the trivial things such as the musical stereo equipment, game players, TV, telephone, and a computer; the key-boards I had once insisted my parent to buy for me now I didn't like it anymore and it was left dust-covered at a corner and I didn't bother to cover it from dust. Of course it was not to mention all kinds of food and fruits in the kitchen; and soft drinks, cigarettes, lubrication oil, paper towels, packets of coffee.... which my parents had brought home like pack rats and load them in the garage. I was at home all by myself with much free time. I could watch any film on TV at my will and pleasure. Having watched all good films from local TV stations I came to enjoy watching adult restricted, or even banned, films on cable TV. Many films featured violent killing scenes that could make anybody's hair stand on end or a number of films that terribly features boys and girls having sex. With the latter, I felt a little bit ashamed and sinful when watching although when there was nobody around. I often felt the urge to switch it on to look at the world of male and female people acting in love while I knew that I was under the age to be allowed to watch. Those strange things in films I had learned at school when some American big girls were talking allusively as they made eyes mischievously at one another. The more having watched them the more I became familiar to the sight of boys and girls hugging, kissing and caressing each other. I came to think that these actions were usual and not a bit horrible or frightful as my dad had tried to describe during a family dinner which was a rare occasion. Those actions were something as common as "buffaloes gazing grass", an expression my mom often remarked. However, I didn't like very much those images which were too blatant in the films. They looked dirty and something. They were so peculiar. The girls in those films possessed heavenly-featured bodies. I looked down upon my breasts. There were nothing much; they were just like two lemons. Female signs were slow, if not too late, to appear on my body. Fourteen years old, I was a teenager already. Boys had started to look at me with respect, consideration and even with befuddlement in their eyes. That meant that I had become a special entity in the world. I was no more a small girl of one or two years ago. Neither was I a stupid girl with lots of wrong-doings that

my parents used to reproach whenever they saw me. Many a time I wished I could adventure in some romantic and beautiful love like that in a film. There should be a Mr. Right coming to embellish my life. There should be a young gentleman coming to wake up the princess – that were me – sleeping in the woods. The first kiss must be very moving and sweet to freshen up my green heart which was ready to greet his love. Life beyond the TV was so bored that I didn't feel interested in for years until I got through the high school education. I was the princess that was bound by the vow imposed by my parents to confine me and my adolescence in this immense house.

Four years prior to the age of eighteen was a very long time, but I knew that the life in that span of time was all the same: going to school, and being kept at home after class like a bird in a bird cage, without anyone to talk with, and there wouldn't be anyone to care about me either. There weren't classes on Saturdays; if I slept in longer or if I watched TV for double time on Saturdays there wouldn't be any difference. Things would change a little bit on Sundays. Either dad or mom would be home. On Sundays they would hire someone to help run the shop so they would have time to take care something at home. Whether they were at home or not there wouldn't be much difference since everyone had their own business. I would keep fastening my eyes on the TV. At this time I would be watching more constructive films. Or I would hide myself in my room chatting with my peers, boys and girls, on the phone. At times someone picked up the phone in the sitting room; I didn't know whether or not someone wanted to make a call or to check up on me. That put me off my stroke and made me upset. I wanted to be freer. I didn't want to be disturbed. Thus I was mooning about six or seven hours a day when having been tired of studying and been rebuked by teachers. I wanted to talk with someone, and to prove that I could think and reason and that I could judge things as I was endowed with a faculty of judgment and I knew what was going on around. In all, I liked talking and listening to the voice of my talking and laughter.

On that day my life started in a different direction indeed. Bill was calling someone but he made the wrong number and rung my family's phone. He told me later that: "That time as you had a very sweet voice that afterward I could not stand against the urge to call that wrong number again, hoping I could make friends with you and to talk to you, Teresa." Anytime hearing him say so I felt so happy but I told him: "How unreliable you are, Bill!"

Bill called me almost every day when I was home from school. I answered the phone perplexedly on the early days. I couldn't resist his insistence on talking to me and listening to my "sweet voice that anyone could hear even when he was in a dream" when even myself, to spend the time, wished to have someone to talk with and to hear my own voice. On later occasions, we were elatedly talking nineteen to the dozen, from the weather to the movies, hit songs, and some love novels on sale at Kmart we both liked. There was nothing more interesting than when both of us were trying to outdo each other in relating the episodes that occurred in those novels we liked. And then we mentioned actors, actresses and singers... Tom Cruise,... Madonna... Oh I couldn't remember.

Listening to Bill's voice I knew he was old. He must be at my dad's age. But that wouldn't matter, would it? His age wouldn't matter since he was someone I could talk with. And Bill was reasonable when saying that one's age was just a number to record the year one's was born; and that it really counted as whether or not this one at a specific age was suited to the other one. My dad, at that age, had been bringing me up for years but I always felt distant and afraid of, whereas I felt being in this man's pocket although I hadn't yet met him. He understood me and he knew when I was cheerful and when I got in a pet. Talking with him I felt in a sudden I had cast the coat and turned to be a grown-up with much account. In my dad's eyes I was a stupid and worthless daughter even unable to do some common problems of grade 8 math.

At school, teachers always insisted for years that you should never answer to strangers in the streets, and never believe in strange people of opposite sex when they were seeking your friendship. I knew it and I did not allow Bill to meet me. Bill told me many times that he didn't want to know where my home

was, neither did he wish to see me; just talking would suffice him. Bill wanted to be my secret respecter. That was what I liked too. And I believed in what he said.

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Dad slapped my face painfully for I had neglected my studying. The school reported that I had many times failed to do my homework, and that I had been asleep at the switch during teachers' lecturing and having given them backtalk. The pain, I could stand, but my anger was at the end of my tether. Nothing could compare to my fury now. Out of this house I was like a princess being praised and respected; people spoke to me with sweet words and entreated me to be their friends. Yet at home I was beaten and reproached as if I were an unfortunate slave being mistreated by a wicked master. What was more, dad told me to behave myself like this one and that one ever did. And that I should be like this and should be like that. Everything. I didn't want to hear him, nor did I want to remember all that he had said. I wanted to be of my own fashion and not to follow any one else's. Why should I speak Vietnamese when my accent didn't sound like that of a native? And every time when I was going to talk something in Vietnamese, I found it difficult to have enough words to express my ideas albeit my best effort in concentrating on the matter. Why should I take the role of a nice daughter to greet my parents' friends while I never knew who they were and how should they be properly addressed according to Vietnamese tradition? Mom had been insulting me for a long time so far. Sometimes she rapped my head with her knuckles. Some other times she beat my arms while she was staring at me and saying something I didn't understand but I knew that she was calling me names. I got used to it.

My dad beat me the first time recently and since then he beat me more often as a habit. That was alright, but I felt that he had become more and more alienated and now he was very distant from me. Everyday, I more and more expected to go home as soon as after class to talk with Bill. Later by later I felt he was lovely and very intellectual, unlike my dad who didn't know anything, who spoke English with an accent, and grammatically wrong and could hardly make himself understood unless he had to repeat two three times what he meant. He was worse at reading, too. There was a lot of papers that I had to explain many times until he managed to see the point.

Being beaten I came to want my parents to shake in their shoes. I would leave home for some days to scare them. I came to temporarily lodge at one of my friends' home. Just a temporary stay and I came back home. I dared not think of leaving for good neither of leaving for Bill's. He was leading a single life but I knew I shouldn't arrive there, even in the daytime. I hid myself in my friend's room. She secretly slipped food in for me. When she went to school I stayed in her room sleeping. There were not many people in the house. I thought two days and two nights were enough. Then I came back home.

Not only didn't my parents feel happy for not having lost their daughter my dad treated me tougher and cursed me more badly. Having experienced that heavy whipping I came to a decision. I wanted to be of myself. No one should maltreat me physically; such physical beating did hurt my dignity. I like to be talked to with words not rods. How I hated the phrase "spare the rod and spoil the child!" and I bitterly resented the expression "we must strike when the iron is hot!" This Vietnamese way of loving and teaching one's children is no longer suitable in the States, why should they apply it too often to abuse me and persecute my body?

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Bill invited me to the back yard, sitting on the lawn with him sipping a can of beer and waiting to see the Hale-Bopp Comet. I could not drink beer but I accepted his offer because I did not want to keep sitting in the house looking at him.

"The comet will appear in the northwest at 8 p.m. If you fail to see it this time, Teresa, you will have to wait for four thousand and two hundred years to see it. It'll be too long, Teresa."

That was Bill's style in talking. Humorous, and serene.

"It would be great if we could sit on its tail to travel in the universe and more than forty centuries later we will come back to the Earth," I remarked.

"There were some dozen people who had such an idea like yours," said Bill. "They committed suicide collectively to enable their souls to board an aircraft on the comet tail bound for the Heaven Gate to access the Heaven."

*There were the sounds of striking bowls and dishes combining with the clanking of tables and chairs being moved in the kitchen. The event reappeared in my mind. That meant the couple were having a sulk. They were trying to pour their anger onto each other. They were speaking in a falsetto tone which was coming loudly from their throat. I tried to finish my meal. Anyway, I didn't want to return to my room. There was not less than a thousand times that their discord broke out between them like this. They evoked each other's mistakes in the past to grumble about. I told myself to stay indifferent. Gumbo was the dish I usually liked very much but today it stayed untouched.*

In a sudden I wished I could die now so my soul would follow those pieces of ice of the comet tail to travel to an eternally happy world. "Everybody has his own destiny," I thought. "Many old and ailing people who are bound to die in this month of April must be luckier than I am. They are going to get access to the heaven while I am to live in the Hell created by my parents." I didn't know when I would be released from the hell they had built to lock me in.

Some high grass leaves were rubbing against my feet. Through the thin silk fabric of the pantyhose the rubbing caused a tickling feeling that was running throughout my backbone. And Bill was looking at me passionately. I plucked a leaf and put it to my mouth; I bit the leaf trying to suppress my fright. The smell of wild onion grated on my nerves.

Bill sprang up to snatch the leaf and threw it away. He affably wiped my mouth.

"Oh my God," uttered Bill, "it's wild onion, very smelly. In summers," he went on gently, "I saw many Vietnamese like you going out to collect bags of those wild onions for cooking their meals instead of buying them at the groceries."

"You could speak anything," I thought to myself, "but I don't like you to touch me so intimately" I moved a little more away from him.

*"What have I got wasting the prime of my life to follow you over here?" the voice of my mom rose in my mind. "You took my hard-to-earn money to offer to someone in Vietnam! I'm not so stupid to work hard to earn money in order to help you support your people over there living in euphoria."*

*"I left my children behind when fleeing the country so I have to support them," replied my dad. "It is not much. We haven't experienced any privation here. I help my disadvantaged flesh-and-blood relatives at home. It must be better than you always receive calls from your former lover while you've had a family for fifteen years now. Don't deny it. Don't pass the buck to him. If you don't answer him, how dared he make the calls again and again?"*

*"Words on the phone doesn't matter," my mom retorted. "It's the money that counts. It's the money you gave them that helps reactivate your sentiment."* (my mom might have made an allusion to my dad's former wife and his children left in Vietnam)

"I smell the scent of some flowers," I shifted the topic. "The scent is so gentle. I like it very much."

"That's the emissary of honeysuckle," Bill showed me some white flowers of a climbing plant dangling from a branch near the lamp. "Remember, Teresa, these flowers are blooming in clusters. This climbing plant, when in blossom, is not second to any kinds of wild beautiful flowers."

Bill went on about the properties of other flowers and plants around. I was listening to him interestingly.

*My parents' envies and jealousies were repeated every week, because the presence of those absentees were usually felt around them. I had never seen my parents fighting each other because they felt sorry for my forlornness in this home. I wished I was a little bit in their care so I could feel that I came to being as the result of my parents' love and not of anything else. I had been waiting in desperation for that feeling just to end up learning that I was no more important than the opening and shutting hours of the shoo they owned.*

*Some tears of mine were falling down into the dish of my meal I was eating from.*

Bill showed me the group of stars in the Big Dipper in the sky and explained to me the tale about a lonely girl who managed to find brother-sister ship with seven men. "... A flock of wild buffaloes was chasing them," Bill related. "They had to run and run for life. At the end, the youngest one tied one end of a rope to his arrow. He shot that arrow into the sky, and all eight of them managed to climb onto the rope to escape the chasing buffaloes. They kept climbing and climbing until they reached the sky. There, the seven bright stars are seven persons. The dim star is the youngest one..."

Bill was relating tales continuously one after another, I could not burst in. But I was overcome with sleep. It seemed I had been sitting beside and leaning against Bill and he was intimately taking my hand to point to the stars. I was too sleepy to stand up and tell Bill to take me home or to call a taxi cab to go home as I had planned previously. I was able only to tell Bill, like the girl in his tale, that I wanted to be his sister under his protection and I would sew very beautiful shirts for him.

He nodded:

"Previously I wanted to be your secret respecter, without having to see you. I just wanted to swallow all your sweet voice, Teresa," Bill was smiling brilliantly. "Now I'm so happy to be your big brother so I can see you and listen to you much more. There's nothing like this happiness."

I felt secure hearing him say so.

My eyelids were so heavy that I could not resist their falling down. Somewhere between reality and the land of nod, I vaguely felt Bill's hand caressing me while his other hand holding the phone and he made a wrong number call to some one. And it seemed that he was telling some one else exactly what he had told me some three or four months before, suggesting to be a secret respecter to a girl who was answering the phone.

And I fell into a deep sleep without being aware of anything else.