

CLOSING THE DRINKS

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Finally, she offered me those sweet words to freshen my heart, the words that I had been longing for tens of years.

They were sitting and drinking like a couple who had been in close friendship for ages. The middle-aged man, who was half naked with a pair of rather loose casual shorts on, with short cut hair, and so thin a body that it looked like a classroom skeleton, was sitting with a leg dangling that swayed now and then as to drive flies or mosquitoes away, while the other leg was on the chair. The older one seemed to be pushing 60, also in a pair of casual shorts but an old shirt was on and around his neck was a towel as if to defend him from the wind. On the plain wood table which was rather low between the two was a potpourri of glasses of all kinds none of which was alike. Some dishes for going with alcohol looked like being rustled up casually from an eating stall at the market place.

The middle-aged man made his voice heard:

“Bro Sáu, *frankly speaking*, this is the first time after months that I can enjoy drinking. How friendly I feel now – with any one and not just with you, you know. Previously, *frankly speaking*, I was just drinking unenthusiastically with someone since I was clearly aware that my words would stick in my throat sometime.”

“Why so – it’s just because you’ve eaten their food and you may feel having a frog in your throat,” interrupted uncle Sáu Cường, who was addressed as bro Sáu. “If you were still in office with some positions, you’d

have quite a few chances to go on a bender with people and the frog would dwell permanently in your throat,” said Sáu Cường. “Well,” he continued, “from now on allow me to just address you Năm Đơ, OK? The title ‘Mr. Secretary’ sounded rather authoritative. I wouldn’t like to call you ‘Năm the frankly speaking’ either as you may take it offensive.”

Năm Đơ smashed a mosquito with a pop; he opened his hand to look at it and not until the poor insect had disappeared for being pressed by his thumb and the index finger did he answer:

“Well, it’s just a trifle. Never mind it. I’m not a big shot anymore. I’ve turned back to be Năm Đơ again as I was in the past. That seems quite easy to be popular; don’t you see so, bro Sáu?” With that, he took the chopsticks to delve into the food in the plate and picked up the biggest piece of meat and put it into Sáu Cường’s bowl. This man seemed to be moved by his drinking buddy’s solicitousness, he muttered ‘thank you’ under his breath and he changed his sitting position. Their glasses were continually full to overflowing with rice alcohol, but the food which was unattended, was exposed to the flies. A woman, who was about fifty-year old, coming out from the house, gave Năm-the-frankly-speaking a vague greeting and seated herself at the front end of the courtyard after having put a tray of votive offerings on a stool that had been placed there already. On the tray put a plate containing three boiled duck eggs, and another plate with a thin cut of pork side and some brightly red boiled shrimps in it. Joss-sticks and candles were lit, the woman was saying her prayers, and then she stood up and walked back into the house with her reddish weeping eyes. The men’s drinks

ceased all of a sudden. The two men fell into a dead silence watching the woman walking away.

Sáu Cường was the one that broke the ice: “Don’t bother noticing other people, Năm. Let’s continue with our drinks. The food we have now is common but safe to eat, you know. Purportedly high-grade food might be dangerous. It might barely pass your throat when you are foaming at the mouth.”

His drinking partner nodded perfunctorily, “Just something bought casually at the market. *Frankly speaking*, those table delicacies of ambrosia should be kept out of reach these days.”

Sáu Cường changed his sitting position, “Speaking after you, Năm, trionychidae turtle roasted with salt, and snakehead fish hot pot, or pupa cooked after any recipe won’t be up my alley. The other day, after having eaten just one fried cicada pupa I felt dizzy and my chin paralyzed. It was lucky that I had taken just one piece and I didn’t come to throw up. My son had to take me to hospital where I was given some medicine and also was heaped upon with reproaches. It was so shameful.”

His drinking partner took a sip of the liquor, and made a sound of satisfaction, staring in surprise, “That’s strange! If we were brought to hospital it was because we had come down with something bad, why do they reproach us?”

“It hurt my feelings the worst,” Sáu Cường went on, “when a young nurse, who was probably the same age as one of my children, kept grumbling that I was old enough to avoid eating those kinds of bad food, and that it was as if I had been esurient for ages. And that ‘such kinds of stuff couldn’t stand anyone in good stead at

all, why do people keep swallowing them’, she said. ‘If those things were really delicious and nutritious the Chinese would have listed them into wedding menus’.”

Năm Đơ nodded repeatedly, “*Frankly speaking*, I have eaten crickets, cicadas, insect larvae, coconut beetle larvae, and scorpions. Nothing ever made me sick. Being deeply fried in butter with garlic and pepper, they would turn out to be eye-catching and would also make you hit bottle. *Frankly speaking*, sometimes a little bit of dizziness and heartburn were coming over me, and I felt my body being flaccid also for some half an hour, but all those symptoms would disappear just after a deep sleep.” Năm Đơ was nodding to himself, smiling delightedly and he added, “Those drinking buddies of mine all threw up, and half of them were laid low. It was a sheer fluke that none of them was pushing up the daisies and was seated on the altar to look at the featherless chicken offered then.”

Sáu Cường was smiling gently: “You were in luck that those pupae might have died not so long before so they weren’t intoxicated, or you all were physically strong, or the alcohol was genuine. It was usually the case that insects and larvae were living in the earth, eating spores of toxic fungi. Those which already died were dead and gone; any one that could survive would continue to kick and run. People came digging to collect all of them, washed them up and fried them. They didn’t care whether these insects were alive or dead. They might have washed them to get rid of dust, but the toxin in the insects stayed. Dead insects are a toxic source for human.”

“Why bro, how could we differentiate dead insects from the living ones? And the

infected ones from the good ones?" asked Năm Đơ.

"Well, that's what I've just learned about. It's just theoretical. Any insect that feels soft, moving, and with black eyes may be fit for eating. On the contrary, the ones that feel hard, lying motionless, and with white eyes are those that have been infected. Eating those ones is tantamount to swallowing poison."

Năm Đơ opened his eyes wide in high esteem: "Being educated is so good. I'm among the ones that possess fake diplomas can't know a damn thing." He looked thoughtful as if he wanted to recall his golden past. "If there hadn't been that bad luck, I could have acquired a bachelor degree in some two more years. The student that was studying on my behalf was a good one. He passed any course he had involved himself in." His drinking partner shook his head with a pity but said nothing. Cold wind was coming rustling from the sea. Sáu Cường pulled the towel a little tighter around his neck. Some women, having chosen their fish, were carrying their fish baskets home passing the place where the two men were sitting. Năm Đơ asked toward them, "Have those brothers over there got some good catches today?"

A woman stopped to answer him, "Fish isn't very abundant these days. [. . .] almost fish has moved to other places; two fishing boats of the Út Chột's family were sunk by strange ships. Út Chột's wife and his children are crying on the beach out there.

Năm Đơ changed his sitting position. He looked thoughtful. "What the violence! God damn the so-called strange ships," he said.

Uncle Sáu interfered, "Oh, forget it. Life is an ocean of suffering. One can't protect oneself; any say-so may cause trouble."

Some fifteen minutes later, the woman came out again from the house, carrying with her an old aluminum basin and a lighter. She was burning votive papers and saying her prayer:

"Today is the sixteenth of the lunar month; mom has something to offer you three. You had followed different ways, died in different fashions, but you all were my children, so mom offers you three the oblation on the same day. When alive you didn't have chance to get together to love one another, now dead you must have reunited and love one another. The pot on the altar, you know, is your vestige keeper: mom has cut a piece from the clothing of everyone of you, burned them and mom keeps the ash in it. Looking at the pot, mom would recall the images of your childhood." She was sitting motionless looking at the fire which was flickering and dying away. Her eyes were reddish. The wind in late afternoon was tousling her hair making it unkempt and her look haggard. The sunburned face of the woman who had experienced much hardship was quite good-looking; in her girlhood she must have been attractively pretty.

Uncle Sáu Cường chirped out a sigh, "What the anguish! On hearing her praying I always feel heartbroken. Hai, her eldest son, was a commando; Ba, the second a guerrilla; and Út, the youngest, a daughter, fleeing the country. I love the second the most. He took side opposite to mine but when he was a little child I used to carry him and I felt like it."

"I know them all," said Năm Đơ. "They often followed me to ask for some candies. Fate

had decided Ba and I were sharing the same trench in the war. He was a romantic one and he learned many poems. Once, during a cease-fire on Tết occasion he was busying himself writing down a poem a so-called quisling was reading through their loudspeaker, and got a scolding from me for it. Later he was killed by a sniper as he had climbed out of the tunnel to enjoy feeling some dew at late night and listening to cocks crowing. How pity I feel for him."

The house owner philosophized, "That was war. The law of war must be observed, otherwise one would suffer damage when listening to one's individual emotion. That's what should be understood by everybody. At any time one should be wearing a corresponding mask to survive."

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Năm Đor sensed that the earth that touched him was colder than he had normally felt. He tried to lull himself into the land of nod for almost an hour but the god of sleep seemed to have wandered somewhere. He was lying in silence looking up to the earthen vault only to see a blear screen. He reached out his hand to touch the rough surface of the vault; when fuel was abundant, he generously allowed Ba Gan to keep a lamp lit to read his letters, play some music or record some financial accounts, and he himself curiously looked at the shadows on that rough surface and imagined the heroes and heroines in the Chinese romance Feng Shen. He raised himself to keep his hand at the place until he felt weary in the arm but he didn't get to sleep at all. He gropingly crawled over to the boy. There was flash-light. You're staying up so late. Hearing the noise, Ba Gan hid the note book which he had been

writing something on it under his pillow, heartily offered his enticement:

"Uncle Năm, what if we emerge from the tunnel to catch some late night dew? Having been confined for two months in this cramped space I have a craving for seeing the sunshine and the rain, for catching the night dew, listening to the chirps of crickets, do you know?"

"You have a florid language like that of those capitalists", said Năm Đor. "You have such cravings while I'm also human, why don't I? Frankly speaking, I crave for hearing cocks' crowing at the break of day, too. Living like this for a week or some ten days is OK, but leading this way of living for almost sixty days without seeing the sunshine like we have been could make us crazy."

"You should proceed forward, uncle Năm," Ba Gan told him. "I'll clear away all these sundries to make the place ready for us to hit the hay later." The boy stopped for some moments, and he added cautiously, "Take the thing with us, in case we'll have something to fight with."

Năm Đor nodded his head, turned back, and started to crawl through the underground passages. Near to the opening of the passageway they sat hunched in the recesses in the walls pricking up their ears. By now frogs' call and crickets' chirps could be heard clearly. Holding their breath and listening carefully they might detect the wind rustling through low bushes and drops of dew falling slightly onto the leaves of grass.

"Two o'clock in the morning!" whispered Ba Gan. He pressed his ears to the tunnel walls for a while then declared firmly, "We're safe."

The two slowly crawled out of the opening of the trench. They were lying on the ground, looking at the stars in the sky. Ba Gan rubbed the grass slightly, then he put his dew-wet hands to his nose and inhaled deeply. He held his breath for some moments before breathing out.

"The night dew on grass smells especially good, uncle Năm," said Ba Gan. "Getting used to it you'll miss it terribly. The distant fire blob out there is so dear to me. It looks like the light at my mother's in the hamlet. Anytime sneaking up on my home, not necessary to come in, just to see the light in it, I felt so happy. As often as not, prowling around the garden and then leaving would suffice me."

Năm Đor nodded repeatedly:

"That's nostalgia, boy. The house where you were born, you grew up at... is a tiny piece of your motherland, which is related to you as if by blood. You've approached it but didn't feel it necessary to come in, whereas I had wanted to get in but dared not..." Năm Đor spoke his mind, "In my school time, I was madly in love with the girl that'd later be your mother; for a thousand times I wanted to come and make her acquaintance, but I wasn't bold enough to. I was a bad student and I took a turn for the worse when I failed the junior final exam. For two following years I was her classmate, but the inferior complex discouraged me from making my love known to her. Once I fought hard against Đực Cồ to reclaim a notebook he had taken from her. When giving her the note book I stood stupefied and could hardly make a word; I was held up to ridicule by my friends since then, hence the name Năm Đor – Năm stupefied – When going to war I found myself loving the name."

Ba Gan was lying in silence. All of a sudden he started to quietly recite some verses:

Please pour me one more glass

I'm now overjoyed to sit with you on this pass

What'll matter tomorrow is nothing to worry about

To keep your heart light all that you should flout

For us soldiers - no resentment to define

Friend or enemy, there's not a dividing line.

Ba Gan stopped to regain his breath. Năm Đor slapped his thigh with a big noise:

"Say, Ba, whose poem did you plagiarize? It sounds quite arresting. Come on."

Why should one invent this bloody game?

So the both sides make the rancor an aim

I'm tired of dealing with these frivolous matters

Only you and I are the losers

Năm Đor dusted off his bottom determinedly:

"Now, get back to the trench. Such a poem made me frustrated. By the grace of God, you've outlived many battles albeit such a poetic inspiration you've acquired.

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The group of people, having finished choosing their fish, was walking toward their home. On their way they were noisily voicing their laments, complaints, accusations and curses. When passing the two drinking men, some of them came up to greet them; delight was written all over Năm Đor's face:

"Here you are, all members of Út Chột's family. It's all to the good now. Congratulations on your good luck!"

"We've managed to escaped this time," a man replied, swallowing the bitter bill, "but from now on our family may die of

starvation. Our boats were broken, we can't afford having them repaired. Whom shall we sue for compensation? Hamlet authorities said since the culprits were strange ships nobody knows their nationality so how can we take legal action against them? Now take a look at my face. They've beaten me so cruelly. They were speaking the language like that spoken in Hong Kong's films but our hamlet authorities wouldn't hear the case until we've reported that we had been attacked by alien ships."

The two men at the drinks changed their sitting positions, sighed and bowed to look down at the ground for a very long time. Their languid drinks stopped in their thoughtful manner.

Waving his chopsticks in his hand, Năm Đơ was speaking in a raucous weeping tone:

"How I love them! Our people! They suffer a lot of desperate situations. Some years ago these matters didn't stir my mind a bit, I didn't see it an issue at all. A couple of years ago on my tour in China I enjoyed staying at Hekou port for some days. On upper stories of the shops there accommodated so many Vietnamese girls. It didn't make me moved seeing that though. I thought it was their destiny to be in such situation. Now I just feel otherwise."

His drinking partner's eyes were popping out inquiringly. Năm Đơ was slowly taking a breath of air. He swallowed the lump that seemed to have attached to his throat for a long time while his hands were driving all the dished and cups aside, clearing an area on the table. Taking the bottle of fish sauce, he said: "This is you", the soya sauce: "This is me", then he took the bottle of alcohol: "This is Ms Bầy, Ba Gan's mother, and all the other bottles over there are people." He continued, "You see, all of them are bottles, the labels on them indicate the substance contained inside of them. In the kitchen they are put separately, not in the same place. Even if they came together they are all distinguishable."

For a while so far, Sáu Cường's eyes didn't make a wink, he was surprised by the special behaviors of Năm Đơ who was now taking two bottles in both hands, turning them upside down to pour all their contents out onto the ground. He continued to empty two other bottles, and others, that way. He took a paring knife to angrily scrape off all labels from the bottles. He said incitingly:

"Now, there are no labels, no contents; these bottles turn back to be of their own. No more alcohol bottle, fish sauce bottle, soya sauce bottle, or bottle of chili in vinegar. They are just bottles, bare bottles."

Năm Đơ sat down panting, his voice was softly:

"*Frankly speaking*, bro Sáu, at a point of time we should have got the picture. If everybody gives up their individual and selfish desire and get rid of their labels and titles, they all, in consequence, will turn to be the same, all Vietnamese; who will they love then if they don't love one another? That's why I was moved in tears when hearing Út Chột's words; and so was I when I recalled seeing the Vietnamese girls at Hekow port in China and at other places in neighboring countries..."

The woman, who was coming out from the house with two cups and a tea pot in her hands, was smiling solemnly but she looked quite cheerful:

"Dear Năm, *frankly speaking* to you, in the old days if you could have had an eloquent speech like that, you would have fathered the three children of mine and their would be biological dad wouldn't have had a chance."

Năm Đơ was radiantly smiling. He was looking Ms Bầy in the eyes, then he slowly got up and turned to walk away, leaving behind the closing drinks with empty bottles and glasses scattered around, and two pairs of round open eyes.