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**“A Bar at the Edge of a Cemetery”**

I poured the bottle of beer into my glass, lifted it, and drank slowly. I gazed at the stones in the cemetery, which were scattered in front of me, illuminated by the light of the full moon. Dark shadows were cast from rows of aging pine trees standing along the fences that surrounded the cemetery on all four sides. Their blackness contrasted with the overall whiteness of the cemetery and the chalky color of its plastered walls. Although the warmer dry season had recently arrived, the area around the cemetery remained cold as a result of the wind that swept across the fields and forest beyond.

It was not the first time I had stopped to drink beer. The open-air whiskey shop where I sat contained two tables for customers, and a third table that was used to store bottles of beer, whiskey, and a glass container filled with cartons of cigarettes. An oil lantern hung from the wall, its light competing with that of the moon and stars. The back wall that ran between the bar and the cemetery was no different than the white cloth that a traveling Mau Lam musical performer would use for the backdrop of his stage, so that people driving by could see the performers only from the front side.

The back of this particular stage was filled with graves and crosses, cold and quiet. The pale yellow light cast a wide enough circle of radiance to allow the drunks, who sat around both of the tables, to see the plates of food that were eaten with the whiskey. I sat on a bench at the table that was used for selling merchandise. I was not obliged, therefore, to get involved with anyone else and could simply play the role of an observer. A middle-aged woman, older than myself, walked back and forth between the table reserved for the store's merchandise and a stove grill used to grill cattle tendons and innards. They were sold for fifty *kip* per skewer. The teenage daughter of the middle-aged woman had powdered her face so that it appeared white and soft. Observing only her face, it would be impossible to tell that her skin was coarse and as dark as a cup of coffee with cream.

The young woman worked as a waitress. She both poured beer and drank with the customers. When the middle-aged woman had a free moment, she came to sit down in a chair in front of mine.

“When you're in the neighborhood, please stop by and give us your business. Our shop has been open for less than a month, and we still don't have many regular customers.”

“Where did you set up your store in the past?”

“Nowhere. All we did was farm. Our fields are behind this cemetery. For a long time we did not sell whiskey or cigarettes because we thought there were plenty of shops selling similar goods. We couldn't compete with the others. We are

poor, and my daughter is not as pretty as the other girls are. After there was a big roundup and arrest of prostitutes last month and most of the bars were shut down, we saw our opportunity.”

“Aren’t you afraid that the officials are going to shut down the bars again?”

“Why should I be afraid? We sell whiskey, not women.”

“I’ve heard that many of the stores that were closed did not sell women. It was only that they refused to give free whiskey to government officials out of uniform. That in itself can be a problem.”

“Well, if we don’t do it, we’ll starve to death. Whatever you do, you take a chance.”

Our conversation ended in silence. The only sound that remained was music from a tape recorder with a single speaker and the continuous back and forth arguing of the drunks.

“Would you like another beer?” the woman asked.

“Sounds like a good idea.”

The woman stood up, took out a bottle of beer that was chilled in ice in a bucket, and returned to sit down as before.

“God, am I tired. This is not a day when I’m not drunk. I don’t want to drink but the customers force me. I have to please them. I want their money.”

I poured beer into a glass and handed it to the pitiable middle-aged woman.

“Expenses are high,” she said, “wages are low. I don’t make as much as I have to pay out. As for you younger people, you have no problems. You are government workers and bosses. You have money left over to save.”

“Government workers,” I responded, “now they are the problem-makers. Their salary is less than a child makes selling grilled bananas at the side of the road. Some work for three months and still smell not a scent of their salary. Their work is inefficient. They have no respect for discipline. Orders from their bosses have no meaning to them. Shameless corruption is rampant throughout government circles.”

“There is truth in what you say. Look at my daughter. After graduating from a teacher’s college, she taught nursery children. After several years of work, she could not afford even a single pretty silk dress. I couldn’t bear to watch any longer, so I had her resign to sell whiskey. It is better for her to do up her face than work like that when her salary couldn’t even pay for half a sack of rice.”

“How much land do you own?”

“Only four or five hectares. But it’s fortunate that we can farm during the rice season and also with the help with irrigation.”

“Is it your own private field?”

“No, it’s owned by the state. In the past, nobody was interested in the land around here because it’s next to the cemetery. Our family was the first to move in and build a house here. At the time, my husband had a small cart that carried merchandise in the market. As the number of our children grew, however, such work was not enough to make ends meet. We had to rent our house and buy our rice. My husband decided to move out here to the outskirts of the town to make a living.”

“You must have been much better off after you moved.”

“What do you mean, better off?” Government officials have come here on many occasions to tell us to leave and make our living elsewhere. Where will they have us go? The officials have said that they have plans to expand the cemetery. However, that is not the truth. We have seen them come and stake claim to every inch of land around here and start their own gardens and rice fields. The more difficult the times become, the more people lack kindness and compassion. The greater a man’s power and destiny, the more heartless he becomes to other people. I am honestly worried for the dead that sleep peacefully in the cemetery. It won’t be long before they will have to pay rent on their plots.”

What the woman said was, in fact, the truth. No longer was true peace and tranquility to be found inside of the cemetery, as people have believed for ages.

I did not hurry to drink my beer. The middle-aged woman stood up, brought snacks over to another table, and sat with the people there. The faces of the drinkers were as slimy as the faces of grilled pigs and their eyes as blurred as pig’s eyes scalded with hot water. What a task, to lift up such heavy tongues and carry on continuously about such pointless topics. Most of their conversation was centered on the struggle for money, family conflicts, and the various obstacles presented by the environment that invariably thwarted personal happiness. The table where the young woman drank had a livelier atmosphere with flirtation and humor concerning what goes on under the mosquito net and inside of women’s dresses. Such humor was followed by the thunderous laughter of people who showed not the slightest fear or deference to any ghosts [rest of line illegible] shadows before they laid themselves out on their rickshaw, their life companion. Some people sprawled themselves out on the tables. Those who remained functional continued to struggle with ears that buzzed, eyes that blurred, and mouths that no longer made human-like sounds.

“Pour another round of whiskey, young woman. My liver is dry.” A drunk with a *lao* flower in his hair started to speak, causing an eruption of laughter among his friends.

“Old man with the head of a snake, do you still want to eat turtle eggs?” the middle-aged woman scolded<sup>1</sup>

The commotion and laughter suddenly fell silent. The old man with the *lao* flowers in his hair spoke up to defend himself: “Happiness...just a little happiness...We are all human beings. All of us are the same. Couldn’t you share, if just a little bit? Is what I am saying not true, young girl?”

“What are you saying? Is it just a little happiness then, to deceive a young child so that you can deflower her?”

The middle-aged woman stood up and showed signs that she was taking offense at the man’s words.

“Who said that I was deceptive? I asked her in a polite and straight-forward manner.” “This type of merchandise is expensive. How can you ask for it free?”

Another drunk interrupted, saying: “We can’t find one to borrow. If we wish to buy one, it’s not available. What else can we do but ask for it free?”

The man’s supporters let out a great laugh.

“Everyone keeps one at home so that they can eat it for a long time. And yet you’re still not full.” The middle-aged woman continued, reluctant to sit down.

“The one you’re talking about is already dead. We’ve eaten it so much that we’re bored. We want to try something new.”

The young woman showed no signs of being upset. She continued to pour their whiskey and listen to them speak. When she had the opportunity, however, she turned in my direction.

“What? Is he your husband?”

“No. I have only come here to sit and drink beer,” I excused myself. “Really? Is that the case?” The man with the *lao* flower in his hair was suspicious. “Don’t take offense at words spoken by people who drink whiskey. They are said in jest. Sometimes they are a little bit filthy.” The drunk who was less drunk than all the other drunks attempted to speak with formality and politeness. “Relax,” I said with sincerity in my voice. “Don’t feel uncomfortable.”

From that moment onwards, I could feel that the surroundings had suddenly become silent. Some of the drunks invited their friends to leave. I felt uncomfortable that I had brought about this change in atmosphere, and had ruined the slight happiness of others. I especially felt badly because I had observed from the very beginning that these three drunks were in fact nothing more than corpses that could breathe. They were leftover bones and fragments of skin who hadn’t the slightest interest or concern about the problems that encompassed their lives, but whose only agitation lay in whether or not the whiskey had evaporated from their glasses.

Or could it be said that true tranquility was contained in each bottle of whiskey?

I lifted my glass and drank the beer slowly.

The full moon spread its soft white light, bathing the tops of the pine trees and the cheeks of the young woman who sat in front of me. The woman’s hazy black hair was tied in a rose-colored bow shaped like rabbit’s ears; her bushy eyebrows, her face, and deep dark eyes spoke of her innocence. There was so much she still had to learn from life, which is as confusing and convoluted as a tornado.

“Did your wife run away with her lover? Is that why you’re sitting sad and lonely, putting on such a long face?”

“No,” I replied. “It’s the young woman who sells whiskey that runs away.”

“But I am still here.”

“I’m afraid that you will also leave.”

As the young woman poured beer into my glass, I noticed a suggestive glance from her that was aimed in my direction.

I allowed the country music from the tape recorder to interrupt our conversation for a moment, then spoke to her directly: “Do you realize that you have made the other people afraid of me?”

“Well then, that’s good. It’ll make them hurry home to their wives and kids.”

“But I have no wish for people to misunderstand me. I am not a fly that travels around collecting news of other people, reporting to the powerful in the hope of collecting a reward. And what is truly important, I have no wish for this land to have any more cowards than it already has.”

The young woman sat quietly and listened to all that I said. I did not know how much she actually understood. It is a pity that I could not explain any more

than I already had. She may even think that I myself am just another coward.

“Let’s talk about other things,” I changed the topic.

“Will you have another beer?”

She stood up and left the table. I glanced at her well-rounded hips, which she moved gracefully as she walked, creating in me a feeling of desire. Her skin, however, was coarse and black, and her body rather stout and muscular. She was not well proportioned.

“Mother, the beer is all finished. I’ll have this man take me home to get some more.”

Before the middle-aged woman gave a response, the young woman nodded her head as a sign that I should follow her out of the bar.

At the edge of the northern wall there was a gravel path that traveled deep inside the village. Along the way, at regular intervals, pine trees threw shadows on the ground. It was the night of a full moon and an orchestra of crickets resounded throughout the forest.

“Are you afraid of ghosts?” she whispered.

“There is plenty more to fear than ghosts,” I replied.

There were many places behind the cemetery where the wall was dilapidated and fallen down. We could see white gravestones spread thickly throughout the cemetery. Crosses were scattered helter-skelter, giving the graveyard the appearance of a rice field that had only recently been pummeled and pounded by the fury of a storm.

The atmosphere inside of the cemetery was colder than that of the surrounding area. I never would have imagined that this young woman would have invited me here to sit and watch the full moon. The graveyard was spotlessly clean as if it were swept several times each day.

“What do you think is more frightening than the ghosts that sleep in this cemetery?” the young woman asked.

I sincerely did not wish to answer this kind of question.

“Dead people that breathe are more frightening than ghosts.”

She turned her head and [rest of line illegible] shone from her deep black eyes with their thick eyebrows.

I answered her question: “The type of person who remains indifferent and merely lives his life day to day, lacking in contentment and concern. In all that he does, his sole motivation is survival. Never will this type of person make a choice between good or bad, right or wrong. He merely clings to rank, status, and power, bags of money, and the handle of a gun. He is no different than a parasite, living off rotten decomposing matter, and destroying all that is decent in the human body.”

I turned to look at the young woman. I wanted to know if she was interested in what I had to say. She was lying down happily, watching the light of the full moon. One might say that she was giving up her body to be caressed by the light of the moon.

“Have I spoken too much?”

“We don’t have much time,” she whispered.

“Get up. I don’t have any money to give you.”

“What do you mean? I’ll have you know that I am not a girl who sells herself.

“Let’s go then. I’m so drunk that I can’t lift up my own head.”

We returned to the bar with four bottles of beer.

The young woman did not come near my table again. I poured my own beer, filling my glass with most of the bottle. I lifted it and drank slowly, gazing at the crosses in the cemetery that was spread out before me. I drank from my beer, feeling nothing at all.

1990s

*Translated by Peter Koret*

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1. A “snake-headed man” refers to an old man with a propensity for women of a much younger age. The conversation is filled with sexual imagery. “Turtle eggs” refers to a young virgin.