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## SLEEPING ON EARTH

*Nguyen Thi Am*

It was in the back streets, near the train stations, that the homeless gathered. They earned their living there, honestly, dishonestly. Honestly, as dockers, carriers of buckets of water and *cyclo* drivers. The dishonest professions are too numerous to mention. The homeless like to gamble. The men played *ba cay* and *to tom* or rolled dice. For the women, it was cards. The dreams born from those games crushed the ones that life had to offer them. They weren't wrong.

Wherever they live, human beings are human beings. God, in creating them, gave them the same right to love. So dirty kids accompanied the wandering of the homeless.

One evening, in a deserted alley near the bus station, three middle-aged women in rags were playing cards.

"A pair of black pawns," said the fat one, chuckling, and showed her hand.

"What bad luck," sighed the skinniest one.

"It's your own fault. You should have played it safe," grumbled the third, whose face was pockmarked.

The losers fished money out of the hem of their pants and paid up, grumbling. Next to them lay a half-naked baby in a ragged shirt. He must have been a year old. He was sleeping.

The quarrel between the players woke him up, and he howled. He was no angel. Between his little thighs, black with filth, nestled a tiny penis the size of a plum. Furious, the little penis shot a stream of urine in an arch. His bawling bothered the players.

The fat one said, "Calm the kid down. He's gonna burst our eardrums."

"Who cares," said the woman with the pockmarked face.

The baby, abandoned, cried even louder. The game was interrupted. The pockmarked woman looked over at the kid, furious. The little boy was purple with rage. Screaming like that—you would have thought it was an ambulance siren. The pockmarked woman had just lost. She stretched out a thin, filthy hand with long, flamboyant nails painted the scarlet color of ten-o'clock flowers. Gritting her teeth, she slapped the baby's bottom.

The little one really let loose then. Exasperated, the two women looked over at the pockmarked woman.

"Rent him out. If he keeps screaming like that, we're going to have to stop the game."

That's what the fat one said. The pockmarked woman turned around:

"Hey, Thuy, come over here, I'll rent him to you . . ."

She gestured with her hand. Nearby, shadows swarmed around the dented pots and pans. A twenty-year-old girl pulled herself out and approached, dragging her feet. A hat made out of bamboo leaves covered her head. She took the baby and said: "You got any Seduxen left, Elder Sister?"

"Here." The pockmarked woman pulled a half-opened packet of sleeping pills and handed it to the girl. The girl took a pill and returned the packet. The little one was still screaming. She picked it up and brought it over to the public fountain. The fountain hissed softly, dripping slowly, drop by drop. Too slowly. The girl pulled open the kid's jaw violently and dropped the pill in. She scooped up water from the puddle under the spout in her hand and poured it into his

mouth. The baby swallowed the pill, choking. And she carried him away.

The woman with the pockmarked face, for a time deeply absorbed in her card game, looked up now. She shouted after the girl:

"Hey! That's going to be 5,000 *dong*. Don't forget to give him a bowl of rice gruel when he wakes up!" The girl didn't respond. She trudged off toward the town.

"A pair of black horses!" shrieked the woman with the pockmarked face, giving her thigh a slap. Astounded, the two other women paid up.

The baby fell into a drugged sleep, slumping over the young girl's arm like a wet towel. Evening fell. A young peasant in rags with a baby in her arms: nothing like it if you want to move the hearts of men.

The wind blew in from the North. The amber light of the sun had disappeared. Above, two black clouds banked in the sky. The rain fell in a drizzle. Then drops spattered the pavement of the road. The young girl carried the baby through the rain. Her conical hat protected her head and her breast. Further down, her body, and the baby's thighs, streamed with rain. People who had taken shelter on the sidewalk called to her, worried. She went her own way. The rain wove a weft for all of life's dramas. She too needed this . . .

Hanoi train station. The electronic clock read quarter to six. The nightlife was just beginning. Every day tens of thousands of human beings passed through here. Hundreds of them had yet to encounter the drama of their day. The young girl wove through the waiting passengers. She cried as she walked. Her tears flowed, slowly, silently. From time to time, she would stop in the middle of the crowd. An old man turned away, unable to bear the sight of her. A few well-dressed city dwellers smiled knowingly. She didn't bother holding out her hand to them. City dwellers live in their civility. They didn't belong to her world. They might denounce her act. In spite of everything, armed as she was, she still had hope.

A mature man, graying at the temples, in uniform, looked over in her direction, bothered. He asked her: "Why don't you change clothes? You're going to catch cold."

"Yes. The harvest was bad. We have nothing left to eat. We're trying to survive by begging."

"Where's your husband?"

"He sacrificed himself in Cambodia."

"And your family?"

"It's not worth talking about . . ."

She wept. The man, embarrassed, thought a moment.

"Here, I'll give you a bit of money. Go buy some dry clothes for the baby. Give him something to eat or he's going to come down with pneumonia."

He opened his leather bag and got out a wad of bills. He took half of them, handing the girl 20,000 *dong*. The girl wiped away her tears and took the money.

"Thank you."

And she left. The man lit a cigarette. He felt gripped by a strange sadness. The girl was about the same age as his eldest daughter.

Five minutes later, in the waiting room, an old farmer, who looked rich, gave the girl 5,000 *dong*.

An hour later, at the entrance to the train station, two young soldiers gave her another 5,000 *dong*.

It was an uncertain evening, the rain falling intermittently. Two young prostitutes wandered in vain inside the station. Jealous, they smoked and bitched. "What a dog's life! That little peasant is making a fortune!"

"I've been watching her from the beginning of the evening. She must have brought in more than 100,000 *dong*."

"From now until dawn she'll probably bring it to 200,000."

The rain fell again. Time goes fast when you're involved in what you're doing. The train station clock started to sing. The two hands pointed at midnight. It was over. The young girl jumped up and hurried back. The kid woke up. This time, he was weak with hunger, exhausted by the sleeping pill. He

stared up at the girl, wide-eyed. She thought of taking him to a rice stall. But she was afraid of being late. The woman with the pockmarked face would certainly demand a late fee if she took time to feed the baby.

She walked back through deserted streets. Under a wide roof, two bodies were asleep under raincoats. She nudged them with her foot. A raincoat moved. The woman with the pockmarked face poked her head out from under the covers. "Where's the money? . . . Why are you bringing him back so late?"

The girl held out a 5,000-*dong* bill.

"Did you give him something to eat?"

"Yeah. It's done."

The little one looked up at his mother. A vacant look, neither sad nor happy. A man lay next to her. The face of a hired killer. He grumbled, angry at having been wakened. The woman with the pockmarked face took the baby under her arm. She placed it between the two of them. The kid fell asleep between his mother and the man.

The young girl left. The man and the woman pulled their raincoats over their heads and fell back asleep.

And time passed. One hour . . . Two hours . . . Three hours . . . Five hours. The sky grew lighter. The woman with the pockmarked face shifted about for a moment under her raincoat, and then woke up. She lifted the baby. His body was blackish. He was dead. A mother always suffers from the loss of a child. She let out the cries of a mad dog. One human being . . . Two human beings . . . Three human beings . . . People crowded around to see the unusual incident. Two policemen approached, curious. They dispersed the crowd. They called a *cyclo* and ordered him to drive the mother and the child to the hospital.

Souls who have suffered down here on earth go to heaven. When he arrived, the little one told his friends: "During my stay on earth, all I did was sleep. Life down there is just one long sleep."

*Translated by Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson*