

## **Rain**

by Nguyen Huy Thiep

*Darling,*

*I begin this story at eight o'clock in the morning in the shabbiest coffee shop in town. There are no other guests, nobody to bother me. It's raining.*

*I sit here writing. Your face appears to me. You are far away. Where are you? All my thoughts are directed toward you. You appear very clearly. You sit next to me, giving order to these incoherent words. On that day in my memory, it is also raining, raining heavily, incessantly. You and I sit in a dark corner. In front of us are two women, a short one and a tall one, both beautiful. I tell you to pay attention to the tall one, the one with long, free-flowing hair, who leans back in her chair every time she laughs.*

*You ask me her name.*

*I say, "Does it matter what she's called? People's names are just a label. I call her N."*

*You say, "So, the one next to her's M, then?"*

*I say, "Yes."*

"The thing is," said M, "You don't understand at all what he's like. He'll ruin your life. I beg you, don't love him."

"No, I don't love him. I'm not mad!"

N took a flower from the table and shredded it.

"But he's so kind and intelligent. Being around him, I can learn something, don't you think?"

"From a man? Women can't learn a thing from men. They're only good for throwing you down on the bed and seducing you with sweet words. We think we got lucky. We believe it's love or human nature. In fact, life is over."

"Why so cynical?" N sighed.

They were quiet for a moment. One could hear the sound of the falling rain.

N said, "He recites poetry in a deep voice. It's indescribably beautiful."

"Poetry is it now! What guy who wants to get a woman into bed doesn't recite poetry? They've composed poetry without a break from the stone age til now - thousands of years so far."

"You seem so strange today. But you yourself got married. Aren't you happy?"

"Well, I don't know. Of course I am. But this husband of mine is a bastard. I know he betrays everyone. I don't understand why I thought so highly of him before I got married."

N giggled. As she was laughing her hair flowed down along the side of the chair.

"Let me have one of your cigarettes. Since I got married I have to smoke in secret. If my husband finds out, he'll beat me."

"It's your own fault. Didn't I tell you he's no good? I hate him. I've never heard him speak a single word of truth."

"Well, it's all fate. What can you do? For me, it's as good as over. I'll get pregnant, go to hospital, and - I don't know why I think this - afterwards I'll be paralysed and that... that'll be the end of my life. But you - I beg you, don't love him!"

"I don't love him! I'm not insane."

“Swear it. I beg you. Do not love him.”

*You ask, “Why would they be like that? Why discourage love?”*

*I say, “Don’t worry. No one as admirable as she is would make a promise lightly.”*

M sat there smoking. The tip of her cigarette glowed bright red.

“I beg you. Don’t love him. Swear it!”

“No! Don’t make me swear! That’s ridiculous!”

“Don’t you understand what a bastard he can be? He’ll do whatever he likes. He can even become violent.”

“I hear you.”

“I.. I used to know him. He detests people. Someone like that has no respect for anyone.”

“But he’s very kind to me. Sweet, even.”

“You don’t understand a thing. He’s kind to everyone. He’s false! He doesn’t care about anything. Have you noticed the way he spends money? If he had the wealth of an entire nation in his hands, it’d be gone in five minutes.”

“His poems are very unusual.”

“Poetry again! If you keep on dreaming like this, you’re doomed. He only wants to amuse himself. Have you seen him play cards with that kid for six hours straight? Just think about how much work he could get done in six hours.”

“I think it’s quite sweet.”

“Sweet? What do you mean, sweet? It’s crazy!”

They sat in silence. One could hear the sound of the falling rain.

“I beg you. Be careful! Do you know what it means to be loved by a man like that?”

“No. How could I?”

“Your heart could break any second. You don’t get it. He does whatever he wants. When he’s in love, he forgets everything else. It’ll make you really miserable. And it’s embarrassing!”

“Why embarrassing?”

“Do you live as if you’re all alone? You still have friends, parents, your grandmother, and there’s your work, too.”

“Yeah, grandma is very difficult.”

“What next? He’ll push everyone else to one side. Then he’ll laugh it all off. It’s a hideous laugh. For him, nothing has any value. I forbid you to love him!”

“I know.”

“I beg you, don’t love him.”

“His poems are very unusual. They have no beginning or end. Here. Listen to this one:

*For this reason I rise at midnight,  
wandering the city streets...*

“For what reason?”

“Who knows? I asked him the same question. He laughed. He doesn’t understand it all himself. He just pointed to the sky.”

“See what I mean? That’s crazy!”

“And it goes on like this:

*I pluck a hair from my leg  
to see whether it’s anything like buffalo hair.  
I have signed a contract  
and strive to drive the wind back  
into that desolate room of mine...*

M sat up straight.

“He signed a contract with the devil. For sure. I know. He doesn’t spend time with people, only ghosts.”

“He could die from the most trivial accident. He’s extraordinarily credulous.”

“Enough, I beg you. Stop dreaming. Credulous, not credulous, it doesn’t make any difference.”

“Really, I’ve never met a person as... as admirable. So warm, and he’s as deep as the dark night. Honest, as well.”

They sat in silence. One could hear the sound of the falling rain.

“Again, I beg you. Don’t love him.”

“I hear you.”

*You ask, “What is love?”*

*I say, “It’s the most refined level of virtue. Not everyone understands that.”*

*You ask, “Why do people write poetry when they’re in love?”*

*I say, “Love brings out talent. Poetry is the most ordinary kind of talent.”*

*You ask, “What type of talent is not ordinary?”*

*I say, “There’s only one kind that isn’t.”*

*You ask, “And do you know what it is?”*

*I say, “Yes.”*

*You ask, “Do you have it?”*

*I say, “Yes.”*

*You say, “In that case, I love you.”*

“Again, I beg you. Don’t love him.”

“I hear you.”

“Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, he loved a young woman. She belonged to an educated family. Do you know what a chaste and noble young woman is like? Her lips are a deep, warm red. Her eyes shine blue like the shell of a starling’s egg. This young woman was brought up on fairy tales and fragrant rice with fine pork sausages. A young woman who grows up like this has the clearest white skin.”

“Give me a break! A chaste and noble young woman? What nonsense!”

“OK, you’re right. Anyway, he approached her, even though he knew damn well nothing could harm her like his love. I really believe he loved her - madly. How could he not love a girl like that? He probably thought that by being near her he’d grow calm, stop being so restless; he’d mend his ways and no longer be some loser just hanging about.”

M fell silent, she lit another cigarette. The tip of her cigarette glowed bright red. One could hear the sound of the falling rain.

“So you can’t really call him unrefined. He merely dared to get close to her. It was more than love. He admired her. He worshipped her in the way that people worship the spirit of General Tran.”

“Why General Tran?”

“Because his love was platonic. Only love for a saint can be that way.”

“I understand. It’s a bit strange, though. I think he’s...er... a bit bolder now.”

“Be quiet! I beg you, don’t think about him anymore.”

“I hear you.”

“The two of them were like people in a dream. She withered because of him. Imagine it. A young girl just coming of age, learning about love for the first time. And this... guy; this hairy, sweaty, greasy...goat! Who laughs and talks like a gangster. He’d think nothing of standing on his head in front of her parents! Her father is an intellectual. He has photographs of famous people hanging on the walls. He loves classical literature, classical music, classical politics. And that guy - he makes music by sticking two fingers in his mouth!”

“It’s kind of funny, don’t you think?”

“What’s funny about it? Once, he caught a gecko and put it on the table. He explained society by describing this creature. According to him, the head represented the cream of society - the brains; the legs were the base - the workers - and the tail was ethics. he said that when the tail of the gecko falls off, it will simply grow back again. Ethics, he said, can wag like a tail, disconnected from everything else.”

“That’s too much!”

“Right. If even you can admit it, then how could anyone else stand it?”

“It’s unbearable really.”

“I beg you, don’t love him.”

“Alright, so what happened to his love for this... young girl?”

“He seduced her. Or she seduced him. Who knows? These are passionate people. Let’s say they seduced each other. If he went for only a day without seeing her, he’d start picking fights. As I tell you this, I realise that no-one can really complain about a love like that. Really, if you can’t call that love, I don’t know what is.”

“I understand completely.”

“There you go again, thinking about him again, aren’t you? I forbid it. I beg you, don’t love him.”

“I hear you. Go on with the story, will you?”

M continued smoking. Silence. One could hear the sound of the falling rain.

*You say, “Basically, life is sad, isn’t that right?”*

*I say, “But love isn’t.”*

*You ask, “Which of the two is happy?”*

*I say, “One just let go of happiness. And the other has happiness in her hands, but if she isn’t careful then she’ll also lose it.”*

M continued telling the story.

“They loved each other. He wanted to marry her. Everyone stood in their way. He persuaded her to run away with him.”

“Where to?”

“Well, to some really backward place.”

“Why backward?”

“In a civilised place, who would have him? Nothing for him is too high or too low.”

“So did they escape?”

“Right at the last minute she changed her mind and broke her promise. She didn’t go with him.”

“Shit!”

“Yeah.”

“Did he come back?”

“A guy like that? What would he come back for? What you think are noble feelings are the feelings of a devil, not a human being. He knew better than to sacrifice his life for a coward, even if she was chaste, with deep, warm red lips and the clearest white skin.”

“He just took off?”

“Right. He took off right away. Gone without a trace. He is especially discerning when it comes to humiliation.”

“And then?”

“She fell seriously ill. He had some medicine sent, but she refused to take it. How could medicine help? Time passed. Her life began to waste away. She realised that she wouldn’t find another man like him.”

They sat in silence. One could hear the sound of the falling rain.

“Again, I beg you. Don’t love him. He doesn’t have a heart. He doesn’t forgive. You mustn’t love him. He’s a devil.”

N rummaged in her pockets, then put a small photograph on the table.

“Here’s his picture.”

“Really, I beg you. Don’t love him. Burn this picture. Tear it up.”

“You do it.”

“No! You have to do it with your own hands. Tear it into pieces.”

N took the photograph from the table and quietly shredded it. Lightning flared brightly. Thunder. One could hear the sound of the falling rain.

“Wicked!”

“Who are you calling wicked?”

“You don’t get it. You have no idea how mean and wicked life became for her after this affair ended.”

“Is she still alive?”

“No, she’s dead. Her soul has died. All that’s left is her body. She turned into a low, despicable kind of person. She got married. Her husband is also rotten, to the core. He’s a thief. He beats her when she smokes.”

“I don’t understand. What are you saying?”

“There. I’m sorry. But you’ve already torn up the picture. You did what I asked you to do.”

They sat in silence. One could hear the sound of the falling rain. Suddenly both of them burst out crying.

M said, her voice muffled in sobs, "Forgive me. But do you think I will forgive you, just because you tore up the picture?"

"What do you mean? What's wrong with you?"

"You still don't understand? Do you think that I told you all this just to put my heart at ease? To make myself feel better? Don't you understand I have torn every shred of flesh from my heart?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Do you think I'll ever forgive you for being so cruel? Never. Now do you understand? If I could, I would abandon my husband to follow that man. If he went to prison, I would bring him food every day. I'd follow him to the end of the world, if only he would turn back to me. But he'll never turn back."

"My God, why are you telling me this?"

"Why? Don't you understand? Because I don't want him to fall into the hands of another woman - into your hands!"

N got up and left. A moment later, M also left. One could hear the sound of the falling rain. The rain sounded indescribably sad.

*You say, "Basically, life is sad, isn't that right?"*

*I say, "No."*

*You ask, "Who is this man the two were talking about?"*

*I say, "I don't know."*

*You ask, "A worker, a peasant, a craftsman?"*

*I say, "I don't know."*

*You say, "Perhaps he's an artist, because she read his poem."*

*I say, "You call that poetry? Do you want to hear my poems? Mine also talk about the plucking of hairs."*

*You say, "No, another day. But I feel uneasy, because I don't know who he is. I noticed that the photograph she had was from a newspaper. He must be a politician."*

*I say, "I don't know."*

*You say, "He must be quite something."*

*Rain.*

*It is still raining. Your face appears to me. You are far away. Where are you? All my thoughts are directed toward you. Now it is two o'clock in the afternoon. I've been writing this story for six hours. Six hours without a break.*

*Six hours. The principal character in this story played cards for six hours. That bastard! That immortal fool!*

*Where are you?*

*Outside, it's raining.*

*When are you coming back? When, darling?*