

SINGAPORE **E** CLASSICS

THE IMMOLATION
GOH POH SENG



GOH POH SENG, a playwright, novelist and poet, is regarded as a pioneer of Singapore Literature in English. A medical doctor by training, his first novel *If We Dream Too Long* is widely recognised as the first Singapore novel, while his play *When Smiles Are Done* is one of the first instances of the use of Singlish in drama. Goh, who was born in 1936, has written five books of poetry. He founded the literary magazine *Tumasek* and formed Centre 65 to promote the arts. Goh also chaired the National Theatre Trust and was Vice-Chairman of the Arts Council from 1967 to 1973.

Goh received the Cultural Medallion for Literature in 1982 and emigrated to Canada in 1986. He passed away in 2010, leaving behind his wife, Margaret, four sons and three grandchildren.

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THE IMMOLATION

GOH POH SENG



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my wife and sons

Kasan

Kagan

Kajin

Kakim

Introduction by Dr. Ismail S. Talib

GOH POH SENG (1936-2010) belonged to a select minority of Singaporean authors—whose current members include Robert Yeo and Alfian Sa’at—who wrote capably in all the three major literary genres: poetry, drama and fiction. Of the three genres, Goh’s legacy as a writer of fiction is particularly noteworthy, as he is regarded as the pioneering novelist in the English Language, which he accomplished with his novel *If We Dream Too Long*, published in 1972.

Placing Goh’s ground-breaking significance in the context of Singapore literature in English may be easy enough. However, specifying Goh’s achievement in historical and literary-geographical terms may not be so easy. For writers of an earlier generation, such as Edwin Thumboo, Catherine Lim, Suchen Christine Lim and Goh himself, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between Singaporean and Malaysian writers in English, as all of them were born in what is now Malaysia, were Malaysians at one time, and became Singaporeans when Singapore achieved its independence from the Malaysian Federation in 1965. In this regard, Goh should be viewed as a pioneering postcolonial novelist not only in Singapore, but

in both Malaysia and Singapore. The nearest competitor to *If We Dream Too Long* was Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*, which was published in 1976. Lee Kok Liang's *London Does Not Belong to Me*, which he wrote in the 1950s, but which was published posthumously in 2003, was a colonial rather than a postcolonial novel, and could be classified with other novels of an earlier era, such as Chin Kee Onn's *Ma-rai-ee* (1952) and his *The Grand Illusion* (1961).

The Immolation, first published in 1977, is Goh's second novel. Unlike *If We Dream Too Long*, which is set in Singapore, it is set in an unnamed country. However, from the names found in the novel, the self-immolation of the monk, the presence of American forces and a number of other factors, the reference to Vietnam is very clear. Vietnam was geo-politically very important in Southeast Asia around the time that the novel was published, as it was one of the major battlegrounds in the conflict between the forces of capitalism, as represented by America and Europe, and communism, as represented by China and the Soviet Union. Also significant in Vietnam were the underlying nationalistic and pro-democratic forces, at least as they were understood by most Vietnamese, that rendered both capitalism and communism much less relevant than the big powers thought they were. However, in spite of Vietnam's importance, only Goh, among Singaporean authors, and to a certain extent, Robert Yeo, in his *And Napalm Does Not Help*, dealt with the country in their works.

In spite of their different locations, *The Immolation* could be seen as a follow-through of Goh's first novel. Both fictional works could be described as limited bildungsromans, which are not extended accounts of their protagonists' growths from childhood to adulthood, but deal with important segments of their lives. More specifically, they are about their developments, at crucial periods of their lives, into more mature or more enlightened persons, with better level-headed understanding of the world they live in. In order to achieve this aim, the protagonist in each of the novels is deployed as the text's centre of consciousness.

In *The Immolation*, attempts to delve into the consciousness of the protagonist Thanh's mental processes can be seen, for example, in the following passage, where Goh uses the present tense, instead of the conventional past tense, to convey Thanh's thoughts to us. In order to make the reader's experience of Thanh's thoughts more immediate, intrusive inverted commas are not used. The passage begins with the solitary mediation of the projecting clause, 'he thought', but this is abandoned right away. What follows is the apparently unmediated use of the present tense to convey Thanh's thoughts directly to us:

Maybe I'm getting sentimental, he thought, trying to dam back that brimming. After all, I've only known the old man for two days. What's two days? There have been friends I have known for much longer: childhood friends, and then friends in France.

A lot of people. Yes, I've known a lot of people in my lifetime.
What has happened to them? How do I feel about them?¹

In addition to genre and technique, there is continuity in the two novels in their content as well. *The Immolation* is ostensibly about Vietnam, but it is also, at a more subtle level, about Singapore. Thanh's decision to follow his vision, instead of having a steady job with a secure income, is an experience that many Singapore youth have undergone, and is another element that thematically links the novel to *If We Dream Too Long*.

Politically, there is more of the reality and practicality of the postcolonial situation in *The Immolation* than in *If We Dream Too Long*. It is thus a more self-consciously postcolonial novel than *If We Dream Too Long*, whose protagonist's problems could have existed anywhere, and are not really specific to the postcolonial predicament. However, dealing upfront with postcolonial politics in a novel set in Singapore would have been too sensitive, and Goh's critique of the postcolonial political situation has to be done by deflection.

In this regard, even if one looks at immolation, the novel is not unrelated to what had happened in Singapore, at least at a symbolic level. Although immolation was not literally used for a political purpose in Singapore, it has symbolically been brought up by some Singapore politicians to refer to the self-sacrifice that some local people had to make, in their attempt

to achieve their political ends. The following, for example, is from the former Singapore President C. V. Devan Nair's foreword to Francis Seow's *To Catch a Tartar*: "The supremacy of the state over the individual which those inclined to totalitarianism always propound has invariably meant, in practice, the immolation of the individual at the altar of an impersonal, faceless, and conscienceless deity..."

Whether figurative immolation in the face of the overpowering authority of the nation-state applies to Nair's or Seow's personal situation is a moot point, and arguments can go either way. Symbolic immolation may be a matter of degree or interpretation. But there could be no dispute that Nair's observation is more fittingly applicable to the self-immolation of the young monk, Tran Kim, in *The Immolation*, or, for that matter, to the literal self-immolation of the Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, which sparked the Arab Spring of 2011, and which rocked several authoritarian regimes in the Arab world to their very foundations. With this in mind, the re-publication of Goh's novel is not merely an exercise in the occasional celebration of Singapore's literary heritage, as the novel has contemporary relevance in the wider postcolonial world as well. In this respect, its wider postcolonial resonance, which continues to ring true today, makes it of some relevance to the Singapore situation as well.

Aside from the expressly political significance of self-immolation, Tran Kim's lethal act must also be seen within its

context in the novel. In this light, it can be observed that it is emblematically and emotionally significant. However, it does not, from a structural perspective, serve as an adequate triggering device for the novel's plot.

From an emblematic perspective, the immolation has a representative connection to Vietnam's political history of that time. It locates the Vietnamese setting within this particular time period more effectively than anything else. The period was between 1955 and 1975; more specifically, from the 1960s onwards, with American military intervention, the increasingly obstinate corruption of the Ngô Đình Diem and subsequent regimes in South Vietnam, and, for the purpose of the novel, the self-immolation of Buddhist monks.

There is also no question about the immolation's emotional impact, especially when the novel is viewed from the perspective of its centre of consciousness, Thanh. The event haunts him, and is deeply entrenched in his mind. He keeps the dead monk's bamboo flute, even though he cannot play it. It is also a concrete object which occasionally elicits the frightening memory of the immolation, but which he is emotionally attached to, and cannot give away, even to the nine-year-old boy Troy, who plays the instrument beautifully. When he later loses it during a battle with American forces, he is devastated.

However, important as it is from the emblematic and emotional perspectives, Tran Kim's self-immolation is not an actional activator in the way perhaps the historical self-

immolations of Thích Quang Đức in Vietnam and Bouazizi in Tunisia were. Thanh has decided on political involvement beforehand, and Tran Kim's self-immolation, although it poignantly reverberates throughout the novel, right to its very end, is not the initiating cause of his political and paramilitary actions in the narrative. It serves as an affective thread within Thanh's consciousness, which is predominant in the novel. In this connexion, it is one of several factors that bring the various strands of the novel together.

The reprinting of *The Immolation* in a new edition is to be welcomed. The novel has been in the shadow of its historically more important predecessor for too long. It is hoped that the new edition will throw more light on Goh's general accomplishment as a fictionist, and on some of his ideas as an author. *The Immolation* is certainly a more forthrightly postcolonial novel than its predecessor. It is also, if one gives some thought to this aspect of Goh's achievement, an exercise in the art of critiquing one's own backyard by relating a narrative that occurs in a different location.

Dr. Ismail S. Talib, 2011

NOTES:

1. Goh Poh Seng, *The Immolation*, Epigram Books, 2011, Singapore, p. 103.

THE IMMOLATION

1

THE MOMENT THANH stepped out, he was stunted by the sun's glare. Lunch felt like a stone in his stomach as he walked slowly, keeping close to the buildings. Even so, he sweated.

Since returning from Europe, Thanh had searched the streets of the capital for evidence of war, but found nothing. There was no blood blackened by the sun on the pavements; the multitudes of the dead did not lie piled up on display; only their unbodied voices chanted in the mind, amplifying the night, and Thanh had spent long nights listening.

Turning a corner, he came upon a crowd in front of the Thing Hoai Pagoda. They were oddly restrained.

A young, bespectacled monk sat on the bare cement street in the lotus posture, his shaven dome vivid in the harsh light. Beside him a few monks stood in a line, intoning prayers. Several people knelt on the ground.

Thanh always felt an intruder in the vicinity of people praying, as if he had no right to witness such an intimate ritual, for there is an intimacy when one communes with God, even to an unbeliever like himself. On such occasions, he felt he did not belong.

The prayers had an incantatory music, unrelated to ordinary language, compelling, yet bereft of ardencies. It almost seemed the only way to God. Like sharp wind sibilant among the leaves.

A shaft of sunlight flashed, reflected off the thin, rimless glasses of the monk. Thanh was drawn by his serene smile, which surpassed those on the statues of the Lord Buddha at the pagodas and museums.

There was a flurry of saffron as two monks emerged from the pagoda carrying cans of gasoline. With sudden horror Thanh realised what was about to take place and shivered with an inner chill. It all seemed unreal, as if happening in a dream.

Abruptly, the prayers ceased. He could hear the noise of traffic not far away. How could the world go on outside?

The young monk rose and walked slowly towards the cans of gasoline. Thanh watched deliriously as he doused himself, the gasoline liquid golden in the sunlight. He then returned to the same spot, sitting erect and looking straight ahead, the sunlight still flashing from his glasses.

Thanh held his breath as the young monk took out a box of matches and without changing his composure, struck one. The flames shot up, leaping higher and higher. At last, a wail issued from the crowd as the flames began to lick the body. From where he was standing, Thanh felt the impact of the heat. He stared into the midst of the flames, and thought he could still see that face, serene and smiling. He stood there transfixed. It

was a long time before he turned away.

He walked in a daze, his shirt wet with perspiration. Fishing out a handkerchief, he began to wipe his face. The white, freshly laundered handkerchief was blackened where he had wiped himself. Could it be a bit of ash? So quickly returned to the elements? So rapid a restoration? He replaced the handkerchief in his pocket and continued on his way.

When he reached Kao's house, he walked up to the massive, carved wooden door and knocked. Soon footsteps could be heard approaching from within. Kao opened the door. He was in his early thirties, tall and lean, with long, black hair, rather badly cut, and a pale complexion from too much time spent indoors. His eyes, blinking at the light, were lively and searching.

"You're late! We've been waiting."

Thanh did not reply, his mind too freshly shaken by the recent incident.

The interior of the house was cool and dim in contrast to the brightness of the streets, the yellow flames and the glint of the rimless glasses. They went towards the back room where they usually held their meetings. The rest were already there. My was seated on the rattan chair, while the others were on the long sofa, just as they were that first time he had met them.

From the very beginning when Thanh saw My, he was instantly glad he had come. She had been introduced as a young teacher. Her dark brown eyes, set in a delicate, oval face which wore no make-up, studied him briefly, without curiosity. Her

hair was combed straight back, tied with a small length of black ribbon at the nape; there was a slight middle parting in front. Her small features, slenderness and beauty gave her a certain unreachable quality. Thanh had found it difficult to keep his eyes off her.

“Sorry to keep you all waiting,” Thanh said, and sat down on the floor beside the door so that he could look at My. She did not smile at him, nor acknowledge his presence in any way, but Thanh had grown accustomed to this. At the beginning, he had found it discomfiting.

“Now we can start,” Kao announced.

“I’ve received our instructions,” he began, and they all craned forward, eagerness apparent on their faces. “The Buddhists have planned a public demonstration against the Government on the afternoon of the sixteenth.”

“Fine, but what has it got to do with us?” Tho asked, in a low, gruff voice, which matched his thickset frame. Tho was a teacher.

“Though this demonstration is being organised by the Buddhists, it’s important that it succeeds. It will be one more blow against the ruling clique,” Kao said.

“You mean we’re to participate in this demonstration?”

“Precisely,” Kao replied.

“And that’s all?” Tho exclaimed, unable to contain himself. “I must say it sounds like an anticlimax after all these months, to find that the first time we go into action it is to join some

religious demonstration! I don’t know about you all, but I feel somewhat let down, if I may say so.”

“Me too,” Thanh said.

“Oh, so you’re disappointed, are you?” My said, in a taunting voice.

“Let me explain why we’ve been instructed to join this demonstration. The strategy is to become part of the demonstration and use it to provoke the police, provoke them till they retaliate, till they use violence,” Kao said and looked around the room. This time no one spoke up. “So,” he added, “those of you who are looking for a bit of action will not be disappointed.”

Xuan laughed. “What do you know! I might find myself in the same demonstration as my wife! Although she disapproves of my participation in the Movement, she’s sure to approve my support for her religion!”

Xuan was the only married man in their group. At forty, he was also the oldest. A cheerful, jovial fellow, he worked as a technician in the Electricity Department. The remaining member of their group was Quang Tuyen, a journalist, but one who did not wear the usual cynical look of his profession. He was open and friendly, and Thanh liked him best of all. Quang Tuyen and Tho were in their thirties. My was eighteen. Thanh, who was twenty-two, had been introduced by Kao that first time as a returned student who was also a poet. The latter description made him blush.

“In other words, we’re to convert a peaceful and orderly

demonstration into a bloody riot,” Thanh remarked.

“Precisely!” Kao said. “And we must study carefully these plans which have been prepared by the agitprop section.”

“I presume there will be women and children at the demonstration?” Thanh asked.

“So?” Kao shrugged.

“Have you considered that they might be hurt in the process?”

“That’s not our problem, Thanh! Why burden ourselves with these considerations? We have our instructions. We simply obey them.”

“Perhaps Thanh has no stomach for what we’re to do? Perhaps he is squeamish about hurting women and children?” My said, looking directly at him.

“Maybe I am. I know that we’re committed to action. Even so, we should think of the likely consequences! In this instance, I’m not saying that we opt out, I just feel that if we understand there might be a possibility of innocent women and children getting hurt, we could think of some means of preventing or minimising it.”

“You don’t understand anything,” My said disdainfully. “You fail to appreciate that getting women and children hurt, getting innocent people hurt, is the reason behind our tactics. What better way is there to whip up feelings against our enemies than to get the police to use force against innocent women and children?”

“There’s truth in what My says,” Xuan noted.

“Yes,” Tho agreed. “What better way is there to stir up the people’s feelings against the regime? Of course, personally, one can feel bad about involving innocent women and children, but there’s no choice.”

“We have to use every method, however unsavoury and unpalatable some of them might be,” My went on. “Surely Thanh can understand that? We have to win at all costs, and we can’t win if we’re soft. Our enemy understands that, even if Thanh doesn’t. They never worry about who gets hurt.”

“All right, let’s not waste any more time arguing. Let’s get down to the plan, so that the operation will be a success,” Kao interrupted.

Thanh felt frustrated. There were some elementally important things that he wanted to say, but could not articulate eloquently. He was also angry partly because he knew that what My had said seemed right. Maybe he was too soft? He listened to Kao as the latter gave an outline of the plan of operation. Afterwards, Thanh had to admit that it was ingenious and had no doubts about its effectiveness. He could almost visualise the coming event. It was all so simple. All it required was some willing people, like themselves. Willing people? Change that to fervent people and it would be a devastating success. He knew his friends. It would be a devastating success.

“Are there any questions?” Kao enquired, but there was only satisfied silence all round, and Thanh had no intention of speaking out again.

“Tuyen, what do you think of these recent Buddhist disturbances?” Xuan asked. “Being a journalist, you must’ve seen a lot.”

“I don’t know what to think. All I know is that the Buddhists have long-standing grouses against the ruling clique and have justifiable reasons for agitating as they do now.”

“What about these public immolations?” Tho asked. Thanh remembered how the blaze crackled, how it leaped higher and higher.

“Well, they certainly draw attention to their cause,” Quang Tuyen said. “Abroad, these immolations are big news.”

“Yes, I’ve read the French papers,” Kao said, “but I found that although there’s sympathy for the Buddhists’ cause, the world outside is rather revolted by these immolations. They can’t understand them.”

“Can we?” Thanh asked. The sweet stench of burning flesh came fresh to him again.

“Why not? They are doing it to draw attention to their cause,” Kao answered.

“It’s very effective,” Quang Tuyen added.

“But it’s such a horrifying protest! All these human sacrifices,” Thanh cried. “Surely there are other means of achieving the same ends?”

“I think it’s a beautiful form of protest,” My said. “The ultimate act! I admire their courage and passion.”

Thanh studied that young, beautiful face. After Kao, My was

the most serious and extreme of the group. Looking at her, Thanh said, “Yes, one can admire them, but surely one ought to detest that waste of human life.”

“It’s not a waste! To die like that, to die for a cause that one firmly believes in, is not a waste! Their deaths further the cause they espoused. Surely you don’t regard that as a waste?” she cried, scarcely hiding her scorn. “The trouble with you is that you’ve been away so long, you feel and think like a foreigner. You’re not one of us.”

“Now, My. You’re being unfair to Thanh,” Kao intervened. “Although Thanh did spend many years abroad, and still has a lot to learn about our country, he is one of us. We must remember that these are discussion sessions, and we must not allow ourselves to get too personal, even if we disagree.”

“I’m not getting personal,” My insisted. “I’m only attacking his views on these immolations.”

“My is right. She was only attacking my views,” Thanh said. He did not wish to pursue the subject, nor quarrel with My, and was rather sad that she had got so angry with him. I’m not making any progress at all with her, he thought, regretfully.

“Kao, I suggest we adjourn if you’ve finished,” Xuan proposed. “One of my wife’s relatives has been wounded in the fighting around Vinh Duc, and I must go and see whether I can help.”

“Yes, let’s adjourn,” Tho agreed.

They broke up and Xuan went off first; then My left with

Tho, and finally Thanh walked out of the house with Quang Tuyen. They always broke up in this fashion, and never left in a group. Kao was afraid that the secret police, seeing them leave his house together, might become suspicious. The secret police were always suspicious of any group of more than three people.

The afternoon was still hot. They walked slowly.

“Don’t let My upset you,” Quang Tuyen said. “She’s a very strange girl. Very intense, for one so young.”

“I’m not upset.”

“You see what war does to our women? If they’re not forced to sell their bodies, they become like My, tense and serious. They used to be gentle, chaste and feminine. Now...” Quang Tuyen paused, shaking his head sadly, “I find that girls like My do not attract me. A man wants a woman, a soft, feminine creature to counter his own nature. But now, you can’t find them anymore.”

“I find them attractive,” Thanh said. “Maybe it’s true that our girls are either forced to sell their bodies, or are like My, serious and intense, but these factors, if one may use the term, bring out a beauty in them, a strange, sad beauty.”

“I can see you’re attracted to My. But be careful, Thanh. Be careful of what you call her strange and sad beauty.”

“Why?”

“I have a feeling that this strange, sad beauty of My’s can destroy you.”

“You’re imagining things. Besides, My is not in the least in-

terested in me.”

“I don’t know about that. But incidentally, do you know that My had an elder brother in the N.L.F.? Well, he was caught, and was summarily executed.”

“When did this happen?”

“About three years ago. She now lives alone with her widowed mother.”

Thanh felt something moving deep inside him. For My. A little farther on, Quang Tuyen went on his own way. Thanh was alone once more.

He passed the Thing Hoai Pagoda. The street was almost deserted. He searched for the spot where the immolation had taken place earlier that afternoon, but there was no evidence of the incident. They must have washed the street. However, there were four armed soldiers standing guard in front of the pagoda.

No trace. Probably kept the ashes in an urn. The serene young face haunted him. So serene. What did he feel, the young monk, at that moment? Thanh recalled that when the body was already turning black, the arms had suddenly shot out, the fingers spread as if reaching for something: a final reaching out for the whole world.

That night, Thanh stirred in his sleep.

2

THERE WAS AN air of tension during dinner. Thanh's father had said that there was a serious matter he wished to discuss with him afterwards, and a rather conspiratorial silence had existed between his parents. The meal seemed inordinately long. When it was over, Thanh and his father went into the study. Madam Vo crept quietly upstairs to her room.

His parents had sent him abroad to study medicine, but Thanh left after his second year at the medical faculty when he discovered that he lacked any sense of vocation. He switched over to the humanities, but still could not apply himself, languishing in an ennui where nothing was of interest; he did not know what to do, and so did nothing. After some time, there was a gradual feeling that he would like to be a writer, but the words would not come, and so he dilly-dallied, talked with friends, discussed books and the cinema, travelled, made love to girl friends, and became an habitué of the cafes and bars of Paris. Although nothing came of the wish to write, he imagined that he was soaking up experience for his eventual work. Yet after six years, there were only a few uncertain lines of verse. Finally, his parents gave up all hope of his graduating

and summoned him home.

His father took out a fat cigar and lit it with ritualistic care, then asked Thanh whether he wanted a drink. Thanh nodded. Monsieur Vo poured out two cognacs and handed one to his son.

"I have a serious matter to discuss with you. That's why I sent your mother upstairs."

There was an involuntary pause, during which Thanh searched his father's face for a hint.

"Do you know," his father asked, "that the authorities have compiled a dossier on you?"

Thanh was completely taken by surprise. This obviously showed.

"So you don't know," his father commented. "I was surprised too."

"How did you find out?" asked Thanh. Now that he knew, he felt strangely calm.

"An official I know in the secret police department told me. Of course I had to pay him something."

"What is it that they know?"

"The official didn't tell me all the details, but according to him they have been compiling the dossier on you for some months now. You can imagine my surprise...and my concern."

"Well, what do they know?" Thanh repeated.

"They apparently are aware that you've been keeping company with someone who's known to them to have connections

with the underground. Someone named Kao. Is that right?"

Thanh didn't answer. Instead, he asked, "And what else do they know?"

"That this same Kao is the leader of some cell, some study group. And that you are a member of it."

"Is there anything more?"

"I don't know. Perhaps you can tell me?" his father said, losing patience.

"There's nothing to tell."

"I don't believe you. For your own sake, you'd better enlighten me. What I've told you is serious, because the authorities don't take these things lightly. Perhaps you think that because we have money, you can get away with it? Let me assure you that it's not so easy. I'm going to do what I can, but I must know everything. So you'd better come clean."

While his father was speaking, Thanh was wondering what he should do. Should he tell? His father was waiting. Thanh decided to say as little as possible. "The secret police have got things wrong. It's true that I know this person Kao, and that we have a group which gets together now and then. But there's nothing clandestine or illegal about the whole thing. We are simply friends. We are interested in topical affairs, and meet for discussions and to exchange views. That's all. Surely there's nothing wrong with that? The authorities can't put us in jail simply because we're interested in topical affairs. They must have made a mistake. I realise that any

group gives rise to suspicion in their eyes, but they're really mistaken about us."

"Don't give me that nonsense! I'm not a child, to be so easily fooled. And it won't convince the secret police either," his father said angrily.

"We have done nothing wrong. The authorities have no proof that we have contravened the law. They can't do anything to us."

"Is that what you think? The authorities don't have to produce any proof. As long as they feel you're up to no good, they can haul you in. And they do know about your friend, this Kao fellow. Why did you get involved with him, Thanh? Didn't you realise it could be dangerous? Have you given that no thought at all?"

"You say that the authorities can put people into prison without the onus of producing proof. I ask you, Father, what do you think of that? What sort of society are we living in?"

"Of course I don't condone everything the Government does. But I did not have a hand in drawing up these laws. As a law-abiding individual, I live my own life, I don't bother with the rest. And you should do the same, if you know what's good for you."

"If each of us just lives his own life, and cares for no one else, cares for nothing else, then we will surely have a situation where the authorities can do anything they want: whether it's good or bad, just or unjust. Don't you think we have other

responsibilities besides looking after our own skins?”

“If each man lives his own life, then society will be a well-adjusted and peaceful society.”

“That’s wishful thinking. In the present situation, surely it’s the responsibility of every citizen to concern himself with the events and issues that have a bearing on his society, so that things can change for the better.”

“I don’t wish to argue with you. I simply want you to give me an undertaking that you’ll stop associating with these people. I don’t know how seriously the authorities regard your case, or how deeply they think you’re involved already. But I’ll see what I can do. I’ll try to fix things,” his father said, with a worried scowl on his usually smooth, round face.

“So, it’s all very simple, isn’t it? You can fix everything, you can arrange everything. All it takes is money,” Thanh said.

“Don’t be so damn smart-alecky!” his father shouted, his face flushed. “I should leave you to your fate, just to teach you a lesson! Then let’s see how smart you really are. Damn you! Here I am, worrying like hell about you, and you dare hurl insults at me in return!” Monsieur Vo walked agitatedly about the room, as if trying to sweat out his anger. “And whoever implied that it’s simple? Even with money, it’s not so simple. I’m not sure I can do anything. Besides, you have no reason to scoff at money. Just because you’ve never had to earn any, doesn’t mean that you can scoff at money, which is hard-earned money, if you know what that means. Perhaps

you don’t, that’s the trouble. You’re spoilt. I don’t think you really know the value of money, because you’ve never known want, you’ve never known poverty. If you did, you would not scoff so easily.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to insult you or make you angry. Perhaps I’ve put what I meant badly. Of course I realise the importance of money, and you’re right about my being spoilt, and never having known want. But even so, and please don’t misunderstand me, money isn’t everything. What I mean particularly is that money shouldn’t be all that powerful. One shouldn’t be able to buy people over, buy the Government over as one can at the present. Money is the source of corruption in our society. There is no real right and wrong, there is no justice in our land.”

At length Monsieur Vo stopped pacing about and continued in weariness rather than anger. “I’m not going to deny that money has great power here, but money has great power everywhere. You should already know this. If not, you will soon learn. Also, I’m not going to deny that there’s a great deal of corruption here, and it is obviously universally known that the Government is thoroughly corrupt. The whole system is corrupt. I should know this, in my position. And I’m not going to deny either that I’ve used bribes in some of my business transactions. But it’s the system. What else can I do? If I don’t follow the system, do you think it’s possible for me to do any business? So what can I do?”

His father ran a flourishing import-export business, which by its very nature meant a lot of dealings with government officials; there were so many licenses and permits to obtain.

Monsieur Vo went to refill his glass of cognac from an expensive cut-glass decanter, and sat down in a big armchair facing his son, twirling the brandy glass in his right hand. "So what can I do? Can I be blamed for having to make a living and employing methods used by everyone else?"

Under his father's questioning eyes, Thanh averted his gaze and strolled slowly to stand by the open window, his back to the room.

"I don't want to blame you," Thanh spoke gently, carefully measuring his words, "but on the other hand, don't you think that every act of corruption helps to preserve the evil system? And that the one who bribes is as guilty as the one who receives?"

"Sure! I agree entirely with you," his father answered unhesitatingly. "No one can argue with that. Yet agreeing with you doesn't alter the situation: which is, what should one do under the circumstances? Should one be scrupulous, should one be honest and pure and abjure the prevailing methods of conducting business, and stand the risk—no, not stand the risk, but face the uncertainty of seeing one's business crumble to nothing? In other words, should one be scrupulous and starve or should one be less scrupulous and survive? Tell me, what would you do, supposing you were in my shoes?"

"But I'm not in your shoes, Father."

"Never mind, I said supposing."

"That's not fair."

Monsieur Vo smiled comprehendingly.

"All right. Let me pose the problem another way. Supposing we find that you're really in deep trouble with the authorities, which incidentally, I believe to be the case, and I can get you out of this trouble with money passed to the appropriate hands; what would you have me do? Should I, as a parent, use money to get my son out of trouble, or should I retain scrupulous principles and let my own son rot in jail, or worse? Tell me, what would you do in my shoes?"

Thanh coloured at this question. Nevertheless, he answered, "I would let my son rot in jail, or worse."

Again Monsieur Vo smiled, but sadly, "Then I'm glad you're not in my shoes, Thanh. I don't agree with you at all. And I'm going to do what I think is right; I'm going to do what I have to do: help my son. To me, there's no longer any debate about principles. There's only one way for me to act, and everything else no longer has validity, everything else is theoretical, academic. As a father, there's only one course of action." Monsieur Vo looked at his son, who was both serious and embarrassed, and again he smiled gently and added, "I think you'd find most parents would feel the same."

Thanh studied the glass of cognac which he had hardly touched, and without looking up at his father, said, "You

agreed with me earlier that every corrupt action contributes to the perpetuation of the evil system. Now you're advocating doing the same thing..."

"I can't deny that. I'm only saying that a parent, any parent, has but one choice in the present situation," Monsieur Vo interrupted.

"Still, it's the same. It's adopting a double standard," Thanh insisted.

"Maybe."

"It's wrong."

"What will you have me do then?" his father asked. "Would you rather have me do nothing?"

"Yes! Do nothing!" He looked his father straight in the face. "Do nothing!"

"Well, you may have it your way, for I'm not at all sure that I can do anything. It depends on how seriously they regard the activities of your group of friends. You still haven't told me why you became involved with these people."

"No use going through that again, Father. I've already told you that so far we've not done anything illegal. We've not contravened the law."

"I hope for your sake you're telling the truth," Monsieur Vo said, and took a sip of his cognac.

"I've already told you. We meet for discussions. What's wrong with that? Don't tell me you never discuss events and issues with your friends, Father?"

"Sometimes, but it depends on who it is that I'm with. I'm discreet and careful about these things. Whereas it appears that you've not been exercising care in your choice of friends. This Kao fellow, for instance. There must be something suspicious about him which makes the secret police watch him. You should be more careful. Didn't you know about his clandestine connections?"

Thanh took his time answering, drinking the first mouthful of cognac. The searing liquid coursed down his throat and his belly registered the warm sensation. He took another mouthful, retaining it for a time in his mouth, swilling it around with his tongue until his inner cheeks felt a hot numbness. Then he swallowed and felt the warmth descending again. The cognac made his eyes shine; there was a recklessness in them.

"All right," Thanh said, "I know about Kao's connections with the underground. I've known all along."

"Then why...?"

"You see, Father, I share their views."

"Why?" Monsieur Vo asked again, in bewilderment.

"Because I think they're right! I believe in their cause, and in their fight against the present clique."

Thanh's father got up. He stood still for a moment, as if undecided as to what to do, and then started to pace the room again. He reached the drink trolley, a shiny, silvery chrome piece with castors on its legs, placed his glass, which still had a

small measure of rich-coloured cognac in it, on the trolley, and turned to face his son. "Thanh, I'm not going to argue with you nor am I going to tell you that your views are wrong. You're entitled to them. You're young, probably an idealist. That is as it should be, I suppose. I'm not going to patronise you just because I'm older than you, or because I am your father. You understand me?"

Thanh unbent a little, although his face did not completely abandon its fixed set. "No," his father continued, "I'm not going to tell you that your views are wrong. In fact, I share some of them, I'm sure. There's a lot that's rotten; that's the fault of the Government. But your views are dangerous, and your actions, your associations with that group, who are all marked men, are dangerous."

"But I don't understand you, Father. If you share my views, why do you object to what I'm doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" his father replied, exasperated. "I'm concerned for your safety."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of myself."

"How can I stop worrying when I know the secret police are keeping a close watch on you? You say you can take care of yourself. But how are you going to do so?" Thanh did not answer. "Well? How are you going to take care of yourself?"

"I will...somehow," Thanh said lamely.

"In other words, you don't know. Well, I have some ideas, and you'd better pay attention," Monsieur Vo's pacing quickened,

agitated by his thoughts. He spoke as if to himself, testing his own ideas by uttering them aloud. "First of all, I must see that official from the secret police department. Find out as much as I can. Then I'll know what I have to do. And who else to approach. Maybe someone higher. Yes, probably I'll have to go up higher. Tell them it's all a mistake. That you were not aware of their connections. That you were naive and ignorant. Yes. And you will have to corroborate what I say," he said. There was a note of hope in his voice. "There's a slim chance, but you have to do as I say. Afterwards, when it's all cleared up, we can send you out of the country again. Anywhere, as long as it's away from here and out of harm's way. Maybe America."

Monsieur Vo paused for a moment, and finding himself facing a wall, away from Thanh, turned rather agilely, on the balls of his feet, to his son. "Well? What do you think?"

"I won't do it," Thanh replied, quietly, but with unmistakable stubbornness.

"What do you mean?" his father demanded.

"I'm not going to tell them that I was naive and ignorant, and that I was misled by my friends. I won't betray my friends."

"But you won't be betraying your friends! They already know about your friends."

"Then I won't betray myself," Thanh said carefully, trying to make that sound as plain and simple a statement as possible, so that it might not be construed as vanity.

“What nonsense are you muttering now?”

“Father, you’re asking me to lie to the secret police that I did not know what I was doing, whereas I knew all along. I want to be involved. I want to contribute towards the movement that is aiming to rid our country of the verminous regime that is now exploiting our people.”

“What?” Thanh’s father interrupted. “You, a revolutionary?” And when his son did not immediately reply, Monsieur Vo laughed. It was a deliberately derisive laugh. “You’re madder than I thought!”

“Then there must be a lot of mad people in this country. For there are a great many people, from all walks of life, who are also revolutionaries. I’m in good company, I think.”

“You’re mad! After all these years of expensive schooling, you’ve learned nothing? I’m surprised, and disappointed in you. What has happened? You have everything, or at least I’ve tried to give you everything that’s within our means: a good home, proper education, money and now you talk this way, like a mad man! Revolution? Yes, I can understand the peasants, the poor, the illiterate and the dispossessed who have nothing; and even so, God knows how many of them really understand what revolution is; and how many of them are unwitting, if not unwilling, revolutionaries. But you? You have everything: and a good future awaits you. This is what I can’t understand.”

“We don’t seem to be able to understand each other. I’ve

listened to what you’ve just said about my being educated and so forth, and that you cannot understand why an educated person should want to become a revolutionary. To me, it’s just the opposite. I cannot understand how an educated person, an enlightened person who knows what is really happening, can fail to become involved. To remain aloof is to be wanton, to be irresponsible in the true sense of the word. Isn’t it the value and purpose of education to make one knowledgeable and able to act responsibly in the light of that knowledge?”

“I see they have apparently indoctrinated you well. But don’t spout your textbook revolutionary ideas at me! I’m too old to be brainwashed. What concerns me here, as your father, is your safety. That’s my responsibility. And I’m telling you that in the present situation you’d better listen to me and follow my advice. Otherwise, you will find yourself in a sorry state. Is that clear? And I don’t want any more arguments, or any more discussion on the subject,” Thanh’s father said firmly.

Thanh remained silent. He knew that it was useless to carry on the conversation, although he felt that there was a lot more that he should say to his father. He had a feeling that there was something final about their conversation, and about their relationship. And this made him sad. But there was nothing to be done now, and he waited for their meeting, their confrontation, to end.

Perhaps he harboured similar feelings, for Monsieur Vo sighed, and said, “It’s late. You’d better go to bed now.”

Thanh nodded, and gently placing his glass of cognac on the trolley, went out of the room. Before he closed the door behind him, he sensed rather than saw his father reaching for the cut-glass decanter.

3

THANH STIRRED WITH the first sounds reaching him from the street. He had lain awake the whole night waiting, as if for a pre-arranged signal. He rose from his bed, and padded softly across the room towards the open window. The light of that early dawn was primordial, washing the world with its soft tints, the colours tentative, subdued, unemphatic; later, they would come into their vivid own.

As he looked out onto the street, he just managed to catch a glimpse of a lone man disappearing round a corner. Then all was quiet again under the pale sky.

On this dawn Thanh sensed something new about to begin. The fresh light seemed to share his expectancy, and his fear; and strangely, his joy. All mixed up.

He leaned out of the window for a long while, as if seeing the world for the first time. For this alone, everything was worthwhile. He drew in a deep breath, filling his chest to bursting. It was the heightened awareness of the sensed moment, of the summary instant, an experience Thanh somehow intuited he shared with the condemned man.

Only he no longer felt divorced or alienated from the flow

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