

Short Story

The Tans of Ta Phin

by Nikola Živković Takšev

The children were in the back of the house playing cards, filling the room with laughter and in-game shouts as the sun was reaching the day's pinnacle, snug in that moment of perfect stillness, the point of maximum altitude — the solar noon. Covered by a solid thatched roof propped up with posts, the café boasted a deep shade and an unobscured 360-degree view of the immediate mountain slopes speckled with houses and furrowed with cascading rice paddies of the early autumn colors — hues of confident green, fresh yellow and everything in between.

A two-hour walk or a thirty-minute bumpy motorbike ride from town, the village of Ta Phin is populated almost exclusively by farmers, tour guides, and textile artisans. During the peak tourist season, the village marks a frequented, if not favored, stop on a hiking trek trail, with a steady inflow of visitors arriving in groups at twenty-minute intervals. But noon is when it all pauses — for lunch, and for the inevitable post-meal nap. The Tan family, humble owners of a café on the main village road with a motorbike wash saloon adjacent to the café, would oftentimes spend these god-granted two hours of midday rest lounging around the premises, gazing at the mountains, or playing cards, and today was no different. Ta Tan, the father and indisputable master of the household, was a strict man. Rarely smiling, his face was that of a serious character with a lot on his mind. Together with his wife Lai, Ta was managing the café and the wash saloon. But with the infrequent tourist visits in the low season, Ta often found himself with a hose in his hand giving his Win a thorough rinse. Their two children, a twelve-year-old son Nhan and an eight-year-old daughter Man, were usually in charge of serving café guests, if there were any.

During midday slumbers, Ta was in the habit of entertaining guests — the local men of the village who had all grown up together — at the terrace of his café, discussing village affairs over iced coffee and cigarettes. Each time, he would receive them with the utmost indifference, barely turning his head in their direction, an impertinent act to a foreign observer, yet so deeply inherent to the demeanor of the Red Dao people. The men would saunter to the terrace and assume their positions on the chairs, to which Ta would

nonchalantly hoist himself up from where he was sitting and join them. Nhan and Man were no strangers to these occurrences and didn't need to be told what to do. Even before the men crossed the threshold, Man was already on her feet, fetching the coffee filters and glasses. Nhan, older than Man and already infested with bursts of slightly disobedient stunts, joylessly dragged himself to the kitchen and turned on the water kettle. The freshly brewed coffee, still dripping from the filter into the cups, arrived at the men's table just in time to accompany the first drag of a cigarette.

"Just imagine what you could do with all that money," started Phin, Ta's ex-schoolmate and a long-term companion. "Five years goes by in no time, and if you don't spend much, you could come back a rich man, with more than a handsome amount in your pocket, enough to buy a guesthouse, or, who knows, maybe you can even pack everything up and start a business in Sapa."

"I don't know," responded Ta. His head bowed and his eyes fixed on the drops of coffee slowly dripping from the filter nested atop the glass.

Ever since the opportunity presented itself, he had been mulling over the idea of setting off to China to work on the assembly line at a computer hardware factory, doing twelve-hour shifts on a rotating schedule, seven days a week without a day off or holidays for five years, the length of the contract. However, the money would be good; he could earn more than he would in twenty years with the café and the wash saloon business. The truth, on the other hand, was that Ta was not cut out for such physically excruciating labor, and no matter how much sense the math made, he knew that he wouldn't endure even a full year. Another obstacle to be accounted for was the fact that he didn't have it in him to be separated from his family for such a long stretch. For no matter how hard he tried to show off an image of a detached and independent male, family came first. He couldn't imagine a circumstance in which he would abandon his wife and children, albeit for only a couple of years. All the same, Phin insisted.

"Think about your children's future," he continued. "Don't you want to give them a better life than the one you have? Are you really content with leaving them with nothing but this shabby barrack and a dozen chickens?"

This felt as a personal stab to Ta, and irritated by his friend's persistence, he shifted the course of the conversation, swatting Phin's remark with a swift motion of his hand as he would a mosquito. "Why don't you go, then?"

Taken aback by this sudden gush of hostility pointed at him, Phin was lost for words, and for a moment, it seemed that the dialogue had been brought to a halt. As if to signal the definite end to the discussion, Ta snatched the water pipe from under the table, ignited the tobacco, and took a long drag followed by a sip of warm green tea, an inevitable accompaniment to the *thu?c lào*.

Recent years had seen an increased wave of migration among the young men, mostly of the H'mong and Dao ethnicity from Vietnam's mountainous north, to China, where they would serve as factory workers in the economic powerhouses of Shenzhen and Guangzhou in inhumane conditions and for less than a minimum wage, which was still substantially more than what these men could ever make back home. Dozens had already made the move, with dozens more waiting to leave. However, as it is with many ventures of this kind, there was a catch — one had to be introduced to a Chinese employer by a trusted mediator, a middleman, often a local person with connections in China, and such a mediation was necessary to get things moving and start the process.

Being one quarter Chinese (from his father's side) and speaking a fair bit of Cantonese and some Mandarin on top of Vietnamese and the local Dao and H'mong languages, Phin was one of the first people in line to become a regional workforce supplier, and because the demand was high, business was booming. Phin was a resourceful entrepreneur, a go-getter. He knew how to talk to people and how to get what he wanted from them, but more importantly, he was tactful and knew exactly when to attack and when to retreat. Letting Ta have the final word was not a sign of weakness or defeat, on the contrary — it was a carefully executed move in the strategy he had previously developed, and even though he understood very well that what he had said to Ta touched him on a personal level and caused commotion, and maybe even resentment, he knew that it would leave Ta meditating on his words in the oncoming days, second-guessing his opposition and, in the end, make him change his mind. Breaking the character of a man of Ta's caliber and turning him against what he deeply believes in and stands for was no easy task, but, nevertheless, one Phin was up to. He knew that, in the case of his confidant, he wasn't in for a quick buck. The truth was that he was, in fact, not after the money this time around, but something far bigger and more

important than sheer monetary gain, an ulterior motive, and because losing was not an option for him, he was ready to take out the big guns.

That night, after Nhan and Man had fallen asleep, Ta confided in Lai about what had been troubling him, presenting all the facts to her, along with the advantages and disadvantages that came with the possibility and, without holding back, expressing his doubts and fears to her, his wife, his life companion for better or for worse, his sweet Lai, the mother of his children. It was no secret that Phin was affiliated with the Chinese and making a living from his connections, and Ta believed that, to Phin, this was a matter of a common business proposal, which was exactly why he couldn't comprehend the audacity of his friend to make such remarks about his personal life. Why he would go that far, putting their friendship in danger only to gain profit, he told her, was beyond him. Ta expected an affirmation from his wife, affirmation and words of encouragement, which was exactly what he got, but one thing that she said toward the end of their conversation caught him off guard.

Lai was, as it turned out, not fully ready to abandon the China idea, as she did see some sense in what Phin had been saying, especially if it meant that the family would, in turn, move up the social ladder and not have to worry about finances, and yes, she admitted that having to take care of the household, the business, and the kids would be a hard blow, perhaps even more than she could handle, but she could maybe try to brave it out, for the sake of the children and for the sake of the family. Nhan was getting older, she said, and, day by day, turning into a man who could take over a considerable portion of the household chores traditionally done by his father, and he already knew the ins and outs of the wash saloon, helping Ta with the sponging and the hosing down of the motorbikes, more often than not completing the entire wash by himself, and Man, although still essentially a child, was brewing coffee and pouring it into cups with almost the same efficiency as her mother. Yet, Lai was fully aware that the matter of labor distribution was the least of her husband's concerns, that the thing that was eating him from the inside was the five-year-long separation from them and a life of solitude among factory machines.

"Five years can do a lot to a man," explained Ta, "and with the possibility of occasional visits off the table, what is to say I wouldn't go insane?"

Was it shame or pride that prohibited him to admit it then? He couldn't comprehend, but Lai knew that his biggest fear was that of abandonment, the dreadful moment when he would come back home from the assignment to find his family gone, forever and without a trace, gone with another man who was, no doubt, twice the father and twice the husband he could ever be.

Jealousy, lack of self-confidence, and insecurities usually buried deep down in the darkest confinements of one's mind bring out the worst in a man, and rather than confronting them and allowing them into the sphere of consciousness, Ta decided that that was the moment the discussion would end, and granting himself the right to be angry and disappointed at his wife, he turned his back to her, closed his eyes and said goodnight.

Every morning, right after breakfast, Lai strolled down to the market for her daily supplies of fresh vegetables and herbs, stopping at each of the many stalls to exchange a word or two with other women from the village, catching up with the latest talks and gossip. During the weekday mornings, Nhan and Man were in school, and since Ta usually kept himself busy with scrubbing the floor of the wash saloon or cleaning his tools, there was no real need for her to be back home before noon anyway. This every-man-for-himself arrangement was working, as every one of them went about their daily tasks and was done with them come lunchtime, but it also meant that neither of them could keep track and, consequently, be aware of each other's whereabouts. This left Ta and Lai with some wiggle room for the occasional whims, short capricious detours to their routines. For Ta, these usually meant little excursions to the neighbors, where he would blow off some steam by drinking a few cups of rice wine and letting himself go. Third glass in, and he would already be oblivious to the fact that he overstayed his welcome, and the neighbors would have to usher him back home. Everyone had their own vice of choice, of course, what with tobacco, alcohol, and gambling, but Lai had a weakness for something a little more perverse, if not presumptuous, at least for the context of a tiny mountainous village that was Ta Phin.

On the third day that followed the dispute between Ta and Phin, Lai finished her shopping unusually early and, instead of heading back home from the market, she took a different turn, a narrow dirt path along the river bank, leading out of the village and into a bosk. There, squatting inconspicuously behind a small shrub, Phin waited with an impatient look on his face.

“I came as fast as I could,” said Lai, gasping for breath. She dropped her bags on the ground, and the lovers embraced each other tightly and didn’t let go. Lai started to sob, drenching Phin’s shoulder with three days’ worth of held-back tears. Phin caressed the back of her head, gently pressing his lips against her sweaty forehead, kiss after kiss.

“He is acting as if he isn’t bothered by it,” Lai continued, “as if your words make no difference to him whatsoever, but I know him, I know he is shaken up, and it hurts me to see him so anguished.”

“It will be alright.” Phin whispered softly and with such confidence, still not letting go of her, which calmed Lai down a little, even for a moment.

“I love you,” Lai said, “and I want to do what’s best for us, but I still care for him and this whole situation is crushing me. It’s just too much.”

“It will be alright,” Phin repeated. “We just have to be patient and endure a little while longer and everything will fall to its place. Don’t worry, my love, I have a plan, and when I set my mind to something, there’s precious little that can come standing in my way.”

This offered Lai comfort, and, to some extent, security, but it also frightened her because she knew what Phin was capable of. However, the affair she had with him had been going on for months now. The secret rendezvous on the outskirts of the village, the rushed meetings in a rented room in the Paramount, a hotel just above Sapa town whose owner was Phin’s brother, the intense games of hide-and-seek with acute onsets of adrenaline at the thought they might be discovered, it was all too much for her, and she longed for the day it would all be over. Once all was done with, her name would be forever tainted and nothing could ever wash away the shame. But Phin had planned for them to leave Lao Cai province for good, together with Nhan and Man, and set out south to the province of Khanh Hoa, where Phin had many friends and where they could start over without the fear of someone uncovering their pasts, and with Ta stuck in China, she wouldn’t even have to face him with the truth, the terrible predicament of betrayal, and could slip out of the village unnoticed, never to return again.

“Ta seems to be a tougher nut to break than I thought,” said Phin, “but there is always plan B. If he refuses to leave, I will make him leave, one way or the other. Just leave everything to me and be careful not to give anything away.”

The two of them lay down on the grass, and started kissing each other frivolously. Running their hands all over their clothed bodies, they enjoyed the last moments of their brief tryst.

In order to conceal her distress, Lai marched straight into the kitchen upon arriving home and started with the lunch preparations. The children were still at school, and Ta was in the backyard, washing his face with the water from a small tap next to the outhouse. The clatter coming from the kitchen put a smile on his lips, not only because he was, in fact, hungry, but also because he was glad his wife was back home, and so he walked over to her and gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead, the same sweaty forehead that was kissed by Phin just moments before.

“Is everything alright?” He asked her. “You seem a little upset.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she responded, not lifting her head from the counter where she was cutting the carrots. “It is just that I am a little bit behind with the cooking and I am afraid that the rice wouldn’t be ready in time for when the children come back home from school, that’s all.”

Her heart was pounding faster than ever. Her hands were shaking. What a stupid thing to say, she thought, and for a moment she was sure that he was onto her, but Ta didn’t seem to notice the horror she was going through. He responded with a single ‘alright’, gave her a soft slap on the buttocks and pottered into the café lounge for a pre-meal nicotine fix from his pipe. The pleasure of sudden relief streamed through the entirety of Lai’s stiff torso, gradually assuaging her shoulder muscles, and as she went on butchering the potatoes with her knife, a calm overwhelmed her body and mind, and she told herself that everything was, indeed, going to be alright.

The dark fell early over the village that evening, with the mist and the haze of late autumn, mixed with the smoke coming from burning rice paddies, the aftermath of a post-harvest paddy handling technique favored by the locals. With no sun in the sky and insufficient lighting (only a few wick lanterns placed strategically around the house to provide at least some visibility in the otherwise pitch darkness), there was not much else to do but bring the day to an end, which among the Red Dao people meant soaking their bodies in wooden bathtubs filled with steaming hot water mixed with various kinds of local aromatic herbs.

The Tans were fortunate enough to have their own bathtub in the basement, next to the bathroom, which meant that they could indulge themselves in the comfort of their own home. Lai would draw herself a bath every night before bed, rarely missing the opportunity to sit in a vat of hot herbal solution for half an hour.

That night, she was looking forward to the tranquil bath more than ever. The warm water would soothe her body and ease her mind, and after everything that had happened earlier that day, the repose was much needed. As she slowly stepped into the bath, one leg at a time, and eventually sat at the bottom of the barrel, flexing her knees and pulling them toward her chest, only her head above the water, she felt warmth streaming through her limbs and fingers, and for the first time that day, she could finally breathe. Each lungful of air she took was deeper than the previous one, and each exhalation longer. Her eyes closed; she focused on her breath and emptied her mind. With each passing second, she was becoming less aware of her anatomy and more aware of the internal flow of energy.

When she came to, she couldn't tell how long she had been out. Two minutes, ten minutes, half an hour? It was all possible, but before she could stop and think about it, her attention was drawn to a figure standing in the corner of the room, a man's figure, for sure, observing her. For a moment she thought she was imagining it, still not fully conscious of her surroundings, but as her eyes gradually adjusted to the dark, she could clearly make out the contour of a person hiding in the shadow. Lai's eyes widened in fear, but before she could open her mouth and scream, the man stepped toward her, showing himself to her.

"It's me, don't scream!"

"Oh, my God, Phin, you scared me to death. How long have you been standing there?"

"There is no time to talk now," said Phin. "Lai, listen to me! There has been a change of plans. We have to go now! A car is waiting for us outside, just behind the curve. It will take us all the way south. There is no time to lose. Lai, we have to leave now, before it is too late!"

He came closer to the barrel and offered her his hand to help her hoist herself out.

"Come on, let's go!"

She couldn't move. She understood everything Phin was telling her, but she couldn't react as if she wasn't in control of her body. It seemed to her that the vat elevated from the floor and that she was looking at Phin and his extended arm from above. She was fully aware of the gravity of the moment, but couldn't act upon it. She heard Man cackling with laughter from above the basement.

"Lai, what is wrong with you? There is no time to waste, we have to go *now*!"

He grabbed her by the arm and started pulling her up and out of the barrel. Upstairs, in the living room, Ta was scolding Nhan. He must have got into trouble for something. He is such a naughty boy, always getting into these mischievous episodes, the little rascal. And Man, she is always right behind him, looking up to her older brother and always following him blindly. But they are good kids, she reassured herself. They are my kids.

The thought filled her with warmth and put a smile on her face. She regained control over her body again and realized that Phin was grabbing her by her shoulders and shaking her. Her head was wagging back and forth from the shakes. Her neck hurt, but she wasn't scared anymore.

"No! Stop it! I don't want to go! Let go of me!"

She opened her eyes. Everything around her was dark. The water in the vat had become tepid, and she felt a chill running down her spine. Immediately, she stood up, stepped out of the bath and wrapped herself in a big towel. Then, she walked over to the chair where her clothes were piled up and started putting them on. Fully dressed, she walked over to the staircase leading up to the living room. On the way up, she stopped for a moment and glanced back toward the barrel. The moon was reflecting on the surface of the water, making it shimmer. Taking a moment to inspect the scene in front of her, she pursed her lips in a smirk and exhaled sharply through her nostrils a few times.

Everything is alright, she thought, and with that realization she turned her back to it all and continued walking up to the living room, content.

THE END

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