

## K A R M A



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Looking at the girl writhing and moaning on the hospital bed, I felt miserable and angry. Why was I so helpless? Why did I choose the wrong profession? If I had studied oriental or Western medicine, I thought, then I wouldn't have to stand foolishly and helplessly by watching other people suffer.

"Oh, it hurts. I'm dying. I'm dying."

The hands of the girl, the blue veins standing out clearly, clung to the bed, as if she were locked in a struggle with death to remain in the land of the living. Her skin was pale. Her long black hair lay spread out all over the white pillow, a few strands sticking to her cheeks and forehead. She was still pretty, one could see, even though she had exhausted herself trying to conquer the pain—both physical and spiritual.

When this ordeal is over, she'll be breaking boys' hearts, I thought to myself, and then I felt cruel for thinking such a thing. Here was a person in pain and I wasn't sharing her suffering. But how does one share suffering? I took the girl's hand. When we feel helpless, we need only pray; we can cling to a bit of faith.

"Try to pray," I whispered to the girl.

"I'm dying. The pain is terrible. Why don't they come? Please go and call them."

I did what she wished—went out and called them again, though I knew it was useless. I'd called them already I don't know how many times. Only nurses were on duty and they had many other

patients. Their job was simply to wait for the doctor to tell them what medicine to give. They were used to suffering, their hearts seemed hardened; cries of pain no longer moved them. And anyway they could not understand the plight of this girl whose illness was more of the spirit than the body. She had endured her troubles for nine months, from that day she decided to become one of the boat people, to leave her parents and brothers and sisters and set off in pursuit of her dreams. Her first dream was to be a nun. If called by God to enter a convent, she would wear a black veil and a black and white habit, solemn but becoming. Another dream was to be a virtuous wife and mother. If not called by God, she would meet and marry a talented and virtuous man who would make her happy.

"My mother told me that to get married and have a family and to try to build a perfect family life—she said that was also a way of leading a religious life. Do you think that's right?"

This is one of the things she used to talk about when we'd chat after meals, as we sat together knitting, or planning the next day's meals.

I met her on a cold rainy afternoon. They came and introduced her to me and asked me if I could take her in since I lived in a big house with extra room. She had the manner of a school girl, a little unsophisticated in modern ways, but a vibrant natural beauty who wore no makeup and was certain to be an attractive woman. I agreed to take her in. I thought she would be a witness; having only recently arrived in the United States, she could tell me what was happening in Vietnam.

I was struck by her graceful manner, by her brown eyes always open in amazement at all the things she encountered in the large city I lived in. She couldn't speak English yet, didn't know how to use the telephone. You could say she was a typical young Vietnamese girl, ready to endure hardships to be free, to be able to go to school.

I sat next to her, listening to her stories about things that happened after we lost our country. The more I listened the more I admired and pitied our people, especially those in the countryside, for bravely enduring so much cruelty and harassment from the communist cadres. Thúy was her name, and it suited

her very well. "Thúy" means profound; it also refers to the blue color of a bird's feather. When I asked her which meaning she would choose, she said she preferred the first:

"Because I want to be someone with a profound soul, not one of those shallow girls who have no depth."

One day I walked by her room and seeing she was still sleeping I stopped and watched her. I noticed her tired face, her pale skin. I felt sorry for this little girl far from her family. If she became sick who would take care of her? She always looked cold, bundled up in clothes that were too big for her. I was afraid that because she had not had a nutritious diet these past few years she couldn't endure the climate in the U.S.

One night after dinner, while I was reading a book in my room, Thuy knocked on the door and asked me if she could come in and talk. Noticing her serious expression, I quickly invited her in and we sat next to each other on the floor. Then Thuy asked, haltingly, what the word karma was and why there was karma and what the Vietnamese had done to create their karma.

I had to go into Buddhist doctrine to explain. I didn't want to say too much, however. I always try to avoid proselytizing. Everyone has his own path to follow. If my parents are Buddhist, then I'll follow them. Let other people follow whatever religion they choose. Each religion had unique qualities but if you talk about them too much you alienate your friends and no good comes of it.

After hesitating a moment, Thuy told me that she had just received a letter from her family informing her about a young man who had recently arrived in the U.S. The letter said that he was a good young man—someone who would make a good husband. Her parents and those of the potential groom intended to arrange the marriage and had agreed that they would conduct the engagement and marriage ceremonies in Vietnam when the two of them had become acquainted. Her mother didn't forget to add this instruction: "Remember," she advised, "you both should say your vows only after the ceremony in front of the altar of Christ."

She spoke a trifle sadly but I thought that was only because she was a little irritated at not being asked for her opinion. Trying to comfort her, I promised that I would stand on her—the bride's—side at the wedding. I pictured the scene to myself—the bride and groom holding hands, walking to the sounds

of the church music, later a small intimate reception.

I was busy and had to be away for a month, so Thuy had to move in with another family. Before I left, everytime she looked at me her eyes would be moist and shining, as if she were about to cry. I had to make a joke to lighten the atmosphere.

"You're acting as if I were going back to Vietnam. If that's where I were going, then it might be difficult to see each other again. But here in this free country it's easy—all you need is an airline ticket."

Then I promised that we'd open a cafe together, since she was good at making cakes. We'd build a future together. These castles in the sand lifted Thuy's spirits. As for me, I was content because the family Thuy was going to stay with shared her religion; they were happy to have another girl live with them.

When I returned, the first person I visited was Thuy. The woman of the house told me that Thuy had entered the hospital a week ago.

"Oh no! What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing's wrong. She's going to have a baby."

"Baby? What baby?"

It was as if I'd just come from some strange planet and had arrived at one even stranger. The woman laughed at my puzzled reaction.

"You mean you didn't know?"

"No. Know what, for heaven's sake?"

"That's strange. And you're a writer, too. She was seven months pregnant. She put straps around her stomach to hold the baby in and almost suffocated it. Now she has to stay in the hospital. She's probably about ready to have the baby. It'll be premature."

"But why is she pregnant?"

The woman bit her lip and frowned before she uttered, softly, two words:

"Thai pirates."

I didn't want to believe what she said, I thought maybe I'd heard wrong, but she continued:

"The poor girl, when she met me, she couldn't stand it any longer so she told me everything. She wanted us to get rid of the child; she couldn't bear to see its face."

"Why didn't I know anything? I lived with her for more than two months."

"Because you didn't pay any attention. I knew as soon as I saw her."

I know it is a weakness of mine not to pay attention to people. Often something will take place right in front of me and I won't notice it. I knew Thúy was sad, and probably embarrassed as well, so I avoided visiting her. After only a few weeks I heard that she had the baby, which was taken immediately to another family for adoption. When I heard that Thúy was ill again, I went to the hospital right away.

Thúy looked at me and recognized me immediately. But she was very sick and didn't remember much else.

"I'm going to die," she moaned.

I took Thúy's hand. I wanted to tell her to pray but then hesitated: we didn't share the same religion. Religious differences can prevent people from understanding each other. Buddhists usually pray to the Goddess of Mercy, but I didn't know what to tell Thúy. Shouldn't she recite some prayer? But could she remember an entire prayer in the condition she was in? Holding her hand, I prayed for her. Then she went to sleep after drinking a cup of milk and taking some sleeping medicine. As I sat next to Thúy watching her sleep, noticing her beauty slowly returning, my mind wandered to stories about pirates, stories people had told me and those I'd read in the newspapers.

Karma. That word that a few months before Thúy had asked me about. Vietnamese must have created some very bad karma, she said, but these pirates, she probably wondered, were they creating karma or were we receiving it?

Thúy must have wanted to talk to me about what had happened to her when she came to my room that day, but then something must have happened to prevent her from bringing it up. Maybe she didn't want to destroy the image I had of her—that of a young girl, an innocent schoolgirl.

Life contains some bitter ironies. If, when this child grows up, someone tells him the truth, what will he think? I remembered a fellow student I knew at a German language school when I was still studying in Paris. Her name was Odine and she is a doctor now specializing in nutrition. After we had known each other for a while, she told me: "I am the result of a rape during

the Second World War. A German soldier on a mopping-up operation raped my mother. Since my mother had no means to do otherwise, she had to have me. Naturally she's still full of hatred."

So here's another case of creating and receiving karma. It's no wonder all the sages tell us we must forgive. If we don't, then we'll be trapped forever in a vicious circle.

Thúy rolled over, sighed in a dream, and made faces while asleep. Apparently she would recover. Tomorrow my Thúy will return to her old peaceful life. The baby will be adopted by some family and will never know he was the result of karma being returned.

If he should become a holy man, I wondered, could he maybe take away the hatred his mother feels for that pirate?

(Translated from the Vietnamese by Cao Thị Như-Quỳnh and John C. Schafer)

