

# BONJOUR TRISTESSE

Nguyễn Dương JJR 62



Mr. Dan opens his eyes after a nap lunch, not knowing the date or the time. Here, day after day, everyday is the same. He is an old man who no longer remembers. Living with other elderly people who are sick or demented, the day of the week no longer matters.

He recognizes his old roommate who had been awake since who knows when. Mr. Dan nonchalantly asks him in Vietnamese: Did you have a good nap? His American roommate, who is also demented, answers calmly in English: Do you want to eat dinner now? Are you hungry?

These two old folks living in a nursing home room are conversing without any mutual understanding. Both are happy just to be talking to someone.

Mr. Dan looks for a cane to go outside. His dutiful daughter bought the cane at a medical supply store. The height of the cane is adjustable. The end is covered by a rubber cap to keep him from slipping when he uses it for support. He is like his daughter's dog who sits on a chair looking through the window watching for her return. Mr. Dan always looks in the direction of the nursing home gate, resigning himself that the door will be always locked with an attendant sitting by the door. He never can walk outside but he can see through the door the landscape beyond where once long ago he had a home of his own.

After standing for a long time, contemplating life outside, he nonchalantly walks in small steps back to his bedroom. Passing by the lounge or the hall he sees other old folks like him, each one in a different pose, either sitting down, sitting in a wheelchair, or walking slowly with a walker -- all looking dejected. Back to his bed, he lies down, eyes wide open, anxious, even fearful of sleeping because he will be awakened by a nursing assistant who will tell him to shower or go to the dinner room, even if he does not want to take a shower or to eat. These assistants perform their duties on schedule with military precision. At night, when he cannot sleep, he gets out of his bed and wanders in the hallway aimlessly into a ghostly environment of dead silence until he is chased back to his bed by the on call nursing staff.

The next morning, his daughter arrives to visit. He is so happy as he clings to her sleeves and pleads: "My daughter take me home". The daughter comforts him: "Yes, I am going to take you home to see your grandchildren." Mr. Dan replies between tears, feeling miserable, but his voice is now alert: "I crave Vietnamese food, spring rolls with cooked shrimps, shoulder pork with rice noodles dipped in a honey peanut sauce sprinkled with hot pepper or the rice noodle duck soup with bamboo shoots". His daughter reminds him: "I know, you will remember to bring your dentures with you so you can taste your foods." "At home, I will boil the pork belly so you can dip in the fish sauce like the old days when you wolfed it down with wine". "Oh, I remember, your mom mixed the sauce with garlic and hot pepper which was so delicious." Those days are now long gone. His wife passed away more than ten years ago, but he always recites this like it just happened yesterday. When his wife passed away, he lived alone in the house that he had bought a long time ago. Despite living alone he had the freedom to do things as he liked. He could drive to the Vietnamese market close by to buy food he likes and cook for himself. He still remembers the boiled pork belly which he dipped into the fish sauce that he prepared but which was not as good as when his wife mixed the sauce. His daughter's home was just ten minutes far away by car, so she regularly came to visit him and helped him sometimes for his cooking, his laundry or cleaning his house, until the time that she insisted that he move into this nursing home.

Mr. Dan is now 90 year old. Generally speaking, he is "healthy" given his age with, no chronic health conditions requiring around the clock care. Although weak in the limbs, he still manages to walk by himself, naturally with a cane. Mentally, he is "half and half", sometimes very lucid, conversing normally, sometimes incoherent, not knowing what is going on. He can no longer live independently. His daughter had thought about it for a long time. She only has 4 bedrooms for a family of four: her husband and her two children. She and her husband both work, their 2 teenaged children are in school, She cannot afford to let him stay at her home since there is nobody there to care for him. In a nursing home there is a staff which can watch him and provide medical care, not to mention meals.

Now and then, she visits her father like today.

Mr. Dan is so happy to follow her, walking slowly as he pulls his body along with his cane. He is like a young exuberant child going to an amusement park. His grandchildren will be happy to see him. He had taken care of them since their birth till their teenage years. They are kind to him even though his presence will upend their weekend schedule. Sometimes he asks if these children are from which family. Luckily he sometimes he remembers their names as well. Generally he cannot understand their chatter due to generational and cultural differences. They play piano, create sketches and shows for him, but he cannot understand their language or melodies. He thinks it all sounds like "rap." When they call, telephone conversations are limited to perfunctory questions. What do you eat today? How is the weather? Are you feeling OK? What TV shows are you watching? They are generally flat and repetitive. Face time and Zoom are not much better.

His daughter has now arranged for him to stay in one room in their house for the two weekend days. The first dinner is served with clean pretty bowls, chopsticks, napkins, and dinner mats. A cold beer just out of the refrigerator, duck soup with young bamboo shoots, and cooked pork belly accompanied with a fish sauce mixed with garlic and hot pepper are waiting for him. His daughter reminds him: "When you chew the food, please remember to spit on the dinner mat, do not drop it on the floor because the food will attract ants and cockroaches. And please wipe your hands with this napkin." She remembers that when he lived alone in his house, his dining room was full of cockroaches. They multiplied so rapidly that no insecticide could eradicate them. Even with her detailed instructions, she still has to watch him carefully because of his mental condition and habit of dropping food on the floor now and then. Finishing dinner, he is offered the mung bean cake that he loves so much. From the beginning of the dinner to the end, all the dishes have been his favorites. His daughter now has lovingly attended to her dad. Patiently she waits until his last bite. After he swallows it, she tells him to go to the sink to wash his mouth and fingers and to gargle. She even wipes her father's hands and gives him warm water so he can gargle, gently reminding him of little things, like "Dad, wash your hands with soap" and "Take out your dentures and clean them." Nonetheless, she ends up having to clean out the dentures and put them in a glass of water.

When M. Dan finishes using the toilet, she immediately enters the room and cleans it, knowing well that he will splash his urine on the floor like he did when he is living alone. If she does not clean it immediately, the urine stench will linger and the unlucky one who steps on the spoiled bathroom floor will bring this undesirable odor with him. At night time, his daughter already has the bedroom arranged for him, showing him the remote control and guides him to use it: "You can watch the news or your favorite pay for view like Netflix or HBO or Hulu. Just turn off when you are ready to sleep. Have a good night!" Mr. Dan lies down and watches TV dutifully as a child. Reassured, she returns to her house cleaning work till bedtime. But when she is ready to go to bed, she sees him furtively go to the kitchen and return to his bed. Surprised, she follows him and discovers that her dad is opening another mung bean cake, eating it in bed because he is so hungry! She yelled softly: "OMG! It is midnight now and you brought the sweet cake on your bed to eat! You are helping ants and cockroaches to multiply freely! And now you have to wash your mouth again!" Not really knowing what is happening, he shouts: "Leave me alone! I am going to sleep now!" He refuses to wash his mouth and hands. He hides under the blanket. Finally he has won.

The next two days, his daughter is so tense as she carefully watched her father's every move. Not only does he keep dropping things on the floor but she has to answer all his questions which he repeats over and over. And he will forget this question a few minutes later and ask again! The most disheartening job is to force him to take a

shower. He refused to be waited by his family members, proudly telling them that he is still capable of doing such things on his own. After all, he still has the use of his hands and feet and does not need help from anybody else. She readies a pot of warm water, leaves a soap and a shampoo, and a set of clean clothes close by. She puts a small stool nearby so he can sit down. Even so, ten minutes later, he emerges from the bathroom wearing his new clean clothes and proudly declaring that he has cleaned his body and does not need to waste water showering. She does not understand why he can "clean" his body when the warm water container is still full!

The next night she gives up obliging her dad to wash his hands after he eats cake in his bedroom. She thinks that a staff back at the nursing home will straighten things out: He has to follow the regulations of the nursing staff and he won't argue with the nurses because he cannot speak English. And besides that, the nursing staff will handle any medical emergencies, God forbid! While the daughter is preparing for his return to the nursing home, he leaves the house with his cane. She runs after him and finds him a short distance away. She grabs his arms: "Where you have been? I was scared to death that you might get lost."

He proclaims clearly: "I am going home". His daughter replies sweetened him: "Yes, I am readying you to go to the nursing home, dad."

He is now fully lucid and harangues: "I am not going to your home nor to the nursing home. I go back to my own house that I cherished with my wife, where I have full control of my daily activities. Living in the nursing home is like living in a jail. They lock the doors. They have guards. At noon time, while I am taking a nap, they wake me up, throw aside my blanket and order me to take a shower. Whether I am hungry or not, at dinner time they force me to go to the dining room to eat food I do not like! They did not care about my feelings, I have to eat foods that I do not like, I cannot ask for my preferences or choose what I want. Even at night when I cannot sleep, I cannot go outside my bedroom before been chased back to bed by them. So how can I be happy in the nursing home?" "To go to your house is like to go to a second jail, I know that you all, my dear daughter and your children. You all cherish me and try to make me comfortable, but I have the feeling that you are spying on me. You watch my every move. Everything I do is watched and then corrected in minute details so that your house is clean. Again where is my freedom?"

After speaking, he weeps like a child. At that very moment, the dementia comes back, but he still declares: "I want to go home... my home!"

One day.....

**Nguyễn Dương JJR 62** Summer of 2020

(Adapted from "Bố Muốn Về Nhà" by Nguyễn Thị Thanh Dương)