

Heavenly Fire (1994) by Jinkang Wang

Translation by Stella Jiayue Zhu

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Penultimate Draft*

After surviving two years at a May Seventh Cadre School,¹ I returned to the physics office at Temple High School. The political slogans on the wall appeared freshly painted in sunset's scarlet glow, as if they were daubed on just yesterday. Meanwhile, the timetable behind the door was already covered in spiderwebs, like it was left over from a previous life.

Am I still myself? The same physics teacher who, though a hapless victim of fate, possessed great dignity in his intellect?

During a struggle session,² a student raised his baton against me. My mind blanked . . . with a flash of white light I had fallen into the depths of the universe. Only an empty shell remained where I had stood.

I found a letter in the drawer. It was covered in dust. The faint and delicate writing suggested a feminine hand. As I read it, I had an inkling that it had been written in fear and a hurry.

“Teacher He:

My name is Xiang Xiulan and I graduated from your class five years ago. You probably don't remember me . . .”

I did remember her. Though she was easily negligible, with average coursework and an unremarkable personality and appearance, she did always quietly address me as “Teacher He” whenever she saw me on the street. It was during the Cultural Revolution and not many students addressed their teachers anymore, so this left a deep impression on me.

“. . . but you must remember Lin Tiansheng. He was your favorite student, please, save him . . .”

Lin Tiansheng!

Fear and pain swept over me. I taught for many years and had encountered a few extremely gifted students in each class. Lin Tiansheng was among them. I expected that he would go on to do great things, but I also harbored deep worries about him: just as brilliant diamonds easily

¹ [Translator's note:] May Seventh Cadre Schools were in effect labor camps, set up during China's Cultural Revolution era (1966-1976). Their primary function was to “re-educate” cadres and intellectuals in proper socialist doctrines through a combination of hard manual labor and the study of Marxist writings.

² [Translator's note:] Struggle sessions were a form of public humiliation and persecution against intellectuals, political rivals, and perceived class enemies, used primarily during the Cultural Revolution. Typically, the victim of a struggle session was forced to confess their revolutionary failures and various “crimes” before a crowd of people, while enduring verbal and, often, physical abuse.

shatter under a hammer, the sharpest intellects, too, are vulnerable against the gravel of pedestrian affairs.

Tiansheng, as I recall, had an especially large head and a disproportionately frail body, much like a thin seedling that had wrestled its way from under a rock. He was dispassionate and aloof, and had a rather unlikable character that was distinctly unfit for his young age. As a matter of fact, I rarely saw him with other kids. He was always strolling by himself, eyes cast down, scuffing pebbles with the tips of his toes. The melancholy in his eyes often reminded me of an oil painting called *The Martyr*. Later on I did learn that he was one of the ‘educable children’³ and that his father, who took his own life in 1957, was a famous rightist. I understood, then, that his detachment was just a mechanism for self-protection, a suit of armor for his dignity.

His coursework was not particularly remarkable, and I would have completely overlooked his gift were it not for a chance discovery. In physics, I often found him staring vacantly outside the window, appearing distracted, engrossed in thoughts about who knows what. Occasionally he would flip over his exercise book, and jot down a few lines, but just a while later tear off the page, crumple it up, and throw it away.

Once, during break, out of curiosity I picked up a paper ball he had just discarded. I opened it and revealed a few pencil lines, which were scrawled across the page with heavy, frenetic slants. I could not believe that they belonged to Tiansheng, because his usual handwriting was much like his person, distant and stiff. I scabbled to make out the characters:

“The universe is infinite in time and space (for else, what could there be before the beginning of time and outside the boundaries of space), but the universe should have long been ripe during the eternity before us, so how could there be such young galaxies, such young particles, and such young civilizations?”

“I believe in the oscillating universe theory: the universe, in its beginning, was a cosmic egg; then it exploded, and began expanding rapidly (still expanding now). Billions and trillions of years later, it will shrink to the center under gravitational forces, collapsing into a new cosmic egg. So on so forth, in infinite cycles.”

“But I could not possibly believe that there is only one cosmic egg in the entire universe! A new version of geocentrism and heliocentrism! What is infinite has no center! Logical fallacy!”

The oversized exclamation marks were written with such force they almost penetrated the paper, making evident the intensity of Tiansheng’s passion. It continued:

“If products from the explosion expand with finite speed (the speed of redshift, according to astronomers, which is less than the speed of light), then it will take infinity for them to reach infinite space, so how could there be ‘periodic’ oscillation? If they expand to finite space (even if

³ [Translator’s note:] “Educable children” was a cultural revolution jargon, referring to children who denounced their families of former capitalists, “bourgeois” intellectuals, pre-liberation rich peasants and landlords, thereby proving that they could “overcome” their backgrounds and be reformed into good citizens of the new society.

the space is unimaginably enormous) and then contract, then they are just an unremarkable point in the infinite space, and how could that represent the formation of the universe?"

The next line was crossed out with heavy strokes. I tried my hardest and made the words out:

"Perhaps the universe is made of infinitely many smaller oscillating universes, and is birthed from infinitely many cosmic eggs in turn. This seems more logical."

How trenchant was this budding reflection, even though it lacked sophistication. Why did he cross it out? Was he uncertain, and loath to face ridicule from the others?

There were a few more lines on the back of the page, written much differently. The strokes were slower and more pensive, and the words themselves emanated a somber air, unlike the temperament of a middle schooler:

"A theory that can never be confirmed by 'human': if it is true, then after every aeon all civilizations in it shall vanish, not even a single trace shall be left for the new 'human' of the next aeon. Was there a middle schooler in the last aeon on the same quest as I am? That, one can no longer know!"

My heart raced as I read on. I felt as if I was scorched by flames, as if a heavenly fire was burning in the universe, a blue-white flame devouring infinity, a heavy rhythm palpitating in chaos.

I wouldn't have thought that this frail body could contain such expansive thoughts, such crisp and clear reasoning, and such somber and ponderous sentiments.

I knew that decades ago there was a restless Jewish child, who wondered what one would see if he were to travel on the crest of light waves. . . . This was Einstein's famous thought experiment, the general theory of relativity in its embryonic form. Who could deny that Lin might be a second Einstein?

I did not know what an astronomer might think of Tiansheng's writings, but to me at least they seemed indisputable! The simpler an argument is, the more reliable it is, just as a Greek philosopher famously argued:

"An omnibenevolent and omnipotent god does not exist, because there is evil in the world."

"Such a simple argument, but no one can refute it, because there is evil in the world."

It is not impossible to refute an unvoiced challenge; one just has to admit that nothing travels faster than light.

I carefully stowed the piece of paper away in a notebook. It was distressing to think how many precious sparks of thought like this had been tossed away in the past. As I raised my head, I saw Tiansheng quietly watching me. I said, gently:

“Tiansheng, if you have notes like this in the future, may the teacher keep them for you?”

Tiansheng nodded in quiet gratitude. From then on, we had a unspoken connection with each other.

Unfortunately, all these treasured notes were lost when my household was ransacked.

* * *

I shook my head, cleared my mind of loose thoughts, and continued reading Xiulan’s letter:

“ . . . our classmates who were sent to Hexi have all left, only Tiansheng and I are still here. And now he is believing in superstitious beliefs (awkward grammar, I thought to myself), single-mindedly trying to figure out how to pass through walls. I am so afraid that the militia would come and take him, but I could not persuade him whatsoever. Teacher He, Tiansheng has always admired you the most, please come and save him!”

I could only smile bitterly. I myself was only just released from the cowshed,⁴ surviving each day still in fear, how could I save anyone else!

The single sheet of letter felt as if it weighed a ton. The paper was soaked in the fear and anticipation of a young woman. She did not date the letter, nor was the postmark legible. It could have been from two years ago, and if anything should happened, it would already have taken place. . . . The student that I had high hopes for would surely not be lured by gimmicks of passing through walls, perhaps only I could understand him, so this must be the misunderstanding of ordinary folks. . . . Still, the next day, I borrowed a creaky bike and hurried towards Hexi Village.

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I used to take students to Hexi Village to participate in the farm work, so I was familiar with the route.

Riding over this bumpy terrain had often give momentum to my thoughts, freeing them, like shooting stars, into all sorts of directions.

I took the same approach to teaching physics, free and unbounded like a shooting star. I did not want the Chinese children to be shaped into stiff and useless china dolls. In class, I was bold and imaginative, and sought to insert into my teaching the kind of critical insights and subtle, deep intuitions that only belong to the wise. None of my students had won a Nobel Prize: the blame could only lie with the fact that the Chinese society is stable to the degree of being rigid.

In any case, the students loved my classes. The very fact that forty-some heads were following me closely made for a happy and rewarding experience in and of itself. As soon as the Cultural

⁴ [Translator’s Note:] The cowshed is a term for makeshift detention centers during the Cultural Revolution. Intellectuals who were labeled class enemies were frequently detained there.

Revolution began, these students invariably turned against me. But they still knew that I was extraordinary, and that gave me solace during the struggle sessions.

Once, in class, I mentioned black holes. I said that black holes are a kind of celestial body whose existence is predicted yet unconfirmed, that they have extremely large mass or density, and that any object approaching a black hole gets consumed under its gravity – not even light can escape.

The students were fascinated, and asked many different questions: what would an astronomer think if he fell into a black hole by accident? Where does stuff go when it is consumed by a blackhole? Can matter be infinitely dense? And if not even light can escape, can mankind ever explore the secrets inside black holes? . . .

Then I taught them about white dwarfs. They are another final stage in the stellar revolution and can be as dense as 10,000 kilogram per solid centimeter. I also taught them about neutrinos, which are electrically neutral particles with zero rest mass. A neutrino can easily penetrate Earth in less than 0.04 seconds.

Somehow or other, we started talking about the Taoist monks from Mount Lao, who could apparently walk through walls, as told by the classical tales in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*. I chuckled,

“Legend goes that the Indian Yoga teaches ways of passing through walls. According to records, not so long ago, a yogi successfully passed through a wall under the watchful eyes of a crowd of Indian scientists. Marvelous tales are frequently told about the Indian Yoga, the Chinese Qigong, and about humans possessing supernatural powers, like telekinesis and remote sensing. It is odd that these tales are so common and even shared worldwide – but of course it is just nonsense.”

Amid his rowdy classmates, only Tiansheng was looking at me intently, with dark eyes much like black holes. He stood up and said,

“In 1910 astronomers predicted a comet colliding with Earth, and the world was terrified, thinking that the world was coming to an end. The prediction was in fact fulfilled: the gigantic comet swept over Earth, but left it intact, because . . .”

I finished the sentence, “The comet tail is composed of extremely sparse substances. Its density is as low as 10^{-22} gram per cubic centimeter, which is thinner than any actual vacuum we might create on earth.”

Bright-eyed, Lin Tiansheng continued, “But who would have known it before Earth made it through the comet tail?”

The students looked confused. Perhaps they thought this had nothing to do with passing through walls, and so they did not understand what Lin Tiansheng was going on about. Only I picked up on his train of thought: he was taking huge leaps in reasoning. I felt an instant excitement: two people who are of the same mind forming a consonance in such vicinity was a rare event for me. I waved the students to quiet down.

“Tiansheng is right,” I said. “People are often inflexible in their perspective about the world. Thus, they find novel theories incredible. A few hundred years ago men had vehemently rejected heliocentrism, because they had seen the sun revolving around Earth, rising and falling, with their own naked eyes. They had also refused to admit that Earth is round, because it was patently clear to them that men could not stand upside down on the ceiling, so of course men could not live below earth as well. Just like this, they drew seemingly correct conclusions from formerly correct ideas, and rushed to dismiss novel theories. Today, we make fun of their obstinance, but would our descendants laugh at us too?”

I paused and surveyed my students.

“Even obvious facts such as ‘men cannot pass through walls’ should not be treated as final verdicts carrying inherent truths. At the invention of propeller aircrafts, it was near impossible for aircrafts to carry machine guns, because the fast spinning blades of the propeller inevitably obstructed bullets from passing through. Only after the invention of the synchronization gear, could bullets break the barrier and pass between blades without striking them. Likewise, light cannot pass through stone, but when silicon dioxide, sodium carbonate, and calcium carbonate are mixed and melted, they come to compose glass, which is transparent. The very same atoms, merely rearranged, now allow light to pass.”

I paused again to gather my thoughts, then continued,

“To our eyes, the human body is an impenetrable dense body, but light, when its frequency is changed, can pass through it. Earth is even more impenetrable as a dense body, but neutrinos can pass through Earth easily. So, do not consider any concept as absolutely, inherently correct and exempt from change.”

The students were in awe of my musings and fell dead quiet. I chuckled,

“What I said is meant to just offer one point of view, in order to help you break through your mental barriers. It is not to convince you of Taoist or Yoga tricks. Isn’t that right, Tiansheng? Do you believe that one can pass through a wall just by casting a spell?”

The students broke into a hubbub of guffaws. Tiansheng smiled but did not say a word.

I did not realize what a stupid mistake I had made until much later. I had given a series of clear deductions, but stopped abruptly at the last step, before smothering the first cry of new thoughts with condescending mockery. That was the kind of trick I had always despised. It was the device of mediocre men.

* * *

The sun was already setting by the time I arrived at Hexi. The cow was bathed in the evening’s glow, while sauntering back to the village. The cowhand half dragged, half carried the harness on his back, letting it click-clack on the ground. The field was speckled with farmers busy collecting

sun-dried sweet potatoes off the ground. I approached a grandma, who, to my surprise, still recognized me:

“Teacher He! Are you here to see those two?” She nattered away, “Poor kids! Everyone else has left but them, and they don’t even know how to get by. Look at all the sweet potatoes on the ground, and they can’t be bothered to come and gather some. All they care about is being ‘in love’ with each other – what is the point of that when you are gonna starve tomorrow?”

According to her, those two would take off to the “divine statue” by the Yellow River every evening and only return in the dead of night. I hurriedly thanked her, left my bike outside the village, and started walking towards the River.

* * *

In truth, this grandma was an extraordinary philosopher, for what she said captured the essence of life for the unprivileged mass: to survive, they must try their very best to secure sustenance.

Speaking of philosophy, something else came to mind. In the early 60s, the Japanese physicist Shoichi Sakata proposed that matter was infinitely divisible. Chairman Mao immediately praised him as the first natural scientist to have consciously employed dialectical materialism to guide their research. The entire nation naturally followed Mao’s appraisal: they took to Sakata’s idea and began to study it with gusto.

I had always disapproved of such use of political authority in questions of scientific truths. But when I taught the idea of infinitely divisible matter to my students, I did not experience feelings of guilt because I believed in the truth of this idea. In fact, as soon as I encountered it, I felt an immediate resonance and was profoundly shaken by the philosophical depth of its historical vision.

* * *

As I waxed poetic about physics in class, the students seemed as if they were brought under a spell. Tiansheng was among them.

That evening, I spotted a certain individual with a big head pacing outside my dormitory. I asked him to come in, gently questioned him as to whether he had anything to tell me. Tiansheng was hesitant for a long while. Then all of a sudden, he asked:

“Teacher He, do you really believe that matter is infinitely divisible?”

I was instantly taken aback. Even though I proclaimed to be a free thinker, and even though Tiansheng and I had an unspoken connection with each other, to say what he said under the kind of political climate of the time was beyond bold. I carefully chose my words in response, “Certainly, I do. What about you?”

Tiansheng, again, paused in hesitation.

“Teacher He, so far only a few strata of the physical world have been recognized by mankind: the observable universe, galaxy clusters, galaxies, celestial bodies, molecules, atoms, atomic nuclei, stratons⁵ or quarks. Even though the idea of divisible matter is applicable across these strata, we cannot conclude that thereby it is applicable for all the strata there are.”

I was relieved and smiled.

“According to the rules of mathematical induction, a hypothesis isn’t proven until one proves the induction step. That aside, suppose the first few steps do fit a certain pattern, and suppose there is no sufficient evidence for the contrary, then the most reliable conclusion to draw would be the one that fits the existing pattern.”

“Actually, I truly believe it too,” Tiansheng spoke all of a sudden. “Just now as I was listening to you, I felt as if a string in my heart was plucked, and it hummed out of resonance.”

We looked at each other, finding ourselves again in a harmonious state of consonance.

But Tiansheng was not yet satisfied.

“Teacher He, there is just one more thing that I am still puzzled by.” He asked.

“What is it?”

“Judging from the structures of the known strata, substantial matter occupies only a small portion of the structural space in each stratum, such as the celestial bodies in a galaxy or the electrons and nucleus in an atom. Moreover, we know that neutrinos can pass through any matter unimpeded. It indicates that there is also considerable empty space in the predictable strata. Is this fair to conclude?”

“I think so,” After some pondering, I answered him. “I am inclined to accept it, because a few other scientific hypotheses work as indirect proofs for it and vice versa. For example, according to the Big Bang theory, the beginning of the universe was a small cosmic egg, so it follows that the resultant matter from expansion has spaces in it.”

Lin Tiansheng changed the subject.

“Teacher He, you have once told the story of a hound chasing a rabbit. At first, the hound is 100 meters behind the rabbit, and runs twice as fast. When the hound has caught up with the 100 meters in between, and rabbit has run another 50 meters. When the hound has met the 50 meters, the rabbit has run another 25 meters. . . . It appears as if the chase would never end, but, in actuality, the hound soon catches up to the rabbit, because an infinite decreasing linear sequence converges to zero.”

⁵ [Translator’s note:] Stratons are the hypothetical subhadronic particles in the straton model, a now obsolete structure model of hadrons proposed by Chinese physicists in 1966.

What he said sent a quiver down my spine – I began to have an inkling of where he was going.

Tiansheng continued:

“In each stratum of matter, only a portion of the space is occupied by substance. Yet of this substantial part, only a small portion is occupied by the substance of the next stratum. The exact ratios of matter to space might differ from stratum to stratum, but they should all be far much than 1; this follows by induction from the structures of the known strata. Therefore, as we dissect the physical world, counting at each stratum the volume of total substances in the universe, we arrive at a decreasing linear sequence.

“If by induction we can reach the conclusion of infinitely divisible matter, we should likewise be able to induce that the substantial part of matter converges to zero. Therefore, matter is just a mode of existence for space. It is stratified space under the distortion of force fields. Teacher, doesn't that seem right?”

I was absolutely stunned.

The tenor string deep in my heart was strummed again. I felt as if my mind rode onto the vibrating crest of sound waves, into the deep universe, searching for the mysterious music of heaven.

Seeing that I fell silent, Tiansheng asked worriedly:

“Teacher, did I make a mistake somewhere?”

He looked at me with such intense sparks in his eyes that it reminded me of the story of Prometheus, whose eyes must have reflected the same lights when he sought to steal the heavenly kindling for mankind. There was something resembling martyrdom in Tiansheng's passion, and it put me to shame. After a long while, I finally answered him with a bitter smile:

“Who do you think I am? I am no Newton, Marx, Einstein, or Hawking and Mao. I am just an ordinary physics teacher. Even if I was once bright, that gift is long gone, muffled by the parochial life I live. I cannot judge your case.”

We stood there in silence, as the chirps of the bugs outside blended into a hum.

I sighed, “It puzzles me: if you think that your essence is no more than some ephemeral ether, and that all our aspirations will eventually dissolve into cosmic chaos, then how could you still have such intensely passionate pursuits?”

Tiansheng smiled, and replied crisply:

“Because I am just an ordinary man who cannot transcend his own mortality: though I know that death is inevitable, I am still compelled to affirm life.”

By then night had fallen. A shooting star streaked through the sky, leaving a fleeting flash of pale blue light behind. The world returned to its slow, rhythmic breath.

“Keep sharpening your mind,” I said, letting out a long sigh. “Do not lose your edges, but also use it with caution, hide it when necessary, and never let it dull. Tiansheng, will you remember that?”

* * *

Steep slopes lined the river: this was the uncanny workmanship of Nature, created by hundreds of centuries of water erosion on the Loess Plateau. The setting sun has closed in on the horizon upstream. Its fiery radiance ruptured the western firmament.

The “divine statue” spoken of by the grandma was in fact a statue of a great man. There is not much to compliment about its artistic quality, for it carries the characteristic dullness and affectation of the Cultural Revolution era. Regardless, as situated against the time-honored river and the bleeding redness of the sunset, it still took on an air of majesty and distinction.

A tiny figure appeared in the murk, and asked in a trembling voice,

“Who is there?”

I asked tentatively, “Is it xiao Xiang? It’s Teacher He here.”

Xiang Xiulan let out a wail and threw herself in my direction. In two years, she had already taken on the appearance of a rural woman. She sobbed with tears all over her face and a look of utter terror in her eyes. I automatically resumed my old role of her teacher and senior:

“Xiao Xiang, don’t be afraid. Isn’t Teacher He here now? I only saw your letter yesterday, which is why I am late. Where is Tiansheng?”

She pointed a finger in his direction, where I saw a figure sitting in the sunset in the valley, seemingly in the middle of a breathing exercise. Having heard our voices, he hurriedly finished the practice.

“Teacher He!” He shouted and dashed over. He wore threadbare clothes, with the pantlegs rolled high up. On that dark, gaunt face, only his eyes were gleaming with light. My heart ached: he had fallen to the very bottom of the barrel, but remarkably kept a restless mind.

We regarded each other for a long while. I said sternly,

“Tiansheng, what have you been up to, that made Xiulan this worried? Are you really tinkering with those tricks of passing through walls?”

Tiansheng smiled, and sat me on a ridge:

“Teacher He, it is a long story. And we will have to begin with a wide-spread legend from around here.”

He continued on with the tale. According to him, some hundred miles from here, an eminent monk once lived in a Tianguang Temple. The old monk was extremely practiced in Qigong and Yoga. As a religious man, he was targeted during the Cultural Revolution, where the mob forced him to string a pair of monk shoes around his neck and attend struggle sessions in public every day. The abuse soon became unbearable. One day, as the mob walked him past an ancient tomb, the monk let out a deep sigh and headed straight to the tomb. Before his guards could stop him, he was gone like a whiff. The tomb, meanwhile, remained perfectly intact. The red guards⁶ were terrified and spread the story in secret.

Tiansheng kept it brief, but the story was chillingly seductive on its own. In fact, Xiulan almost shuddered at the sound of it. Having tolerated the tale in full, I asked him sadly,

“And you? Do you also believe in this myth? Have you become as easily hoaxed as the illiterates?”

He looked back at me with piercing eyes:

“Indeed, anyone who has even a modicum of scientific training would reject tales like this. Only two kinds of people will believe it: the ignorant, who have blind trust, and the philosophical, who can step outside of the boundaries of classical sciences.”

He continued, “Teacher He, as we have once discussed, matter is just space under the distortion of force fields. Because there is sufficient homogeneous space between their distorted microstructures, two trails of smoke or beams of light can penetrate each other. The reason a man and a wall cannot penetrate each other is not because there are no spaces in them, but because those spaces are distorted, just as a curved copper rod cannot penetrate another curved copper tube, even when the tube has a much greater diameter. Yet, once we remove the distortion in both, or even just in one of them, the copper rod can pass through.”

It was a sophisticated argument, but far from convincing to me.

“I am willing to admit the theory,” I smiled bitterly and asked. “but how do you remove the distortion of space? By casting a spell and channeling the powers of your spirit? Do you know how many electron volts of energy are needed to break apart a nucleus? Do you know that despite all their efforts, scientists have yet to break apart a single hadron and release the quarks? let alone particles of the lower strata!”

Tiansheng looked at me in pity and remained quiet for a long time. I had to avert my eyes to avoid his gaze. A long while passed before he slowly opened his mouth,

⁶ [Translator’s note:] The “red guards” often refer to any young participants in the Cultural Revolution. But, more specifically, they were groups of student-led paramilitary, who were committed to destroying the old establishment, and had sworn loyalty to Mao and his revolutionary line. It was a nationwide movement that wreaked havoc to Chinese society and economy.

“Teacher He, it does appear impossible to remove the distortion of the microstructures in matter with the power of the mind. You’ve told us about telekinesis, which I did not believe was possible. Still, I thought that since the tale is told around the world, it must come from somewhere. Moreover, how much do we even know about the structures of ourselves, about our mental activities, emotions, thoughts, and intuitions? You have also told us that theory is stale in comparison to practice, which is evergreen, ever-new: if we cannot explain possible facts with current theories, then the best solution is to forget about the theories, waste no time on them, and instead confirm the fact empirically as best as we can, because this type of explanatory conflict often foreshadows the coming of a theoretical revolution.”

I did not say anything; deep inside, I was shaken.

“So you confirmed the tale?” I asked faintly.

“I did,” He replied with resolution. “I even went to Tianguang Temple and managed to retrieve the monk’s secret scripture. I will not go into the details, but it took me three years of desperate search where the loneliness and silence of the underworld almost drove me mad. Only recently have I caught a glimpse of light.”

Understanding what he was insinuating, I asked hurriedly,

“Can you . . . can you pass through a wall now?”

I stared at him, while Xiulan watched him almost fearfully. It was obvious that she had no clue about his progress.

A heavy silence fell between us. A long while passed before Tiansheng gave me a rueful smile and said, “I do not know for sure. I have passed through the doorway curtain twice while being distracted. In essence that is no different from passing through a wall. But because I did it when my mind was absent, I don’t know if it really happened. When I sought to enter this state of mind on purpose, I could not succeed.”

“But tonight is different,” His face suddenly lit up. “I feel like I am in great form, and perhaps we can give it a try. It must be because Teacher He is by my side, and the minds of two geniuses are in consonance. Teacher He, could you give me a hand?”

He looked so earnest it made me turn red – what kind of “genius” am I? If anything, I felt like a lowly worm that had not survived the winter frost. Yet my heart ached for him – he was as poor as a church mouse, but still devoted himself to exploring the secrets of the universe with such a primitive method. I wanted to weep for him but had no tears left. I asked gently,

“How could I help? Just tell me.”

My reaction took Xiang Xiulan by surprise. She turned to me with tears pouring out of her eyes. I held her back and said:

“Xiulan, don’t try to stop him. If it is just crazy muttering, then trying it once will not cost much. At most, he will get a bump on the head.’ I smiled bitterly, ‘Perhaps that will wake him up. If he is right, then . . . then even if he might die or disappear in the process, and become a pall of undistorted homogeneous space, that would still be worth it. It would mean that mankind broke through yet another barrier in the pursuit of knowledge. Do you recall the story of Prometheus stealing fire from heaven?’”

Xiulan swallowed her sobs, and quietly retreated to the side, while tears rolled down her cheeks.

Tiansheng gave me a grateful look and quietly said, “Teacher He, I am about to begin. Stay close to me so I have a shoulder to lean on, is that okay?”

I nodded with tears in my eyes. He walked to the statue, sat down, crossed his legs, and suddenly turned around and calmly said to the girl, “In case I . . . Keep the baby.”

Only then did I learn that Xiang Xiulan, while still unmarried, was already pregnant. She held back her tears and nodded solemnly without shying away.

What remained of the sunset bathed Tiansheng. Soon he entered into a state of transcendence. A look of grace and serenity fell on him, just like Prometheus, chained to an iron pillar, awaiting the next strike with composure. I unwound my mind as Tiansheng instructed and dove into the microscopic world in a vessel of time. I stroked the walls of space that were constrained by the force fields, as if I was stroking a myriad of clear soap bubbles. Under my caress, the bubbles burst quietly one after another and coalesced into uniform, transparent ether.

In a trance, I saw Tiansheng slowly rising. What happened next was burned into my memory in slow motion just like in the movies: Tiansheng turned his head around, quietly broke into a bright smile, and then sauntered to the stone pedestal. As xiao Xiang and I stared on, his silhouette gradually sank into the pedestal. They overlapped each other as if both were transparent. Soon, only a faint shadow remained outside the stone.

I rose to my feet involuntarily. Xiang Xiulan slumped into my arms, her nails digging deep into my skin. But, of course, we only noticed these things later. In that moment we were so nervous, our minds went completely blank as we stared dead into the sculpture.

All of a sudden, a paralyzing cry of anger broke the silence:

“Who’s there?!”

* * *

The cry stunned my nerves. A terrible despair sent tremors down my extremities. Much time passed before I was able to turn around.

It was a gunned militiaman, dressed in what was typical of the Cultural Revolution era. He wore an unbuttoned military uniform, no collar insignia, and a field cap tipped to the side. He also carried a wooden rifle slant across the body. There was a great deal of smugness in his demeanor. He leered at Xiulan and smirked,

“Fucking hell, look at this rhino robbing the cradle. Fucking *chou lao jiu!*”⁷ (He was right on about my profession.)

He strutted towards us. I snapped, “Stop right there. Someone is inside!”

As soon as I said it, I realized it was a mistake. I bit my tongue in regret, but it was already too late. The militiaman circled the statue in suspicion, then stomped towards me and slapped me across my face, “You dirty old bag, how dare you trick me!”

I was thrilled at his attack, and hurried to admit, “Yes, yes – I was fabricating disinformation, I should go with you to confess my crime.”

I winked at Xiulan and led the way towards the village. Xiang Xiulan was still at a loss. Bewildered, she followed me. The meekness of the enemy class seemed to have surprised the militiaman, who warily trailed behind us.

At that very moment, Xiulan did something she would regret forever after: having taken just a few steps forward, she uncontrollably looked behind. The militiaman followed her line of sight and, at once, let out a sharp cry of surprise!

A human head was emerging gradually from the pedestal, at first, like a shroud of shadow, then slowly becoming more vivid, followed by the shoulders, the arms, and the top of the torso. We were stunned, and the world too paused. Then, in a side glance, I saw the militiaman holding up his gun in terror. I cried out in despair and lunged at him.

“Bang!”

The shot was fired, the half of a body in front of the pedestal twitched, and a hand rose to cover its chest. Frantically, I seized the rifle, slammed it in half on the ground, turned around, and rushed to Tiansheng.

His chest was blood-spattered. The gore did not dribble down, but lingered on his chest, hovering like a billow of red smoke. I held him in my arms and cried:

“Tiansheng! Tiansheng!”

He gently regained consciousness and broke into a beaming smile. Through fluttering lips, he said, distinctly,

⁷ [Translator’s note:] *Chou lao jiu*, or “Stinking Old Ninth,” was a common term of abuse for intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution. The derogatory term harkens back to the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), when Han Chinese scholars temporarily lost their elite status, and were cast down to the lowest social strata.

“I’ve done it!”

Then he closed his eyes in peace.

What happened next was even more remarkable. The body in my arms grew increasingly light. It became ever so soft and obscure, that soon it dissipated like smoke. A glistening bullet fell to the ground with a thud. Only a slightly dark elliptical smudge remained on the stone statue where Tiansheng’s body had been joined, but soon it began to fade too.

The genius of a generation had, just like that, come to naught in my arms. I wanted to cry, but had no tears left. I picked up the bullet – still piping hot – and lunged at the militiaman.

He was staring, in utter terror, at the statue and the bullet in my hand. Then, without warning, he howled like an animal and fled away.

From then on, a madman appeared in the area. He was dirty and unkempt, and would always bow to “confess his crime” as he wandered around, mumbling that he was not aiming at the statue, that he was guilty of a crime for which he deserved to die ten thousand times, and other such things.

Other than Xiang Xiulan and I, no one understood what he was talking about.

* * *

I collected myself from the madness of desolation and remembered that I still owed duties to the living.

Xiang Xiulan was lying prostrate on the ground, her listless eyes cast up to the firmament. I helped her up and whispered, “Xiao Xiang . . .”

Before I could offer my solace, Xiulan snapped her head up. “Teacher He,” she asked, with a strange gleam in her eyes, “do you believe that I am going to give birth to a boy, and he will be a genius just like his father?” Lost in fantasy, she continued, “My son will take me traversing the past and the future, and Tiansheng will be waiting for me in the heavens. Would you agree?”

I sighed, realizing that she was overwhelmed with distress. But I would rather she suffer from delirium for the moment, than lose her will to live.

So I fought back my tears and answered, ‘Yes, your child will be even smarter than Tiansheng. I will teach him physics too, and he will certainly become a wise, philosophical man. Let me walk you back to the village, all right?’

We looked around in longing, and then, while holding on to each other, walked home. In the west, the blazing, fiery sky had burnt out. The world was now cloaked in the darkness of dusk. I

imagined Tiansheng's immortal soul travelling through the deep and profound force fields,
continuing its quest for the kindling of an undying fire.

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