

Daydream on a Summer Afternoon

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When the girl was still in the temple, she woke up twice one night. Before waking up for the first time, she had a dream. It was in a deep night. She sat in a boat which was floating on a long river,. With her there was a scientist said to be dedicated to the pursuit of eternal life. The scientist turned his head and told her that that was the river of eternal life, a river that ran from the very beginning of everything to the very end of everything. The river was made up of strands of water, each of which was thinner than a hair strand. These strands ran from the source of the river to the end of the river, and never break. The scientist went on to say that everyone had two ways of reincarnation. As he said this, he took out paper and pen, and drew two lines, one of which was hollow at both ends, and the other one was hollow at one end but solid at the other. The scientist was then about to write a rigorous mathematical derivation to prove to the girl the seemingly unintelligible image was a correct model. But from the river that was as unrealistically serene as if it was in an ukiyo-e painting, there was suddenly a drop of water splashing on her

forehead. And so before she could comprehend the meaning of the image, she woke up from the dream.

It was after midnight. A dim light came from the tulle window, and it looked a little purple at first glance. She remembered that there was an idiom from Taoism, saying that purple air coming from the East is a symbol of propitious omen. In a Taoism folklore, it is said that before the great saint Lao Tzu passed the Hangu Pass, Guan YinXi saw the purple air coming from the East, and he immediately knew that a sage would come. And as he expected, Lao Tzu shortly arrived on a black ox. According to the folklore, there should be someone also important coming today. But she was surer that the sky was purple because when the transparency in the air was reduced, the weaker penetrating lights got absorbed and reflected, leaving only the most penetrating red and pink lights. When pink lights and red lights intertwined with the color of the night, a purple sky appeared.

She was a science student at the time, and did not believe much in religion. Sometimes she was even arrogant in that she felt herself closer to the truth of the world - those scientific laws. But until that night, she had lived in the temple for about two weeks.

Her grandfather had just passed away at that time. All of a sudden, it was like a bad joke, but no matter how, she would not be able to do anything about it.

She was studying in a foreign country back. when she first heard the news, and she didn't have much of a reaction. Since the moment she left home in middle school, she had been struggling with the inevitability of the eventual separation of her and her grandfather. To relieve

the unavoidable pain and to continue living after that, she came up with a way that most people might find somewhat insane - she no longer communicated with her grandfather. She resisted going home all those years, and even when she returned home, she would only smile at her grandfather, never talking much. When she was in middle school, she had frequently hid in her bed. Thinking about how her grandfather would one day pass away, she would weep over until hypoxia brought her unbearable headaches. By high school, she had made remarkable improvements - she was too numbed to cry. She felt so distant to everybody, so detached to the mundane world that she thought feelings could no longer hurt her.

She thought that she was prepared.

But apparently she was wrong. It was much more profound and heavier than what she could have imagined. A few days later, a sense of sorrow started to encroach upon her, like some kind of chronic disease. She started to feel dazed, unable to even speak a complete sentence for many days. Only from the occasional sound of sobbing and choking uttered from her abrupt crying could her friends confirm that she had not lost her voice.

She was so powerless.

The companionship of her grandfather since she was born had imprinted his gentle smile so deep in her subconsciousness. For so many years the cozy smell of the old suit her grandfather always wore reappeared again and again in her dreams, waking her up in tears. And when that day finally came, she, the one who had been preparing for so long, still had nowhere to hide. The only thing she could do was to find a place to sit and meditate, day after day. To help with

cleaning in the temple; To feed the goldfish in the free life pond; To hear people give her brainwashes, saying that everything was just in vain.

The temple was once dilapidated in her childhood. In her memory, she had only been there once or twice when she was in that city. It was when her mother took her to burn incense for Buddha, asking for some favor. It was generally for family health and career success. In the years since she left her hometown, the temple had been rebuilt with government funds, and the size of worshippers had also grown. The temple became somehow reputable in the area, while it was indeed still peaceful and quiet. Except for the occasions such as Sunday afternoons, when people came to burn incense or just stroll around, few people could be seen walking around. The monks also rarely appeared. They had regular daily routines and spent most of their time on the hill behind the temple.

Days there went on slowly and smoothly, almost nothing was changing day after day. Her mood had indeed become much stabler. Years after, and even for the rest of her life, she would often miss the days when she was there, the days flowing slowly like the river in her dream. But when she came to remember that, outside those vermilion color high walls, everything was still changing rapidly, and she had to go through all sorts of irreversible partings, she would still drown in the smothering pain. At those times the image of the temple collapsed so easily as if it were just a temporary illusion of escaping. The little goldfish she raised, the dove that drowned in the white oil barrel, her cousin whom she was unable to see one last time, and so on, and so on. In her life, she always seemed impotent and powerless, as if she had always been standing

quietly in place, and the environment surrounding her kept changing as rapidly as some cinematic effects.

She clearly remembered it. In the distant afternoon when she heard of her cousin's death, she was fishing for goldfish in a park with her grandfather. The little goldfish chased the dropped bait, swarming in clusters, knowing nothing about their fate. The crowd was bustling, most were old people and children. Lives that just started their journey and not yet aware of life, death, and incessant change; lives that had witnessed the sufferings of the world and had almost come to an end. In the summer heat, they showed a harmoniously joyful scene, as if life and death were without boundaries.

She no longer remembered how her grandfather reacted after receiving that call. A week later at the funeral, she saw her aunt and uncle who had almost broken down. They looked so pale, seemingly losing consciousness. They were also unable to finish a real sentence at all, until a relative went to comfort them.

The relative said to them, "It will be all right. We had already invited the most famous abbot for the memorial service. He will definitely be reborn in a good family. And if he is really connected to this family, or if he remembers the good of his parents, maybe in a certain life he will return to this family."

Her aunt and uncle seemed to be brought back from a very distant world by the relative's words. They repeated several times, "We will see each other again. We will see each other again..."

Later when she went home, she asked the adults in her family how they could see her dead cousin again. Her grandmother who had always been a little crazy explained that her elder cousin would become someone else and continue to live in this world. She then asked why the cousin would not come back to their home. Her grandmother replied that her cousin would not remember them anymore. Even if he remembered, it would be too vague for him to figure out who they were, because the cousin will come to this world again as a small baby. And they would see him again if they were deeply connected. She still did not understand why the adults would allow her cousin to become a child of another family and not to return. But she remembered that her cousin would become a child, grow up, and one day in the future, they would meet again.

More than a decade later, in the night shortly after she saw the purple air in the temple, someone really did come. It was after three that the morning. Someone came to gently knock the glass on her window. The weak but abrupt sound flowed insistently. It was not a sound as if people were hitting the glass, but as if some kind of water was dripping on a special kind of metal material.

She opened her eyes to look at the one who was knocking on the window. It turned out to be a male stranger.

She was living on the first floor, and her room had no curtains. Pedestrians could get a direct glimpse of the inside of her room when approaching the building. The man stood straight up right, and looked shorter and weaker than her as if a gust of wind could knock him over. He looked like Jesus who had just been released from the cross, tortured by unimaginable torments.

The man spoke with an accent which did not sound local. With no redundant sentimental rhetoric, he asked her if she had any money to lend him for a train ticket home. She was filled with confusion, but more with timidity. She did not dare to talk much and had to quickly answer that she had no money. The man didn't say anything as he heard it. He paused for a second or two and left silently. Vanishing into the darkness, as if he had never appeared.

Later when she thought about it, she found it weird rather than shocking. The gate of the temple was always closed at night. She had seen the person guarding the door a couple of times. Then where did the man come from? Where would he go if he did not get the money? If the man sneaked in the temple during the day, why did he not come to borrow the money during the day? If his real purpose was the money to return home, then he must know that the girl more or less had some money, but he did not even have the will of asking her once more. Or if he had other purposes, why did he leave silently?

Many years later, even when it approached the end of her life, she would still remember the man when she recalled that time. She would reflect a lot on how she might have impacted the river of eternal life where everything intertwined, by having not lent the man money. But we are never able to know. It might just be a trivial thing, an accident. It might be so unimportant that it could have changed nothing in the river. But we human beings are animals seeking meanings from all kinds of things. Otherwise, when she asked a senior lay-person the next day if this kind of thing had happened often, why did she remember her cousin who had long been forgotten?

The next day when she told the senior lay-person what happened last night, the senior lay-person asked if she was sure that all that she said was real.

And she hesitated.

The senior lay-person then said Amitabha. Slowly after that, she added that such a thing had never happened before, but everything was uncertain and unpredictable, it could always happen. What she said was so ambiguous, as if she was saying that this happened normally. At the end of their conversation, she added a few words: the temple is surrounded by an extreme Yin-Qi(阴气)¹ as a result of all lonely ghosts wandering around. These ghosts wish to go home or reincarnate, so sometimes they might possess living humans. The door eave of each room is covered with the Great Jing-Shen Spell(净身神咒)². You should recite it when you pass it and ask Buddha for repelling bad luck on you.

The girl did not know much of Buddhism at the time. She did not even know that the Great Jing-Shen Spell came from Taoism. But she was confused by the spell-like sutra that she was not able to understand a word. She wondered if reading out something without understanding it would really have any effect. But all of a sudden, from the wandering ghosts hoping to go home, she remembered the dream about rebirth, the purple air last night, and what was said in the long-ago summer - that she and her cousin would someday meet again.

Dizziness blew against her like a gust of hazy wind. How could one find a well justified, scientific reasoning for all these coincidences? Distant and nebulous memories vaguely stuck together, like a huge dislocated net. This moment and that moment were like two points on this net. And because of the folds of the net, different moments overlapped from time to time. The net

¹ Shade

² Purifying the body incantation

captured her and her cousin, her grandfather and everything that had been set apart from her or had not yet. It captured every single being in this world.

More than a decade later, she suddenly met her reincarnated cousin and they hurried apart again.

She suddenly thought that if she could wait again for unknown many years, her grandfather and she might also meet again. Those moments she spent with her cousin and her grandfather were carved in bones and were unveiled by her pining for her grandfather. The feeling of grief came back again and swept away rationality, like a wild storm that would destroy everything. All of a sudden, she wept buckets.

She would go back to the day when her grandfather passed away. If she could. She hoped to ask the most eminent abbot for a solemn memorial service and to beg for a reunion for them. She hoped to meet her grandfather once more, even if he would forget that she was the one he loved the most and cared the most, even if he was not to remember her anymore. With no doubt, she was someone from contemporary society, As we said, she had an outstanding science education background, and correspondingly a rigorous logical reasoning ability. She did not even believe that the Buddha was someone different from ordinary people. Surely, anyone who receives a modern history education should understand that history is more or less exaggerated during its recording and transmission progress. Not to mention a religion that inevitably includes oral history as a part of it. But at that time, a craving for Buddhism to have a set of logic strict enough to prove that living beings were indeed forever reincarnating rose from her deep mind.

Thoughts in an arcane conundrum, she could not fall asleep that night.

She went out for a walk.

There were no street lights in most places in the temple. It was pitch-dark all around. There was only a faint sound made by small insects. She had to walk in the dark. Through the arches, through the corridor, through the lotus pond. She had been gradually hearing the voice of monks reciting sutras. As she walked around the hall, she saw a shining golden light coming out of the hall. The monks were chanting sutras, all eyes and ears. Their voices were neat and consistent as if they were praising an imperishable truth of the universe, and the ultimate salvation of human beings.

She stood there for a while, but could not understand anything. However the rhythm came with a pattern, like some agonistic and unbreakable law. The girl hid in the darkness and peered at the lobby. A distant and mysterious sense of solemnity gradually rose in her heart. Little by little it matured in the monotonously repeating background sound, grew immense, and flew upward, like a huge luminous body, lightly embracing any possible sorrow and pining. The luminous body emitted a mellow and dazzling light, in the air not far away. And she saw herself kneeling to it. The light surrounded her was like water, tender waves, gently stroking her. But she could not even look up to see it because of its great brilliancy. Keeping her head down to look at her shadow cast by the intensive light, she felt that she and others no longer existed. There was only the light, and the waves projected by it. Nothing else is left in the space. Her heart was filled with an impulse of kneeling and crying.

How eager she was to become a loyal Buddhist, to believe in that nonsense with no doubt.

Many years after she had left the temple, she would realize that there should be no reincarnation of a soul in the orthodox teachings of Buddhism. What she called a loyal Buddhist was only someone trying to divert her attention from one attachment to another, in the support of a crooked understanding of Buddhism. She would know that an orthodox school of Buddhism does not even believe in an everlasting soul. Orthodox Buddhism believes that everything is ever-changing, no matter the physical world or the spiritual world. Similarly, behind the idea of “Shengsheng(生生)” in I Ching there is also the idea: “Continued growth and perpetual change is the essence of the way of heaven”. At some point in the future, the girl would find another kind of relief from this impermanence nature of beings, but that would not happen until a long time after. The senior lay-person she met at the time was certainly not a qualified Buddhist. But was it not the senior lay-person’s crooked interpretation of Buddhism that saved the girl from the endless abyss of despair? For someone who for no ways can get rid of her Ātman and attachment, what can save her besides such "superstition"? Like everyone else, it is all a self-hypnotic choice they make under battles of rationality and over-sensitivity. What true Buddhism teachings are is not so important for her, nor her grandmother and aunt, nor most people. People have their own lives in the mundane world. It is impossible for every one of them to spend a lifetime practicing Buddhism and getting rid of their Ātman. All they need is the same thing - self-consolation. This is why most Buddhist lay-people in China are mainly from older generations. Like the old people in the temple where she used to live, most of them have lived poor lives. They have nothing to do before death and nowhere to get emotional support. For that reason, they wanted to find something to believe in, and then they chose to find sustenance for this life in the belief of next life. Some others may want to atone for their crimes committed

when they were young, so as to avoid being reborn as hungry ghosts. They do not need jumping out of the sea of suffering. All the way coming from their lives, they have had their dissatisfaction and struggles ironed out. They have no more complaints. For now, the only thing they want is to find something to do, to accumulate good karma, to be reborn in a good place in the next life.

Time flew by, the girl would eventually become a reputable physicist someday. But even till then she would still keep telling herself that different denominations of Buddhism had different belief systems. In Tibetan Buddhism the reincarnation of an external soul does exist. The system of Tibetan Buddhism states that there are two ways someone can take rebirth. One is the reincarnation of karma, the endless metempsychosis within the sea of suffering. This is the rebirth way for most of us. Whereas for some very few others with great compassion, they are able to choose how they will reincarnate. She also believed that the dream she had of the river formed by countless strains of water was to insinuate that she should believe in Buddhism, in that each strain of the river was exactly the karma of a living being. Similarly, the two ways of reincarnation drawn by that scientist in the dream were to foretell that she would one day find out two possible ways of reincarnation. And so it was a hint that she should believe in Tibetan Buddhism. It was a hint that her beloved ones would really reincarnate, and then return to her side.

All of this was not necessarily related to Buddhism. It was rather herself constantly looking for meanings from seemingly related things and finding plausible theories to support

them. Just like that when she went back to the temple after leaving it for many years, she would find out that the purple air she saw that night was not the “purple air coming from the East”. It was, in fact, the light coming out from the window of an old lady living next door. The old lady sometimes forgot to draw her curtains, and the purple light in her room would thus come out. It was simply because the girl was in semi-consciousness when she woke up that night, and so did not see it clear enough.

At the time when she went back, the lay-person and the volunteer girl she used to talk with had already left. One said that she had already seen through the mundane world and felt that everything was no longer important, so she was returning to the mundane world. The other could no longer stand the gossip about the abbot and her spreading in the temple. But apart from the ones who had passed away and the newcomers, the lay-people were almost the same people she had met years ago. Like the old lady living next door.

The old lady seemed to be around in her seventies or eighties. It was surprising that though the girl had changed so much over the years, she remained almost the same as in the girl’s memory - quiet and small, with a pair of eyes that seemed to be engraved to observe her surroundings. Later, the girl would learn from a friend in the temple that the old lady had been worshipping a Buddha in her room. She went to bed at nine o'clock every day and got up at three o'clock, to recite sutras and to meditate in front of the Buddha statue. She had been doing this for several years and nothing could stop her. Curiosity had then been raised in the girl’s mind. Inside her, there rose an impulse to worship the Buddha statue which had in some sense saved her many years ago. On one midnight, she walked towards the old lady’s room.

Shadows cast by the purple light shook slightly, like waves in a rippled river, similar to the ones she saw in that awakening night. It was like an invitation to her, hugging her, welcoming her home.

In her mind there appeared a Buddha statue with a golden body, smiling in perfect tranquility, generating a mysterious purple light. It was a statue that once convinced her that the man who suddenly appeared at night was her reincarnated cousin, and thus gave her the confidence to believe that people would never be really set apart by death. It was a statue that made the old lady next door forget the endless sea of sufferings and seek from it the escape of the sorrow and pain in the mundane world, and even the fear of death. It was the incarnation of the eternal luminous body she saw when she was still young.

Once again, she felt the impulse to kneel down.

And then standing outside the room, near the window like the man did, she saw in the dimly lit room a small statue of Guanyin, one that could usually be found in wholesale markets.

Like a defective product on a mass production assembly line, the Guanyin statue was painted with heavy colors. Her lips were also painted with such a bright color that even in a dark room like this her fiery red lips could be easily seen. There was a lotus seat under Guanyin. The petals of the lotus seat were made of colored plastics, with small colored bulbs inside. And the light passed through from the multicolored plastic petals. Lights with different colors mixed up, forming a kind of chaotic purple light. It reflected the face of Guanyin, with rich makeup but

smooth facial lines. It reflected the shape of the old lady curling up on the bed, which could barely be recognized as a human figure. It reflected the worn-out magazines used to raise the lotus seat. It passed through the window, went far, and dissolved in the darkness.

After she went back that night, she had another dream. A dream within a dream. She returned to the dream she had many years ago. From the river which was said to be composed of strands of water that would never break, there was suddenly a drop of water splashing on her forehead. But when she opened her eyes in the dream, she found that it was not water from the river, but a drop of water from the leaves of giant taro. In the dream, she went back to the summer when she was seven years old when her grandfather and her cousin, the dove and little goldfish had not left or even appeared in her life.

She was lying on the floor. At that time, the city had not prohibited horn honking. From time to time, short siren sounds came from far away. The summer breeze outside softly blowed in from the opening window. The worn electric fan repaired by her grandfather with tapes was rotating creakily. The drop of water ran down from her forehead, ran into her eyes, and she woke up in a daze.

It was not a dream, but a memory, a reality. Or, is it necessary to distinguish?

Giant taros have another name in China, called “Dripping Water Guanyin”. At the age of seven, she concluded from a repeating schedule as a firm law of the world - as long as she watered the Dipping Water Guanyin on the night before, the next day the water would condense

into a few drops and hang on the tips of the leaves. The water was free in such a way it left the same way it entered the Dripping Water Guanyin, just like the souls that can choose their own ways of reincarnation. She thought that the water was condensed with the Dripping Water Guanyin's vitality, and as a result, it must have some mysterious power. So every night she watered it as part of her daily routine, When she woke up the next morning, the first thing she did would be to collect the water drops and swallow them. This continued until one day she was caught by her grandmother. Her grandmother stopped her with anger, saying that the water must be left there, emerging and perishing by itself. She never explained why, and it remained a mystery after her passing away.

Leaving that home, leaving that city. Running around for almost half a life, she had become a mother from a young girl. Struggling and swaying in all kinds of ignorance, attachment, and aversion, she had once forgotten the giant taro. It was not until in a similar afternoon when she accidentally let a drop of water drip on the forehead of her daughter did she remembered her childhood, and the dream in the temple, and the dream she saw the giant taro in her childhood. Her daughter was taking a snap at that time and was woken up by that drop of water. From her daughter, she saw herself, everyone who had left, and the river she saw in the dream decades ago.

Secretly, she thought that she still believed an ethereal destiny, or karma, that linked everything together. There existed a river, not only in her imagination. It gently embraced everything. Everything in it would always be together, never separated. Everything inside it would forever exist. She believed that her daughter's physical body was composed of particles

coming everywhere in this space, from the very early time when the universe was formed. She also believed that her daughter's spirit was comprised of strands from the river, the river silently shimmering under the eternal luminous body, days and nights, timelessly. The little goldfish, the dove, her cousin, her grandfather, her grandmother, and those whom she could not remember at once, and even herself were all strands in the river. The river of salvation, she thought, the river of self-salvation. She could not prove its existence, and she might never be able to. But she believed so.

Silently in such a summer afternoon, she felt home. Back to her childhood, to every point of her life, back to everyone.