

The Occurrence of Tragedy

She sat motionless on the side of the road. The blanket in front of her was as smooth as silk. The wrinkles on her expressionless face were as deep as the Three Gorges. Laid out on her blanket for all to see was an assortment of well-worn items. It was everything she had, which amounted to no real value. A bamboo-wrapped flask and shave kit. An old indigo-dyed cotton jacket, Zhongshan suit, and boots. There was even a small box of tools and, resting next to it, a slightly ragged child's doll that had likely seen years of attention poured over it. Most people would agree that there was nothing special about what she was selling. That is, apart from the stories they held.

Every now and again, someone would stop to inquire about one of her items but more often than not, the old woman would simply watch as the world went by. Hours or even days could pass yet she never stirred from her spot underneath a line of French phoenix trees. You might think those trees were her respite from a weary life but she needed no such protection. She was content, sitting there watching as commuters hurried by with a sense of urgency each morning and again in the evening, barely noticing the world around them. She was undisturbed by the hordes of scooters that recklessly drove past. She paid no attention to the roar of traffic as it came and went like a cacophony of sound that would inevitably give way to the stillness of life. She simply sat with a stillness of heart that was true to her nature.

And when someone did stop to ask about this or that on her blanket, the old woman would respond with a calmness that bordered on indifference. It was only when someone stayed long enough to listen to one of her stories that she came to life. Stories held within each of her belongings, lying open for all to see. Stories about her life. Stories about him.

• • •

Her recently deceased husband of 61 years lived as you might expect for a man of his time. He grew up in the countryside amongst piles of ash. Public schools wouldn't exist in their area for another ten years or so and anyway, his rural village cared little for the collection of knowledge. Survival was all that mattered. He started working at the age of 12 and quickly rose to be a respected member of his trade. At 16, he discovered wine. Indulgence in this warning tipple quickly established itself as a lifelong passion. In fact, it wouldn't be too much of a stretch to call it one of his great loves. "He worked to drink and he drank to live," someone had said of him.

Once, when he stayed out drinking for three nights straight, someone asked the old (though then young) woman "don't you mind your husband staying out for three nights drinking, like you don't exist?" Without putting down her work, she took a slow, deep breath and said...

The moon doesn't wait for nor does it want the sun's rays to reflect upon its face,

yet it always welcomes the sun when it comes.

Water doesn't wait for nor does it want the moon's pull,

yet it always moves when called.

An orange grows without desire to be eaten and a cicada hops without dreams of flight.

What good is there in my wanting him to be anything other than who he is?

• • •

The pangs of consciousness is a void bequeathed by our ancestors; a void created by thinking that we are different from nature. Knowing this, the old woman strived to avoid the trap of consciousness by living a life that was free from desire. Hers was a simple life, which she kept from the day she was born until the day she died. Like generations before her, it was one of routine. Even when raising a family or burying her parents, routine rested at the centre of everything she did. That might go to explain why she now sits in the same place, day after day, under the French phoenix trees. Rain or shine, there she sits, with her collection of things for sale; each laced with a memory. And whilst the items on her blanket occasionally changed, the blank expression on her face always remains the same. Nothing, it seemed, could distract the old woman from her steadfast nature.

One chilly morning, someone stopped to enquire about her bamboo-wrapped flask. She had bought it for her husband on his 20th birthday. He carried it with him every day; tea in the mornings and yellow wine at night. Wherever he went, its contents kept his heart warm. That flask was perhaps one of his most cherished possessions, next to the ceramic jar that he used to heat his yellow wine each evening. Until the day he died, that flask was never far away. And now, it is to live a new life with someone else.

The idea of giving up physical attachment to her memories of him neither pained nor excited the old woman. That is, after all, the natural order of life. Memories are like objects and she knew she was only acting as custodian of both, until the time came when they would no longer be hers. Action or non-action; nobody can fight the currents of time.

• • •

Three months after they were married, she was pregnant with their first child. She worked day and night, as though nothing had changed, straight up until the week she gave birth. “We can’t afford not to,” she would say but secretly, everyone knew that she liked the rhythm. The strain, however, would prove too much, and the child died three days later.

Someone once asked the old woman, “aren't you sad that your son wasn't meant for this world?” Without so much as looking up from her sewing, she responded...

The moon and the sun cannot help but be in balance

because that's the way it must be.

Rain falls and plants grow

because that's the way it must be.

What happens must always happen and what doesn't can't.

Why should we want anything else?

After that day, her husband disappeared for a week. Drunk or with another woman or perhaps both, it was never said. When he returned home, after a week, he told her that they would rebuild their lives and move forward. He bought some tools, tore down the side of the house, and made plans to extend it. "I'll build you a home worthy of a family," he told her.

A week went by. Then a month. The hole in the side of their house remained as big as the hole in his heart. One afternoon, when he was out drinking and she was out working in the garden, their house was robbed. When asked about it later, all that she said was "what is there to be sad about? They didn't steal the moon." Well, they did steal his favourite ceramic jar that he used to heat his yellow wine in each evening.

She was happy to see those tools go, the day they were sold under the French phoenix trees. You wouldn't have known it from her sombre expression but something had changed inside the old woman. With each sale, a story was relived in her mind. With each sale, a memory departed. Perhaps those memories were passed on from one owner to another. Or maybe, they became lost altogether to the fabric of time.

• • •

Their next child, a daughter, was born a month early. "Weak in body yet strong in heart," they would say of her. Always worried about the little girl's strength, her father would wake her early each morning, still smelling of yellow wine. "You need to exercise," he would say, "if you want to be strong." But that wasn't what she wanted. The little girl knew in her heart that she was

destined for something beyond the life of their rural village. And so it was that two weeks after her 13th birthday, he went to wake her as he always did, smelling of yellow wine, but she was gone. There were, of course, rumours about what happened. Sometimes, people would say that she took a job with a bookmaker in a far-off city. Sometimes, people would say that she ran away with a merchant's son from the next town over. But the truth is nobody knew for certain what happened to the little girl.

Whenever the old woman was asked if she missed her only daughter, she would simply say...

Rooted to the ground, a tree grows.

Rooted to the ground, a corpse decays.

Who are we to say which should happen?

After that, he doubled down on the wine to forget. At the same time, he wouldn't let the old woman give away any of the little girl's things. "She'll come back," he would say. But the little girl never did come back and so it happened that mixed amongst his former possessions, there on the blanket under the French phoenix trees, was a small Bragi dress and matching shoes that were in remarkably good condition for their age. It was of little surprise, then, that they caught the eye of a young mother passing by one morning, after dropping her daughter off at school.

"But won't you miss them," the young mother enquired, after hearing the old woman's story, "if they're your last connection to your daughter?" Without hesitation, the old woman responded...

What good is holding on to memories

when memories are no more real than dreams?

What good is holding on to dreams

when what's real is here and now?

Live in the past and you're a story.

Wait for the future and you've never existed.

• • •

As the days went by, the old woman sold more of her belongings. She recalled and gave away more of her memories. With each passing item, she appeared older yet at the same time, somehow more alive. It was as if removing distractions from her past allowed her to become more present now. In a way, this made sense. Stories are not of this world, after all, but echoes of what has been, what could be, and what never was.

One day, as the rain began to fall high above the French phoenix trees, the old woman looked down at her blanket. All that was left were a pair of teacups. She remembered how, when being confined to bed for three months after developing rheumatic fever, her husband had hired someone to mind the house. This new auntie; she cooked, she cleaned, and she stole at every chance she found. It seemed like all that was left, by the time the old woman recovered, was the stove, a pot for boiling rice, and those teacups.

The rain brought back a pattering of memories. The famine that took the lives of her parents. The illness that would later take the life of her husband. And in between, a series of lives that were and never could be. With the passing of these memories, the old woman had become frail. So much so that she struggled to tell her remaining stories. She undoubtedly knew that they would be her last yet she wasn't sad. "After this," the old woman said, "I can be at one with nature. No longer torn between the past and now."

Shortly before she died, someone asked the old woman if she regretted living a life of such tragedy. The old woman smiled her withered smile and said...

The past can't be changed any more than the future can be lost.

Experiences can't be replaced any more than the seasons can be stopped.

Why dwell on such things?

And then, after a pause that could have been mistaken for the changing of the seasons, she added...

It's easy to think of our hungers and our fears only in doing so,

we find ourselves looking out and not within.

Look within and you'll see

that hunger and fear is no different from satisfaction and delight.

How can any of these be tragic?