

Reverie

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I.

Call me Pony. Gunther, let me tell you a story about life, memories, and identity.

When I was a baby, I was given the prestigious name Duma by my mother, whose parents Du and Ma were from Harbin, China, as a monument to their family names. But since they were my maternal grandparents, Duma became my English name, and my grandpa decided to take it upon himself to name me in Chinese. The product, Tianran, or Tinyin, literally means “Natural”. My father from Hong Kong respected his decision, and quoted my grandpa’s exclamation, “Tianran – the proud son of heaven, born naturally to the Earth!” I envisioned my grandpa proclaiming that in the balcony facing the distant horizon, holding a glass of sorghum baijiu in one hand and a lit cigarette between the fingers of the other. He was the captain, or the chief advisor, of an engineer company during the civil war. He had two children: My beautiful mother, whose name literally means “army”, and her older brother. Her brother gave birth to a daughter and named her “Chen”, after the family name of his wife. Then a few years later, I was born a healthy boy, the only son that my mother’s family could sire because of the one-child policy. So, my mother and my grandparents celebrated my birth and flooded me with love and adoration in every moment as they endeared themselves to me.

I doubt the gods intended for their illustrious scion to be brought down to earth through a C-section procedure. Maybe that made me in a sense special, yet displaced: I was fated to become a different specimen here on Earth.

My early childhood passed quickly, just like yours. Events happen too sporadically to young children. We moved in between spaces, from Guangzhou to Harbin, then Hong Kong and then back to Harbin – when finally, in the fall of – what year was it? – When I was four years old, my family finally settled in a quaint housing district in Hong Kong Island.

You must forgive me for not being able to grasp the expressions of time in your world. Time flows differently where I hail from. It functions more like grains of sand passing through slits of a sieve, like liquids looping in a capillary tube, random like a sudden pseudopod of a cell. It is inconstant and non-mechanical here. But my time is indeed limited, Gunther, so listen very carefully and note down what I say. I am here to tell you the answers you seek, and the things you wanted to know.

We were a family of four. My father was a graphic designer and an artist. On weekdays he ran his company where he designed posters, packaging and the like for other companies. On Saturdays he taught adolescents how to paint at a workshop. On Sundays, because he would like to spend time with his son and teach him how to socialise with other people, he would offer to take me to his company or the workshop to meet his partners and his students. But my grandmother, who had been looking after me since I was born, grew so attached to me that she would not acquiesce my custody to him.

My grandmother stayed at home and took care of my needs and our household duties, and so I spent most of my time at home with my mother and grandmother instead of other children. We had a VCD player and plenty of educational English cartoons that my mother procured from the mainland, which she played after dinner for my entertainment, and formed into a tower that leaned over that cupboard as they were taken out and used. One afternoon when my father and mother were away, my grandmother played me one of the cartoons while she prepared dinner in the kitchen. When it finished playing, I approached the stack of discs and selected another programme to watch. As I watched the disc slowly being absorbed into the video player, and transformed into the brilliant shapes and colours on the screen, I was for a brief moment struck with fascination at the great amount of potential that had manifested within the device. Then I cheered and bounced with glee, and lost my footing as I crashed against the pile with a loud clatter, cutting my leg against the ridge. At that moment, as though it were all part of some divine plan, my father emerged from the doorway, having come home early from work and rushed immediately to my aid. But my grandmother in the kitchen was closer and hurried towards me from the other side of the apartment. Their hands reached and took hold of me at the same moment, as my grandmother brushed my leg to sooth the cut, while my father held my shoulder to help me sit back up. The cut was slightly bleeding, yet it was relatively minor without lasting pain, so my father asked me to sit on the sofa to bandage it. But then, I was too drawn at the cartoon playing on the screen. Seeing this, my grandma scoffed at my father, and bandaged my leg on the ground, while I laughed innocuously at the antics that just transpired on the screen.

When my mother arrived home, she cradled me on her bed. She brought in a bag of confectionery as a present and offered it to me, which I readily accepted. As I dug into the container, she produced a broken half of a cartoon disc, and grinned as she told me how I smashed it into two when I fell. When she left, I peeked out the door and saw my father sweeping the broken pieces into a dustpan. From the wreckage he held up a piece that resembled the one on my hand, and paused for a moment to examine it. When I retreated into the bedroom, its silver surface gleamed.

One of my father's clients was a communal kindergarten founded by a religious charity foundation. This way the kindergarten can declare that all its children possess pure hearts. One blazing afternoon sometime in July or August my mother took me to the kindergarten where we were

greeted by several smiling teachers in the same coral-coloured clothes. They eagerly showed us each room as we passed the copious displays of colourful decorations in the hallways. Their voices were strangely pleasant and uniform, almost melodious, that my mother harmonised with their assimilating whispers. But I paid them no attention regardless as I was not interested in talking, nor was I interested at the citrus tree on the wall created of toilet paper or the cheerful images of small children huddled together in a circle. I abhorred the true purpose of the visit, which I knew was to put me in school, and that meant stripping me off of my inherent powers from birth as though confining me in imaginary shackles. I grimaced and felt myself wasting away as more and more moments elapsed. Nobody noticed how I turned my head away from their view.

But then, I caught from the corner of my eye a frame of desire. Resting on the floor several steps away, cross-legged and sporting a little black dress was a girl whose face of beguiling beauty resembled that of my own mother. I was drawn to her since the very beginning. She did not see me at first, and I carefully studied her straight, black hair, her petite figure and her subtle features, which I recognised in my mother. She sat gracefully, staring off into the distance, her brooding eyes wide and gleaming in the light. Then all of a sudden, I found those eyes locked with mine, and found myself unable to look away, as a sense of powerlessness overwhelmed my senses, and a most curious feeling arose in my stomach. I had come into a vague revelation that I did not quite understand yet at the time, and another epiphany was soon manifesting itself.

When I finally returned to my senses, she was gone. But her image and her gaze lingered in my mind which I could not stop thinking about. I did not tell anybody of my revelation when I returned home. Inside, I slowly developed an eerie eagerness to return to the kindergarten. When I did in a few weeks, I made a substantial discovery. Sue was her name, and a fine name it was indeed. I rejoiced in my heart, knowing that with this, I could afford to know her.

And so there I was, one fine morning during the autumn months, sitting on a stool at the side of a room in the kindergarten, staring at the teacher as she spoke in rhymes and riddles to an audience of twenty other children. She was waving and making gestures as she spoke to engage and attract our attention. She held out her hands at some of the children, and invited them to repeat her words and wave their arms in the air in the same way she did. For some strange reason as I gauged the exchange, I felt inspired to stand up and laugh as if to proclaim my great pleasure and satisfaction at the moment. Never before had I felt such a sudden wave of euphoria pulse through every nerve and muscle of my being, when I picked up the pace and started to flail my arms and stomp my feet and spin around in circles. I roamed the room without a shred of worry in my mind. I turned towards the other children. Then, one by one, my frenzy spread onto them as they too broke into dance and cheer. The atmosphere climaxed. I roamed and raved until, as though I had been possessed and infused with a

command, my body abruptly stopped at a designated location, upon where I willingly dropped into a chair that faced towards the wall. And then, as quickly as they surged, my wildest sensations that infested my mind emptied from me in an instant.

I sat on the stool, still and silent. There, sitting in front of the pristine background, was Sue with her immaculate poise, her brooding eyes piercing mine. Behind me, the room quietly descended into chaos.

You'll be safe with me, her voice issued in my head. *I will protect you, always, forever.*

Her expression was beautiful and alluring.

I love you, Duma.

My heart pounded. Words quivered in my mind. A sensation stirred within me. I held the gaze.

A pang of pain pierced my back and brought me aware of the screeches and hollers that were resounding in the occasion. I turned my head and realised that another boy had fallen onto the ground, over whom loomed the towering figure of the teacher. She was seething with anger. *Tinyin!* She yelled out, and all shred of excitement was purged from the atmosphere. When all finally returned to a calm, and the teacher produced a ruler in her hand and held out my palm, I stole a furtive glance back at Sue on the other side of the room. Her gaze betrayed no emotion, yet somehow, I sensed a lingering wave of great concern in the direction of her countenance. And ever so slightly, a hint of fear.

That did not ever happen to me again. But as I have observed, some things have permanently changed in the aftermath. The teachers were as brightly dressed as ever, yet their smiles no longer retained the resplendence when they first greeted my mother and me. The other children, who I rarely interacted with, were of no more significance to me as I was to them. And one night when I was asleep, my mother screamed. She was not in bed by my side, and she was angry. I heard her loud voice interposed with loud hammering thuds, rattling noises of scattered chopsticks, that of flappy loose slippers, and a sound that I could be certain of – the sound of a compact disc snapping into two. I did not remember any of that when my grandmother awoke me in the morning, as though I had just had a bizarre dream. She led me to the table on which two plates of food were laid, and muttered something as she buttered my toast with a spoon. I ate, and with very little spoken, she then took me to the kindergarten.

That was a dim and windy day. We were brought by the teachers to the gymnasium and arranged to sit in an incomplete circle towards the stained window glass. On the ground, the coloured tapes formed a peculiar symbol. Then, appearing from the door came a pale white lady with rich, dark hair, dressed in sepia clothes and a black jacket. She looked exquisite. She sat herself down at the opening of the circle, revealing the piece of jewellery shaped like an inverted cross that hung around her neck. She turned open the white book in her clasp and started speaking in a foreign accent. When that was finished, she asked each of us of our names.

The boy next to her began. *Donald*, I think, was uttered. *Very good, Donald*, came the woman's voice. *A delightful name, Peter. Thank you, Mary. Excellent, Sue.*

My ears perked. It occurred to me that I did not see Sue that afternoon when we marched into the gymnasium. I examined the swarm of faces and there was no trace of her to be found. Confusion struck me and left me with a sense of emptiness, when I came to realise that the room had fallen oddly quiet, and everybody had their eyes fixed on me.

My name is Duma, I said, slowly.

A foreboding feeling arose in me as the woman smiled. I shuddered. *Very good, Duma*, I anticipated the words leaving her lips. Instead, as I stared at them, a distorted chuckle rang in my ear. In shock from this realisation, I shifted my gaze away from her to the other children, and the lights flickered. In that instant, their expressions had shifted. Laughter emerged on their faces like before as though I was the centre of attention, yet I realised this time I was being seen as a curious creature, a novel entity, and a spectacle of asininity. Panicking, I sought for Sue, but once again her appearance was lost in the mass of looks that seemed to be melding into a single daunting spectre. Their façade then shattered all at once, and my vision faltered. Their malign laughter resonated throughout the room with dread, pestering my being deeper and deeper into a shadowy corner, until I could no longer hold back the collapse of my eyelids that darkened my entire world to black.

I beamed as a birthday cake was slid in front of me by my mother as she sung a mirthful tune in rhythm to the claps of my father. They cheered from my either side as I blew out the candles and made a hopeful wish. But when I turned to witness their merry faces, I was greeted instead with expressions of anger and disappointment as their bright cheers turned into wicked snickering in a cruel twist. Choking, I wiped the slate clean and again from blackness I conjured a bright sunny day with rainbows and trees and happy faces, but the scene immediately dissipated into mist with a sudden, deafening blast of a loud thunderstrike, that reverberated in the surroundings from which the malicious laughter arose. I squeezed my eyes shut and they hurt. My mind went blank and lost track

of time and space. Desperate, I tried to invoke the presence of Sue, but to my great surprise, her straight black hair, her slender figure and brooding eyes found themselves awkwardly distorted and jumbled together in my envisage. It wasn't meant to be this way. Sue wouldn't forsake me. A gentle sensation graced my forehead and the vile mockery subsided. I found myself arising from my mother's lap, my marshy eyes rekindled with the light of day. I wailed. I told my mother everything that had happened. When I looked up at her face in my blurred vision, I caught a glimpse of Sue, who smiled at me and caressed my forehead ever so tenderly. At that moment, I broke down further into tears.

The principal's office which I found myself in soon afterwards was cold and solemn. There, my mother and the principal chanted heatedly in a frantic haze, swinging their arms at each other as if they were engaged in some sort of exorcism. I paid little attention to the adults, and instead found myself staring at the remaining person in the room – Sue. Her piercing gaze betrayed no emotion.

The principal did not look pleased when she spoke something to me. I cannot fathom what she said. But I knew that I reacted instinctively by pointing at Sue before retreating into my mother's shadow. The principal nodded at my act, and said something to Sue as my mother patted my shoulder. I glanced from my hiding spot first at Sue, then at my mother, and became instilled with an inscrutable feeling of nonchalance and calm. Ultimately, it dawned upon me that this was the moment from which onwards the laughter would cease.

For do you see why, Gunther? I'm going to pause my recollections here to allow time for everything to sink in, since this part of the story nears its end. You know what sort of ending we are approaching. No, it wasn't because Sue stopped the heckling, even though I relish in the thought of it and her presence was comforting. No, Gunther, the truth that I have come to realise is that my peers were only laughing because of the natural curiosity that is inherent in us. They were only laughing at a chain of glyphs and sounds that amused them the same way a witty pun or a funny fart did. But because I had been raised on a pedestal, I did not experience the same feelings and insight as everybody else, and all that I felt at that moment was insult and insolence. With Sue's installation as my Guardian, my name no longer evoked the same fascination that enticed the children to rebel against the banality of their own names under the threat of divine judgement and punishment. It was then, still unbeknownst to me, that I had been assimilated into an ordinary individual. It was then that the memories of Sue started fading away in my head, until I could no longer remember what she actually looked like. It was then that kindergarten was over, and I would for the duration of my time in primary school, become simply known as Tinyin.

With time I severed all remaining traces of Sue from me and prepared for primary school. I didn't know it at the time, but my father and mother were divorcing. Years of fracture had reached the core of their union and the irreversible damage had been done. My mother, in a reckless capricious fit, smuggled me back to her family's home in Harbin without a note, leaving behind my father to handle the gargantuan mess she left in the wake. A year later I would be returned to him as the divorce arrangements were finalised. My father took me under his wing and taught me the laws and axioms of the world. Under his guardianship I would, although expectedly, slowly become independent with a heightened sense of judgement and responsibility. He would spark my passion in the language of English through nightly visits to the enchanted bookstore, and only then I would have learnt of D'Artagnan's three musketeer friends and the celebrated French playwright, as well as becoming interested enough in history to read about the Russian revolution. Many years after being Tinyin, I would become known as Washington in high school, and then Guntelsköppi as I entered community college. And after that, Gunther, I am become Pony, the writer, the lyricist, the person you always wanted to be in the future. I know, Gunther, that all of these names carry some sort of significance to you, which I would gladly speak to you with. I even know, Gunther, that your name is but a mispronunciation by your Hispanic lecturer!

You're still young, Gunther, and thus you've got a long way to go ahead of you. Yet, while I could bolster the claim that I am in possession of more experience and knowledge than you, eventually you will come to acquire them. I understand your own doubts and insecurities like the back of my hand, quite literally indeed. I understand that at this moment you are struggling to make sense of all those identities that coalesced into you. I know of your passion for writing and that, deep inside, you are struggling with ways to express yourself. Thus, from an ephemeral space in the future created from that burning passion, I have come to help you. Listen: this is your life story. Jot down my speech word-for-word. Do not worry. Nobody can claim that this story is plagiarised, not even yourself, because nobody can tell you what I can. Don't you see, Gunther? This is what a life story is: a messenger from the future telling you what your life is all about!

Now that you know this, Gunther, my time is almost up. But I promise that you will see me again in the future, and when I do come by, perchance in your dreams, perchance manifesting as a real person, I will tell the rest of your story and everything else that you want to know. But now, if there is a final message for you before I leave, it is that you must seize the moment. Wake up now, Gunther, and start writing. For life, too, is but a reverie, where the future soon becomes the past, and the past a hazy dream...

(To be continued in part II...)