



# Fiction

Group 5

# Mogao Grottoes

*Dulwich College Beijing, Frota, Elisa – 18*

There were too many, reaching as far as his mind could go. Blindingly bright. They did not seem to be randomly placed either but rather alluringly, convincing him to follow their path. Which he did. He trusted the Buddha and his timeless wisdom. Each little statue seemed to chant a different prayer to him, some seemed amused at his childish fascination for their intricate detailing, others seemed annoyed at his meandering walk, as he dedicatedly observed their every crevice. Yet, eventually, he reached the cave. There, bolstered by a variety of colourful pillows, lay another effigy. This one though, seemed to extend to the sky, its proud face looking through a purposefully cut window to what lay beyond the clouds, perhaps a foreign land, that of the gods, where the water itself tastes better than any alcohol reserved for the emperor.

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He looked at the small block of wood nestled in his hand, the red strings attached to it leading into an intricate design of interlaced knots so as to resemble a square, attached by two of its opposing corners. It couldn't possibly have been a message from the Buddha. Slowly he traced the cloud motif he had so carefully chiseled into the block, following all its curls and waves with the tip of his finger. He was used to his overactive imagination taking him places it shouldn't. Yet, there was something about the dream. Just some thing. Something he couldn't quite identify. Something that kept that crowd of Buddhas drifting in front of his thoughts so he couldn't focus on his task.

Confucius in the morning, fields in the evenings. He had already read the book, he knew of its teachings but they never really stuck with him. Perhaps it was his hesitance towards the section about filial piety, "a son's first priority is his father". Yeah, yeah, he knew that. But what if the father and the son had different priorities? What if the son had a different goal in mind? He sighed, maybe he would just go to the fields before his grandmother called everyone in for lunch. He could justify it saying it was harvest season, that they'd need more hands and that as an avid learner of Confucius's readings he could not forget his duty towards his parents. He did not know if he truly wanted to be one of the officials, standing all day in their heavy robes at constant risk of being killed were they to offend the king or any particularly angry farmer. Yes, he would have heaps of money which he would send back to his family as a good son should. But didn't the Buddha refuse all of that in order to achieve enlightenment? A person could be happy off of very little. Frugality was an important value, everyone knew that. The Buddha, Confucius, Taoism, even the gods of the passing merchants from both the silk road and the great wall said that.

Incredulous, he stopped in his tracks. Right in front of him, on the very same path he'd taken every day since he could gather fruits to place in his mother's basket, was the same place he'd been the night before. He had been too focused on the Buddhas to notice the surroundings but he was sure of it. It was here! Well then, that confirmed his suspicions, it had indeed been his imagination...right? It had to be. He couldn't just disappear without an excuse though, and what if there really was nothing up there? He could even get lost, he'd never been up there before. Reluctantly he peeled himself from the path back to his own in direction of the fields. He loved the fields, the sweet smell already reaching him just at the mere thought of them. The ever changing landscape and colours wafting in and out in a random dance. Glossy jujubes tiny crabapples, pear flowers pale like Chang E's smooth skin, bright purple turnips dispersed in a sea of long green blades and red spires from the flowering garlic. He enjoyed his time here and would gladly spend hours collecting peppers until he could not feel his hands anymore if it meant he could spend that time in the garden.

Weeks gone by and everytime he felt compelled to stop in the same spot. What would he get from a cave anyways? Were it to exist in the first place. Long and hard he contemplated whether or not he should take that detour, a short hike just to verify what was down that path. Endlessly torturing himself with the uncertainty until, eventually, he decided it would haunt him forever were he to continue turning a blind eye.

Grabbing his scrolls and a handful of crabapples, throwing the lot into his leather satchel he decided to finally make the journey. As, he approached the path he realized just how beautiful it looked. Perhaps it was just the day

or his excitement but the light streaming through the ginkgo leaves falling on the back of this winding imperial dragon who seemed to want to lead him to the cloud castle of the gods, gave him the confidence that he had made the right choice. Admiring every scale of this grand creature, fallen from the neighbouring trees to complete the scenery, he made his way onwards. No Buddhas were on this path. And yet, the spirits of the mountain seemed so close, leaning in to whisper their secrets into his ear. Where the large Buddha had stood, the hole still remained within the mountain. A cave, that now, despite feeling inexplicably empty, still seemed to welcome him into its arms. Nestling into them, he looked back towards the path and the orchard. Considering the surrounding mountains, he concluded there should be a lake in the proximity of the area.

He brought his satchel closer to himself, took out his calligraphy brushes, ink block and water pouch. On the walls he started drawing a few figures, gods, creatures, shapes, colours. Repeating the moves his parents had always told him to forget. Moves that were reserved for the idle rich trying to pass time. If he were to support his family, he should study, pass the exam and work at the palace, become a scholar and only then could he go back his flowers. Why? Why was he not allowed to be happy? Was this a proof of him being a bad person, for not agreeing with Confucius? What about the gods? Did they not think of art as important either? Surely not, otherwise why would the monks spend as much attention to making temples beautiful?

He woke up with a jolt, how long had he spent here? Quickly he rushed home before his parents presumed him dead somewhere. He'd had a very bad cough for a while and his parents were always worried for his health. That's also why they wanted him within the palace, there, perhaps he could get treated. There, he wouldn't have to do physical work either. But the affairs of the palace always seemed so complex, so unwieldy. People were massacred for greed, corruption, power or whatever other problems these powerful people could have with one another.

With his new excuse, he would climb up that road in order to "study the words of Confucius somewhere where he could think" as he would tell his grandparents every time they saw him walk out in the mornings. Carving out the Buddha from his dreams to protect him, adding details to his paintings, his sculptures...The cave seemed to welcome him every single time like a mother to a crying child. In it he forgot himself, forgot time.

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He walked through the marketplace, fruits, silk, pottery... Objects of all types met here regardless of their origin or purpose. Each grabbing the passer-by's interest in one way or another.

"Hong ah!". He turned around. It was his childhood friend. In the space between them lay a cord of memories, times momentarily forgotten ready to peer up in a moment of solitude, times stubborn as a rock, showing up every time eye contact was made, times holding them together better than any real cord could. With this cord, no one needed to learn loyalty, surely this would be enough. At least this felt more real than any possible rule written down on a manuscript, chanted endlessly by students across the entirety of the middle kingdom.

On that rope lay endless moments spent in the orchard as kids, sneaking juicy persimmons into their mouths, evading the watchful eyes of the adults; moments spent carefully shaping random pieces of wood into funny looking animals which eventually became delicate creatures under his friend's guidance. For it had been from him that he had learnt to lay down his mind into little statuettes, paintings or poetry.

Unlike him, Yixiu had not needed to learn the words of Confucius. His parents loved the Buddha more than anything and from a young age, his mind had been locked on the monastery.

Right then, the very air around them seemed to dance, like it does above a fire, trying not to get burnt. "Did you hear what people have been saying?"

"No", he didn't spend a lot of time in town other than to buy groceries. He wasn't much interested by what people said. They all thought the same. About Confucius, about art, about the government. It just tired him.

"What are they saying?"

“Apparently there is a cave on the mountain. One of the sellers was talking about it. Apparently he was getting really thirsty and tired and he found a cave, it’s exactly on his usual path too. I wonder how they didn’t find it before. Oh yeah, because you know what’s the amazing part? Its entire walls are decorated with the most beautiful paintings! People are already talking about using it for the night”

Was it his cave? Had people found his cave? He’d never really shown his art to anyone before, other than YiXiu. Was it really beautiful? He’d never known. He’d never really thought about it either. He’d just made it for himself.

Borrowing clothes from YiXiu, he decided to go to the mountain to burn some incense for the gods, thanking them for sharing his work with the world. Hopefully no one would question his particular interest for the cave.

He walked up the path he now knew so well, he could already start to see smoke winding up through the branches of the trees, a cloud from the snout of his dragon dancing to itself as it started its journey to join its brothers in the temple of the gods. Carrying smells of wood and various dishes he could not name, the cloud came dancing near his nose, a mischievous spirit welcoming him back into the arms of his mountain.

As a final gift, the cloud shared laughter. Something he did not know the merchants were capable of. Always cold and tired from their long walks, the travelers remained alone, separated from each other merely by the lack of acquaintance. Here, the mountain brought them together to share their struggles, their stories. His mother had opened her arms to more of her children.

Indeed, a group of merchants had already thrown their bamboo mats on the floor and were discussing how lucky they’d been to find it. Surprised that he had found the cave on his own they welcomed him into their circle around the fire and asked him about it. And he told them about the dream, about the solace he had found embraced by the arms of the mountain.

When the travelers left, more came and after that even more. Coming and leaving on their own mission yet brought together by the cave, every person leaving a mark of their passage: the embers from a meal of another land, a story spoken through the lips of a stranger, a manuscript in the now ever growing library, a painting on the wall. For his painting seemed to have taken a life of its own, changing, growing, evolving without his help. People teaching each other how to add to it. Laying down their struggles onto the rock, into the rock. Communicating where words could not. A library of words, of thoughts, of stories.

Daily, he came to the cave, even when his cough worsened, stealing from him even his sleep, even when the lumps started forming under his skin, even when his hearing started to go, when his urine turned red. Until he could no more. Weeks, it had been weeks since that day. When his cave had given him a family who would always be there for him but who he’d only ever really meet once. The weeks away were the worst. Only then did he really feel the pain.

Yet, the merciful Buddha, helped him one last time, taking him back to the cave to do what he had always loved to do, watch the travelers and hear their stories and so he did through the eyes of his animals. This was everything he could want. He watched, as the cave became two, became three, became four. Smiled, when anyone came, inscribing their worries in beautiful shapes into the cave, reminding him of his own trips up the mountain all those years ago.

Embracing them, like the mountain had embraced him during all those years ago. He watched as the last merchants left and when the caves were found again. He watched, watches and smiles.

# Road to the Desert

*ESF King George V School, Zhao, Ran – 16*

The contents of Yang Zhigang's truck: Eight tonnes of lumber, a beat-up stereo blasting Mongolian rock music, and a seventy-year-old ex-tour-guide from Shaanxi History Museum who'd broken out of his nursing home to hitch a free ride to Dunhuang.

"You're telling me I'm harboring a fugitive?" Zhigang demands, swerving to the side of the highway and gaping at the old man in the passenger seat. He turns down the heavy metal and rubs his face, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "You could have said something before I picked you up at that gas station!"

Up close, Mr. Yu looks frailer than Zhigang thought. His back is bowed, and there's a faint quaver to his voice. When he runs his hands through his hair, his fingers shake. "I didn't need to escape," he says pragmatically. "I just walked through the front door. Besides, I left a note on my bed. I'm sure they'll understand."

"What about your family? What if they're worried about you?" Zhigang shakes his head incredulously. "What business do you have in Dunhuang anyways?"

Later, Zhigang will play that moment again and again in his mind—the dusty windows, the slight tremor to Mr. Yu's hands, the steadfast weight of his gaze. He'll wonder what stopped him from turning around and driving the old man straight back to his nursing home in Xi'an. "There's something I need to see," says Yu.

Zhigang scratches his ear and frowns. He's always considered himself a practical man: No questions, no fanciful thinking. He puts his head down, hauls his lumber, and stays out of trouble. But there's something in the old man's voice, something keen and unbound, like if Zhigang dropped him off at the side of the road, he'd walk straight to Dunhuang himself. Later, Zhigang will relieve this encounter again and again in his mind, but at the moment, there's not much going through his head. He looks the old man up and down, turns the stereo back to full volume, and shrugs. "Let's get going then," he says.

The days on the highway run together like streaks of rain, glimmering with yawning skies and distant mountain ranges. Despite his reservations, Zhigang has to admit he doesn't mind the company. As heavy metal blares in the background, Yu regales him with stories of ancient Chinese relics—wooden horses, jade swords, and the Shang dynasty oracle bones he'd led tours on during his time at Shaanxi Museum. Most of all, the man loves the Mogao Grottoes. As the days pass, Zhigang gathers that he's traveling to Dunhuang to see them. Zhigang has heard of the grottoes, of course—everyone has—but he's never been sure why so many tourists flock to Dunhuang just to see a few dusty caves. It's not his problem, he supposes. If they're happy blowing their money, who's he to complain?

As Yu and Zhigang travel west, the trees and hills turn slowly to yellow plains. Zhigang takes Yu to Weihe River, then to his favorite noodle shop in Tianshui, then to the flame-colored mountains of Zhangye, their ribbons of strata like the whorls of oil paint. He doesn't know why—he still has that shipment of lumber to make—but there's something about the old man, the way he nods along to Zhigang's stereo and reminds him to keep warm, the weight of his hand on Zhigang's shoulder. Maybe Zhigang is just lonely.

On the road to Baoji, Yu tells Zhigang about a Daoist monk finding an abandoned temple in the Gobi Desert, its rafters wispy with cobwebs, its pillars half-buried in sand. He spent his days reshelving books, restoring paintings, and sweeping out the sand-filled halls. One day, following the drift of his cigarette smoke, he found a crack in the wall of a shrine. When he tapped on the stone, he found it was hollow.

"What was behind it?" Zhigang asks, intrigued despite himself. "A secret room?"

"Not just a room—an entire cave system. A library of stone. He found piles and piles of scrolls, stacked from floor to ceiling: Tibetan stories, Sanskrit mantras, manuscripts from every corner of the world. And when he held his candle to the walls, murals leapt to life before him: temples and gem-colored birds, bodhi trees wreathing the high ceilings. And in the alcoves, thousands of statues," Yu says. When his voice gets like this, you can't hear the tremor anymore. "Demons, fairies, gods. Some the size of your thumb, some more than thirty meters tall."

Zhigang shakes his head, whistling. If he found a room of treasures in his apartment, he could stop hauling lumber forever.

In Lanzhou, Zhigang stops at a farm to collect a shipment of nuts. That evening, he takes Yu to the night market on Zhengning Road, and they buy a grilled fish and two steaming bowls of milk pudding. Under the lantern lights, Yu tells Zhigang about the Daoist monk and the explorer who'd journeyed from the West in search of the grottoes' secrets. How they ate together by the fire each night and the explorer wheedled, then bribed, then begged for the monk to unlock the grotto doors. When the monk refused, the explorer returned to him with trunks of silver

taels. When the monk raised his voice in desperation, the explorer told him stories of his journey through the Silk Road, of the wind-blasted mountains and wild desert dunes, how the path he'd traced was the same one the legendary monk Xuanzang had traversed on his holy pilgrimage to India. The explorer said that he was Xuanzang's spirit incarnate, that it was the monk's divine duty to bequeath him the sacred tomes. The monk spent a sleepless night beneath the painted eyes of the Buddhas, and in the morning, returned to the explorer's tent. In his hands was a manuscript by Xuanzang.

"The original volume?" Zhigang asks. "The one he wrote during his voyage?"

Yu sighs heavily, spitting a fishbone into the plastic container.

Zhigang shakes his head disbelievingly. "That filthy thief!" He's heard tales of Xuanzang, of course, from his parents and his school teachers, before his father died of lung cancer and he quit school to start laying bricks. But to think that he was a real person, that he laughed and bled and wrote books about his travels. It makes Zhigang's head spin, his ears buzz, like he's just downed a bottle of baijiu. Like he's driven his truck to the top of a mountain and stood there at its summit, gulping in lungfuls of cold midnight air.

At night, Zhigang reclines in the driver's seat and stares at the stars beyond the windshield. Yu is asleep in the small cabin behind him—Zhigang has insisted that the old man have the bed—and his quiet snores reverberate through the truck. It's strange, sharing this small, cramped space with someone else. Ordering two bowls of noodles instead of one. Pulling over to the roadside when the sun floods the grain fields gold, and asking Yu which poem it reminds him of. It's strange, but he thinks he could get used to it.

Qinqiang opera on the stereo today. As much as Zhigang wants to rib the old man for his taste in music, he has to admit that the clamor of woodblocks and string instruments does something for his spirits. A pickup truck swerves in front of them, and Zhigang mutters a string of curses—under his breath, of course, out of respect for the elderly. "And then?" he prompts as he turns onto the highway. "What happens next?"

Yu folds his hands, leaning back into his seat. "The monk spent a blustery night gathering the most valuable manuscripts and sealing them in a cavern, but he couldn't save them all. One by one, explorers from the East and West arrived with their caravans of camels and men. They combed through the scrolls and paintings he'd spent his life protecting, and left with their trunks filled with treasures. They offered the monk money, but what need did he have for money?"

Zhigang looks sideways, waiting for more, but Yu has fallen silent. He gazes out at the snow-capped mountains, their peaks like pale, unfinished brushstrokes against the sky. These days, the simple act of speaking takes more and more breath from him. He's going to catch a cold, Zhigang thinks, with all that wind from those open windows. Zhigang rolls them shut.

At the rest stop, Yu lays two slices of mutton on top of Zhigang's noodles. "You have my mutton," he says. "Look at those strong arms. A young man needs his mutton."

As the trees and buildings grow sparser, Mr. Yu gets quieter and quieter. When Zhigang points out the wild camels, he takes longer to lift his head. His breath comes in a frail rattle now, and when the truck tyres jolt against potholes, his rasping coughs grow more and more pronounced.

When Zhigang asks him, again, whether he wants to see a doctor about it, the old man only waves his hand lightly. "Too late for that, too late for that."

*He's dying, Zhigang realizes. He's dying, and he wants to see the Mogao Grottoes up close before he dies.*

"When we get to the caves," Yu says, "we need to go see the reclining Buddha." Zhigang doesn't know when Yu decided he was coming along with him, but he's not about to complain. He might have lumber to deliver, but he's not letting the old man out of his sight. He looks like a stiff wind would blow him into the next county.

"The reclining Buddha?" Zhigang asks, glancing through his rearview mirror at Yu.

"You'll never forget it. The head alone is three meters long, but his face, there's such a stillness to it. Such a serenity. And I've heard that the view from the terraces is spectacular—the whole desert laid out before you. It's a long walk, but that should be nothing for a young, strong man like you."

"Don't forget about yourself, old man," Zhigang teases. "Aren't we walking there together?"

Yu lets out a laugh, which turns into a rasping cough. Zhigang pats him hard on the back until it subsides.

The next day, when Zhigang tries to rouse the old man for breakfast, his skin is cool. His mouth is parted slightly, his face serene in the morning light. Zhigang sets down the plastic bag of congee and bread, a dull weight settling in his throat. “Old man,” he says quietly. “Wake up, old man.”

Outside, the sky is blue and yawning, the distant mountains like furrows raked into the ground by a god. Zhigang stands in the dry grass beside the highway, the desert air stinging his eyes. He feels formless: a flag in a windless sky, a hot air balloon tethered to nothing.

That night, Zhigang parks his truck in the outskirts of Dunhuang and orders a single bowl of noodles. He eats it at the folding table outside the noodle shop, the store sign casting its flickering light on the empty seat opposite him. The broth is good and hot, the mutton slices swimming in chili sauce and freshly cut spring onions. And suddenly Zhigang is crying. He sets down the chopsticks and buries his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking with the weight of the sobs. *Why didn't you tell me, old man?* he thinks bitterly. *Why didn't you tell me sooner?*

The next day, he drops off the lumber, asks his boss for a leave, and sets off for Dunhuang. He drives alone through the wind-tossed tussocks of grass, lights incense alone at the roadside temples, puts on Qinqiang opera for an audience of one. They were so close. Just one more day and they'd have reached the desert. He has to catch himself, now, making jokes to the empty air, pointing out the ridiculous things the tourists wear and realizing there's no one beside him to point them out to. Strange how easily the companionship had become routine, well-worn as a wagon's path in the dirt road of his days.

At the edge of the dunes, Zhigang parks his truck and takes the eight-dollar shuttle bus into the desert. The sandstone cliffs are just as majestic as Yu described, the sculptures like sleeping giants. He stands under the painted ceilings Yu described, their ridges twined with flowers and bodhi trees.

“Did you know that the world's first printed book was archived in these caves?” he finds himself saying to the family beside him. “It was a copy of the Diamond Sutra, a scripture translated from Sanskrit to Old Chinese.”

Soon, a small crowd has gathered to listen to him speak. His words don't weave the same spell as Yu's stories, but they flow out all the same, dredged out from some deep well inside him he didn't even know was even there. He finds himself smiling. Strange that he should be smiling, at such a time, such a place. But he is. And oh, night is falling. The fading sun wheels over the sleeping Buddhas, casts blue shadows over the flowers and bodhi trees, floods the desert gold. Zhigang's voice rises through the old halls, mingling with the rush of windblown sand. Echoing, echoing, echoing.

# The Eye Of The Storm Is Always Clear

*ESF Sha Tin College, Sin, Jasmine – 17*

There was once a monk who travelled the seven seas in search of rare antiquities. He was known as a man of wealth beyond the gold or dazzling jewels of naive prosperity. For he was known for his wisdom, his poise and his grace. He had a long pointed nose and often dressed in ivory white robes, adorning the precarious planet with his presence. Many looked upon him as an item of envy. His words, heeded like mantras, his movements observed as a holy dance. The monk was an enigmatic entity. Beholden only to himself, yet serving the needs of everybody else. A humble man, sailing across the cerulean skies in a noble pilgrimage: to unearth the shrouded spectres of the skeleton soldiers hidden amongst the brambles of the harmonic heavens. At his journey's end, he deemed it fitting to revive his roots, ceding to the untangled legacies of his various victories. Returning once more, to the beginning and the end of his stories galore.

His eyes crowded with the haughty companion of treasures, striking objects used as bait to hook the fresh baby fish in the jarring raucous seas of commerce. The ecstatic summer breeze reeling and hitching at the line of unsuspecting patrons walking through the gates of strait. The familiar rhythm of timber carts rocketing against the ragged rocky roads as a mischievous growl of crackles and rumbles echoed opposed to the cold press of the coarse pavement floor. It's body bound tightly together by the will of a million thousand threads tugged taut with fathomless trial and tribulation. His ears swiftly blessed with the lyrical tones of might and mass as he followed the steps of an eager merchant approaching... Adorned with jade sage robes, his head held high with a sharp stout nose in his grand march across the old narrow road. The merchant greeted the great monk with a thundering toll: "Welcome! Behold! Believe! For the spectacle before you is this world's only worthwhile wonder! Your unpleasant hunt is over, cast about that hefty anchor! Come, come close, wander and take a gander! What you wish to find is here! For the magical, magnificent and marvellous Silk Road is near!"

Tracing the twists and the turns all along the gluttonous path, he swam in the tumultuous tang of metals, the reverberant ring of bells, the tsk and tuts of traders defending their precious merchandise from the detrimental dangers of a lower price. The monk smiled softly, reminiscing the days where he would spend ceaseless nights haggling over a costly cent. Haggard by the hapless plight of a dollar lost in overbearing anguish, a cemetery for loose change and snatched quarters. Indeed, it was on this wistful winding road that he would find himself in the melancholic umber setting of the Singing Sand Mountains — the place where his journey had all began, and where it would soon end. The remnants of his pretentious past were now only a vestige of his current self; a stranger unaware and unsuspecting of all his latest astounding accomplishments. Standing at the edge of the cosmic crescent moon crater, the monk let go, exhaling a long and blissful sigh at the dramatic scene that played out before his eyes. A destined dawn in the distant horizon dampening the night into a pile of ash and dust, a blood red river pouring into his palms in its honey eyed attempt to corrupt him. But to no avail, for the monk had prevailed easily. His soul searched white as a lily. And so he watched as the small stream shrivelled and shrank, scattering into the small sparse specks of sand. The valiant army of tiny bronze warriors retreat back to their eminent castle, slipping straight through the giant gaps between his fingertips. They shifted and stirred, cowering in the face of their new fearless foe. And with his prominent glory, the colossal mountains seemed to have begun to fold, as if to greet him graciously with a benevolent bow. The monk sat in content at his own self discovery. Relishing in his enchanted reverie, yellow with enlightenment, green with providence, he began to sink into his own fortuitous recreation...

There was once a man who knew only the desolate plains of a boundless barren land. He had a tired droopy nose and often dressed in worn out tattered rags. He was a man of few possessions: a small wooden bowl that never tasted like a fresh meal, a metal flask for a liquid that was never water and a large floppy hat, limp with the high hopes of shielding him from the scorching heat of the star that towered above. In this age, he was known for his drunken songs, weak stomach and sorry state. Many gazed upon him as an item of hatred, a beggar plaguing the virtuous shores of the merchants and visitors of the legendary road weaved together by fabulous silks. Even so, sitting at the foot of the rough and ragged ridge, the man himself was a legend! A myth known as the herald of gloom, for everywhere he went, a grave of business would follow. Indeed, he was the source of dread for the masses. On most days, he would spend his hours rotting in the light of the blazing Sun, minutes stealing wine from passing merchants, days getting beaten into submission for his misdemeanour and seconds waiting for dusk to shake his hand kindly. To congratulate him for getting through the horrid day. He came and went as he pleased, growing accustomed to the merchants who condemned him, fearful of awakening the omnipotent power of the merciless mountain king. They warned him to cease his hideous acts of atrocities, the gods despised the disturbance of their delicate dunes. But he paid no heed to their warnings, nor their stark chants: "Beware the wrath of the deities who dwell deep inside the deadly terrain. They will not be so kind in the face of your insolence." To which his reply was:



“You believe in your gods, and I’ll believe in mine.” Raising the dense jug stuck by his side, a bottle dedicated to cheering their distaste with a grin. He bathed in the sacred Crescent Moon Springs, drinking his poor life away, draining the colour from his forlorn veins. The man tried his very best to drown his endless sorrows in the amber slops and sludge of bad wine. The bitter flavour of grief resonated through his soul as the ghosts of his past continued to trespass and cross his rotten mind. Infested with insects of death and disease, to him, every god was ruthless, every angel: terrifying. Each bottle was a blessing, each sip: a miracle. Guilt was a heavy melody. A wretched song that even the loud drums of the shaken shores crashing into the tawny brown stacks could not ignore. He was a man with nothing left to lose. Fate had stripped him of everything several eons ago...

The day the world fell, the heartbeat of war thumped the ground with a hum. The strings of love had snapped briskly and it had all come crashing down. Scraps of battered corpses banged against the fragments of his once loved home, the boom of an earthquake splitting his soul into two. What was his sin? His wrongdoing? The man often pondered why his life was left in shambles, so imperfect. No wonder. No pulse. No consonance. No cadence. Huffing he smoked, puffing his aspirations, his dead ambitions preached as prayer to the choir of toxic fumes; his loathsome and tiresome addiction. He was left with no hope, no pipe dreams left to envision. Without family, without name, without wealth, without meaning. Indeed, in this space, the man found himself belonging to the plane where gallant gladiators came to grapple. The glorious golden arena where cities came to die — the dead end of the universe where nothing had quite existed yet.

Many a moon drifted by, a company of immortal white knights who took it upon themselves to tear up the sombre stygian skies. Their pale faces glowing brightly with marigold warmth, the soft touch of heavenly hands turning its attention to the moon’s purposeful reanimation. The moon laid in the lake of saved space, a white lotus flower drifting aloft the calm breaths of compassionate clouds. Withering into black, each rotation turned it inwards to bring another placid petal to the ground, stemming the next lune and stalking the man’s acrid agony outwards towards the despondent desert. In the time that ticked by, the man pursued his cycle of self-destruction, gambling his life away. He drank and drank and drank and drank away, filling himself up to the brim with the sour taste of an apocalyptic age. He forced himself to burn and flare in a fever of stray passion as the hours went past tock with time.

It was then that suddenly, on that one fateful evening, enthralled by the vastness of this ocean of woe, the man felt the dune’s grit fly and flurry past him in a rigorous rush as if to protest all his previous claims of dejection. A tenacious tempest had gathered, unlike any he had ever seen. The sands of time spiral into itself to form a chamber of council for Fate to decide their decree on his life hereafter. Their hands clasped together firmly with the power of weathering a vicious cataclysmic flood. The man watched in terror, sprinting in his efforts to wipe off the terrible taste of demise. Dragged into the violent tide of disaster, he was pulled into its currents of suffocating waves in a desperate struggle against the deafening force of final deliverance. Pushing ahead in search of samaritan salvation. He winced. Witnessing the ways of the chaos that had led waste leaving a dismal trail of destruction in its pious proclamations. Twisting him out of place, the greedy gales of the tornado left the man to hang aside the tower of calamity constructed amidst the clump of wreaked havoc. The shadows of his doubts illuminated by the unwavering host that trudged in to replace its relentless predecessor. A brand new torturer! The hanged man’s observation was disturbed by the commotion. Fighting at odds with mother nature, he wrestled in awe of the reverse depiction of doom besides him. The nerves in his body shaken with mayhem as he heard the hint of faint whispers, hushed voices saying: “It is not yet your time.”

The man awoke with aches and sores in his side, knocked into a dreary wet cave, he remarked himself alive! Limping towards the mouth of the grotto, he peeped outside at the turbulent void. There, he saw the mirage of the years, a thousand benevolent gods swaying, whirling, trilling and trolling atop the vague silhouettes of the sunlight’s tan rays that bounced zestfully off the swirling column of sand. His mouth gaped wide open as he stared out in bewilderment. A glimpse of a perpetual paradise beyond the vivid horizon. Doubt had fallen to its knees in defeat. Hope, the executioner who had severed Doubt’s lonely head and slit the organ clean on the whim of predestination. The cleaved limb rolling south the illustrious round hills to join the gregarious gists of bygones long past. Together, they feasted, devouring Doubt decapitated, destroyed and detached.

Nonetheless, the harsh winds of the storm had still yet to settle... Now trapped in his tower, the man stilled. Bewitched by the view of what he thought was an ancient war, a ritual like no other, he watched the gods prance in pleasure, jubilee and gaiety. He stood under shock at the image of their contentment. They were satisfied and delighted with no hint of resentment. His eyes turned emerald green at the lively cinematic scene. Turning slowly he noticed the dim caverns that surrounded him, his saviour, he examined with thankful cries and repletion. The weary

walls of sand encompassed him genuinely like no other. Inside the hermit's shell, radiating an air of solitude and reconciliation, he finally rested his mind in this grotto of reservation. It was empty with no noteworthy distinguishing features, save for its massive pyrrhic expanse. Craters like the hollow cavities and cracks engraved in a human skull where the eyes were supposed to go. Sinking into the shell of his own skin, he continued to listen silently to the sounds of subtle serenity. Ultimately at peace. He stayed. Realising the reality of his sculpted visions, creating and casting the blessed crown of the merciful mountain king. He stood in the tall tower engulfed by the renegade betrayal of treacherous winds, unbound and unchained by the cage of cosseted clay. The man heeded his own intuition, painting the blank canvas with a strongly coveted conviction. He created his own kingdom of instinctive wisdom. Built from mud and dirt, he coloured the clarity bedlam had bestowed upon him. Soon, it became the plane of omniscient existence where he had awakened to find himself reinvented.

As he exited the cave, he carried the present of a new found purpose, one of balance and peace, redefined by his tune of rebirth and resurrection. Setting out on his next voyage, he knew exactly what he needed to do. Heading down the pristine road of destiny, the monk carried himself rightly, free from malediction, guided by a cherished compass of composition.

# Mirror Mirror

*ESF Sha Tin College, Yu, Vivian – 17*

In Shazhou, the bustling city center of Dunhuang, was an antique shop tucked in a corner of the frenetic city's heart. Passers-by typically took little notice of its unassuming storefront. Only visitors of a particular disposition, possessing discerning taste and often wealthy, would push open the double-doors of Yuehai Antiques.

Yuehai Antiques' location in Dunhuang meant that its proximity to the Mogao Grottoes served as a backdrop of intrigue for the antiquities displayed within, even if few items were actually treasures looted from the caves. All manner of curiosities were displayed – scrolls looted from the Library Cave, ceramics once used by eminent figures including emperors, poets, Peking opera singers, even a wooden stool that had supposedly once been graced by the buttocks of Marco Polo when he stopped at Mogao on the Silk Road.

One evening, a young man was keenly examining the wares displayed under the warm lantern-light. He heard a voice from behind him, and turned to see a woman who now stood next to him.

“May I help you?”

Ouyang Yuzhui, the owner of Yuehai Antiques, was a well-known figure in collector's circles. She had inherited the store from her father and prided herself on being an archivist beyond compare.

The young man, dressed in a Western-style overcoat, pushed up his glasses before pointing to the bronze mirror he had been studying prior. He said with a polite smile,

‘I'm rather fascinated by this exquisite counterfeit.’

In a nation whose people relied on commerce and artisanship for their livelihood, this was no statement to be taken lightly. It was a threat to Yuzhui's scrupulous collection of antiquities, for it implied that she had erred. This particular bronze mirror was one of the few artifacts that did hail from the Mogao Grottoes, a fascinating ‘magic mirror’ that behaved as though it were transparent. A British researcher had sold the mirror to her father decades after it had supposedly been taken from Mogao by explorers in the nineteenth century. Her father had haggled relentlessly to acquire the mirror, which he identified as being from the early Yuan period. This young man's accusation was a direct attack on Yuehai Antiques' reputation as connoisseurs of quality and an offense to Yuzhui's father's memory.

“Oh? What makes you so sure it's counterfeit?” challenged the owner.

She knew there was only one way to save face and salvage the esteem of Yuehai Antiques; she must find a way to sell this mirror to the young man.

The mirror was of fine make, with an intricate design of the Eight Legions cast in a wheel design on the back of the circular mirror. A gleaming red jade bead sat in the center, attached to a gold tassel that had been restored by Yuzhui's father.

“Miss, may I ask that you demonstrate the mirror's ‘magic’ for me?” asked the young man.

Yuzhui narrowed her eyes but complied, pulling on a pair of gloves and carefully removing the mirror from the glass case.

The mirror's ‘magic’ was that when a light was shone onto its surface, the decorative patterns on the back of the mirror would be projected out of the reflective side. This phenomenon intrigued scientists for centuries until finally it was discovered that these mirrors were not transparent at all. The designs on the back were cast first, before the stresses of shaping and polishing the mirror caused the thinner parts of the decorative side to bulge outwards on the reflective side. Thus, minute imperfections of the reflective side perfectly matched the patterns on the back and projected the whole image when brightly lit.

Indeed, now that Yuzhui pointed a torch at the mirror, the fierce, penetrating images of the Eight Legions were projected onto the wall; Asura, the three-headed, four-armed demigod, Naga, the half-snake half-human, to name a few. The mirror itself was palm-sized, but the illusion projected was currently magnified to more than a meter wide.

“Herein lies exactly why this mirror is a counterfeit. The Yuan Dynasty to which this mirror is dated was a period of political turmoil. Naturally, every court was infested with spies. During this period such mirrors were often used to convey secret messages. Words were etched into the reflective side so that, along with the back design, messages would be revealed when a light was shone onto them. Because these messages were absent on the back design, no suspicion would be raised. So, such mirrors were generally cheaply made. This tassel,’ he continued, pointing to the red jade bead upon which hung the gold tuft, ‘is a contemporary addition. Jade would have been too valuable for one-use secret message mirrors, no?”

“That is an unfounded generalization,” said Yuzhui. “This mirror contains no secret message – by all accounts, it was owned by nobility, for whom...”

But even as she spoke she realized the answer. She had been about to say that a rich person might have owned a mirror with a jade bead. However, in the Yuan Dynasty, glass mirrors were being imported from the West, and mirrors for daily use by aristocrats who could afford jade would have been fashionable glass ones, not bronze.

“As a historian yourself, I’m sure you realize this discrepancy,” said the young man with a genial smile.

The store-owner stood a little straighter. “This is where you are wrong. While that may have been the case in the capital, this mirror is from the Mogao Grottoes, not the royal court. There is a very good reason there is a tassel on the back.”

“Oh?” said the young man, who held about him an infuriating air of pedantry.

Yuzhui narrowed her eyes and began to tell her story.

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Long ago, a weary explorer wandered the deserts of landlocked Gansu in pursuit of greener pastures, for his village had been struck terribly by drought. His star map had led him only to more bleak dunes, stretching as far as the eye could see. Countless days and nights passed under the scorching sun in biting, cloudless air, and still there was no end in sight to the endless barren dunes.

The explorer’s tent was pocked with holes from sandstorms, and his water flask was empty. Despairing, once night fell, he collapsed into the pale, shifting sand and wept, but he was so dehydrated that no tears came.

When he looked up, piercing through the velvet black of night was a dim yellow light at the base of a distant dune, akin to the sparkle of a gold coin. With every remaining drop of willpower he had left in his trembling limbs, the explorer drew himself up and continued to traverse the sullen sea of ashes. The golden sparkle grew brighter as he drew nearer, pulsing and twinkling. Thoughts of treasure, gold hoards or gemstone vaults, crossed the explorer’s mind, lending him the strength to keep moving.

At last, he reached a dilapidated temple built into the side of a sheer cliff. The golden glow was stronger than ever, seeping through cracked, dust-matted windows and spilling out in sunbursts through rotting wooden walls. When the explorer pushed open the ruined temple doors, there was no treasure to be found. The glow emerged still, from a crack in the side of the temple built into the cliff, illuminating the neglected temple altar. A gentle push revealed that the wooden wall was false, collapsing in a burst of dust and splinters to reveal a gaping cave mouth, into which the explorer stepped, all fatigue forgotten.

As the explorer went deeper, the golden glow only grew stronger, at every corner he turned, every narrow tunnel and damp cavern he traversed. The golden light bathed him in sun-like warmth, forcing him to squint. He was now

convinced that some sort of lucky star awaited him, having fallen to the earth by happenstance to cast its glow across the desert.

Brighter still the golden light grew, such that the explorer could no longer keep his eyes open. Sensing that the source of the light was right around the corner of this next cavern, the explorer produced a bronze mirror from his traveling pack, turned around, and used it to peek around the corner without blinding himself. He continued to walk, facing backwards, using his mirror to follow the light. It had grown so brilliant that the bronze mirror was heating up, the surface warping, forcing the explorer to hold it dangling from the tassel attached to the center to avoid burning his hand.

Upon entering the final cavern, the explorer was greeted by the sight of neither a star nor treasure. As the caves opened up out of the mountains into the desert once again, there sat a magnificent, giant bird, golden from tip to toe, whose feathers glowed in such a dazzling blaze that night had turned into day. The leviathan bird, startled by the explorer, drew its sweeping wings up and, in a gust of wind so forceful that the explorer was pushed backwards, took flight. He watched in awe as the bird soared elegantly into the sky, its glossy train of tail feathers twinkling with a jewel-like glimmer.

As the bird soared higher and higher, its graceful, distinguished silhouette was overtaken by the glow of its plumage, so that it was indistinguishable from a star. The explorer, deeply stirred by the sight he had witnessed, stood still in contemplation for many moments, after the glow had long since faded and the night was once again black.

The giant golden bird had left behind a single golden feather on the floor of the cavern. The explorer picked it up and immediately set to work, fletching the feather into the shaft of an arrow. Stepping outside the cavern exit, he drew his bow with the arrow that bore the golden feather, aimed straight up at the midnight sky, and fired.

The arrow bearing the golden bird's blessing glowed brightly as it arced through the sky, glowing still where it landed in the far, far distance atop a lofty sand-dune. Once more the explorer set out, following the glowing point. He was once again exhausted, but persevered, dragging himself across the arid plains of dust. He was now close to the arrow he had shot, yet saw nothing at the dune it had landed on. With a final desperate effort, he hoisted himself over the last ridge and looked down on what lay beyond.

A lake glimmered with the light of the first rays of dawn across its surface, surrounded by reams of lush grass and dense forest. The oasis stood out beautifully, a gem studded in the inhospitable desert landscape, promising fertile land and bountiful harvests.

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“Imparted upon the explorer was the feeling described in Tao Yuanming's poem, Peach Blossom Spring: ‘After a great many steps, a breathtaking scene appears before one's very eyes,’” finished the shop-owner. “The fable continues that the explorer marked the oasis on his star map, returned to his village, and brought his people there, to what is now known as the Crescent Lake. The caves he passed through were likely early iterations of the Mogao Grottoes.”

“So you see,” she said triumphantly, “In this local fable, the explorer's mirror was struck by light so strong it burned his hand to hold the metal, so he held the tassel. This myth was told in an age where it was common for bronze mirrors to have such beaded tassels.”

The young man adjusted his glasses once again. “Interesting,” he said. “But I raise you this: the Mogao Grottoes were carved into the mountains prior to the proliferation of trade across the Silk Road, along which Buddhism was imported to China in the Han dynasty. Your fable could not have been contemporaneous, because the golden bird in the story is likely—”

“—the Golden-Winged King of Illumination,” finished Yuzhui.

“Who is a mythological figure derived from Garuda, a deity from Buddhist mythology. Your legend seems to tell the origin of civilization around the Mogao Grottoes, before which only religious men and scholars inhabited the caves. While a fine story, I must now tell my own, to explain how this could not be possible.”

“By all means,” said the shop-owner.

“You see, the legend of the Golden-Winged King of Illumination, or Jinchi Dapeng Mingwang, was that it was a magnificent bird of prey who hunted evil dragons. Every day it would eat one dragon-king and five hundred poison-dragons. Eventually, the negative energy and karmic debt it accumulated from the evil it conquered burned it away from the inside, leaving behind only a pure crystal heart.”

“The Peng bird is oft depicted as a demon-turned-Buddhist guardian who sits above the Buddha's throne.” He pointed to the bronze mirror once again, indicating the bird deity Garuda within the Eight Legions.

“But this legend about evil dragons is not native to Dunhuang, because dragons are good creatures in Chinese mythology – auspicious symbols of prosperity.”

Now Yuzhui hummed in consideration. “‘Peng’ is indeed speculated to be a corruption of ‘Feng’, or the phoenix, who is often paired with the dragon in imagery.”

“Is that so? That strengthens my point. Legends of evil dragons, including those that the Golden-Winged King of Illumination hunted, could not have existed in Dunhuang as early as your myth purports. It must have been created much later, making its credibility for customs surrounding bronze mirrors questionable. Unfortunately, folk legends are often such – they are poor temporal indicators.”

“When are legends ever created in the same time period they are told?” challenged Yuzhui. “How would a storyteller sound talking about events that happened last week? Of course the legend is more recent than its setting. We do not examine myths as bastions of factual credibility. I have not proven beyond a shadow of doubt that all mirrors in the Mogao Grottoes had tassels – I have merely presented evidence that there exists precedent for craftsmanship in that style. Your Garuda myth mentioned crystal hearts – here is another story for you, one of my own. I hope that it will illustrate to you the power of stories.”

Yuzhui ducked behind the counter and pulled a mahogany drawer open, where she kept small goods that had been reserved or for other reasons could not be sold. Removing a velvet box, she pulled the wrappings away to reveal a golden filigree hairpin in the buyao style of the Western Han dynasty. Nestled in azure kingfisher feathers lay a sparkling ten-sided diamond that cast iridescent rainbows when hit by light.

Yuzhui held it up for the young man to see. “I sold this to a youth who wished to gift it to his girlfriend. I told him its origin, which was that it had been made in the 60’s as an imitation prop, but was of fine quality nonetheless. Two weeks later, a young woman came into my store with this very hairpin, wishing to sell it to me. What happened was—”

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The bell hanging from the door of Yuehai Antiques rang out.

“Welcome to Yuehai Antiques. Feel free to have a look around.”

“Actually, I’m not here to buy,” said the young woman, a harrowed expression crossing her face. From her pocket she removed a handkerchief, in which was wrapped a golden hairpin with a large diamond in the middle.

“This was given to me by a man who was pursuing me. He said that it belonged to a princess of the Western Han dynasty, and that if we looked into the diamond together, we might see extraordinary things. But when I look into it, I only feel uncomfortable. It’s beautiful, but I feel nothing for that man... and I can’t help but think the rust on the pin looks like blood. He said it was the crystal heart of a phoenix, and that it could... reveal one’s true heart’s desire, or... something. Please, just take it off my hands. I am not concerned about how much money it is worth, though I am sure something like this is priceless.”

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“It was not,” concluded Yuzhui. “The young lady named me a price ten times higher than what I had sold it to her unfortunate suitor for. I had to tell her she had been lied to and that this pin was no priceless artifact. She was even happier to part from it after that.”

Herein was the power of stories. This young man before her seemed not to understand that a counterfeit’s physical value was, in fact, quite similar to that of a genuine artifact it imitated. Factors such as craftsmanship, quality, and material aside, the true worth of relics lay in their backstory, in the tall tales woven around objects that were, at the time of their creation, ordinary. Else if the young man had a mind to do so, he could have ground the worth of all the goods in Yuehai Antiques to dust. Who would buy the string of pearls if they had not been burial goods for a nomadic queen? Who would be interested in the broken guqin if it had not been the instrument on which the original Three Stanzas on Plum Blossoms had been composed? Who would look twice at the tattered scroll if the text within was not in ancient Khotanese?

Long-dead, time-worn legends were revived by oral tradition, elevating the physical husks in which they were held to priceless. Exotic curios were easy and cheap enough to produce, but the true challenge lay in weaving a spurious tale to breathe life into the object.

“I see,” said the young man simply, a small smile playing on his lips. “In that case, please allow me to buy this exquisite fake.”

The shop owner sighed. “After all this, you still think it is fake?”

The young man smiled, and indeed seemed happier than he had been since entering the shop and exchanging stories with Yuzhui.

“Of course. After all, that story I told about mirrors containing secret messages? It was nonsense. Nonsense I just made up.”

# Mind Palace

*ESF West Island School, Eyunni, Gayathri – 16*

*Darkness.*

*I want to run,*

*Far away wherein*

*Solitude.*

*One blessing I may count.*

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I closed my eyes as I walked in. The smell of agarwood hit me almost immediately. I stretched out my hands and felt the chipped and textured walls. I tasted the sweet and dusty air as it filled my lungs. I slowly opened my eyes, and once they had adjusted to the darkness, I looked at the mural in front of me. Fluttering ribbons of blue and red, adorned with simple gold jewellery. *Feitian*. A flying *Apsara*. I turned around to explore the other mural, but quickly stopped myself. I had a task to complete. In this cave I stored my childhood. My earliest moments. I rummaged through the contents trying to find what I was looking for, but to no avail. As I stood in frustration and cursed the inadequacy of my previously devised methods, I heard a low, deep voice. I stopped and listened. There was no source, the voice was everywhere. It was intangible. As the volume grew, so did my fear. Brewing. "Mama?" I called out. The voice stopped. I took one last look before closing my eyes again.

In an instant I felt the warmth of the old but functional electric heater next to my bed. As my shivering slowly died, I fell back into the same irritation I felt before this yet again futile attempt at entering the cave. Why couldn't I remember?

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"I don't need your help." I snatched the book from his hands, underestimating its weight and stumbling slightly. "Ignorance is fickle." He shifted his gaze from me to the window, mirroring the shift in conversation. "Do you want to be left in the dark?"

"It's a new moon today." I said, tightening my grip around the book.

I turned my focus too. The dark sky was empty, except for a small spot of brightness. "Venus," he said, as if on cue. "did you know that she could fly, escape from mortal sight and shift her physical form to other beings?"

"If a mortal being was given these powers..." I paused, turning to face him. "They could escape death."

"How's your mother?" he asked, looking as if he knew the answer but was waiting to see what I would say.

A bird cried in the distance. *A raven*, I thought, placing my hand on the cold window sill. The raven continued to call out, until it seemed as though it had lost its will. Once silence had resumed I turned back to face him, but he was gone and I couldn't say when he had left.

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Most people choose their house as their *locus*. But the obscurity of my childhood created a murky medium to dwell in doubt. I needed to see. The agony of a lost memory blocks all reason to a point of madness. I could not stay here. I had to find an outlet; a clear path where I could organise my thoughts. So I chose the Mogao grottoes or caves. I remember my first visit. At first I found them almost boring. Hours of staring at paintings, carvings and murals. But slowly I started to lose myself. I divulged into the beauty of the area. I felt as though I had received a glimpse of the diversity of cultures that had bestowed their creations here. "This is a special place." my mother told me, as we walked out of the final cave. "It shows us evidence of the evolution of Buddhist art, and thereby, the evolution of Buddhism itself." She looked as if in a trance.

I wasn't really listening. I was preoccupied by something else. "Mama, who's this?" I asked, pointing to a tall statue of which one of the hands was broken.

"Do you remember the statue that was cross-legged in the last cave?" she asked. I nodded. "It's the same person here." she said.

"How come they look different if it's the same person?" I asked, picturing the previous statue.

"The last statue was built at a time when the nomadic Xiongnu people from the north were in control of the area. You can see their artistic influence, as the statue is sitting cross-legged, which was not traditional at the time." She paused to make sure I was listening. "This statue," she continued, pointing to the statue in front of us, "dates to the Tang dynasty. At that time, the statues started to show more characteristics of the Chinese style. The plump faces are full of expression. Do you see that?" She turned to face me now.

I stared in wonder at her vast knowledge. "Who does the statue depict?"

"Maitreya," she answered. "He will come in the future and teach pure Dharma."

*Dharma*. I had heard that word enough times to understand what it meant. The caves were filled with symbols of Dharma. Of righteousness. The caves would be my place. I had made up my mind that day. I started building. I



started with *id* - the primitive and instinctual part which contained hidden memories. Then *superego* - the moral conscience. And finally *ego* - the realistic mediator between the other two.

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*Rays.*  
*Not of hope,*  
*But of satisfaction,*  
*Simplicity,*  
*I start to doubt.*

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“Oolong or Earl Grey?” I asked, dangling the two tea bags in front of his face.  
“You need closure.” he said, taking the Earl Grey from my hand.  
I laughed. “Have you been reading up online about PTSD?” I joked.  
He wore an expression of careful guilt. I shook my head. “How can I have PTSD, when nothing even happened?”  
He shrugged again. “You’re the only person that isn’t convinced.” He looked at me challengingly. “And how come you don’t remember? You never forget anything.”  
That was true. I had, as people would say, an “eidetic memory”. Photographic even. My brain had a one way entry, nothing ever left it. But I had closed that gateway. We both sat in silence for a few minutes while he steeped the Earl Grey, reminiscing about those young years when I would do memory tricks for fun, harnessing the talents of my brain that others only dreamt of possessing. But those days were long gone. It was like I had closed that chapter. I looked up at the old wooden clock hanging solemnly on the wall. I hated those devious hands, which would only move in one direction. *The arrow of time*. In space you could move backwards and anti-clockwise, to undo your actions. In time you couldn’t.  
“Maybe it’s time to visit your caves again.” he whispered.  
I poured myself a cup of tea. I took a sip. The bitter-sweetness of bergamot coated my tongue, the warmth trickling down my throat. I felt the ice that had frozen my mind slowly melt. “Too much sugar.” I said finally, as he always sweetened his tea. “I prefer the Oolong. It’s a tea fit for an empress.”  
“Did the empress have a good memory too?” He wasn’t going to give up.  
I laughed a little and placed my cup on the table, trying not to make a sound as the delicate porcelain touched the fragile glass. “I can’t get into the caves.” I sighed. “I forgot how.”  
This was a lie. I had actually already gone once, but only to one cave for just a few minutes, and I didn’t want to feed his idea about my supposed mental illness.  
“What about the book?” He tilted his head towards the windowsill, where the huge book waited to be opened.  
I shrugged, tugging at the strings of my jacket to tighten the hood. A brisk, icy wind had filled the room. I could hear the rustling of the leaves on the chrysanthemum plants in the balcony. “Why did you plant chrysanthemums?” I asked.  
“I don’t know,” he said unenthusiastically. “they looked nice I guess.”  
I could see he was irritated with the change in topic. “They’re a symbol of death you know.” I looked at him intently.  
He frowned at my statement, but looked anxious for me to answer his previous question. I didn’t really feel bad though. I wasn’t in the mood to have this predictable conversation. “You could grow lilac ones.” I said, walking precariously towards the balcony.  
“Answer my question.” he said, growing increasingly impatient.  
“I don’t know.” I said, picking up a yellow chrysanthemum that had fallen on the floor. “I’m going to visit my mother.” I said finally.  
He frowned but didn’t say anything, and as I left the room, I wondered why he didn’t.

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*How*  
*In this world,*  
*Of imperfections,*  
*Unforgiving.*  
*Can I stand?*

---

I remember the day vividly. I was sitting on the cold, stone floor of our humble living room, reading *Great Expectations*. I had already read it before. I was reading it again not out of interest, but out of boredom. I felt a sense of comfort in the fact that I knew what was going to happen. My mother walked in after coming back from work. It

was strange but she never told me what her job was; only that it required her to visit many houses and work for long hours. "I told you not to sit on the floor," she said, placing her coat on the table, "You'll catch a cold." I rolled my eyes and moved to the sofa. "I got something for you." She removed a large book from her bag and placed it on my lap.

*The Method of Loci.* "A maths book?" I looked at her and frowned. "We learnt about this years ago."

"Not that loci!" she laughed, taking the book and opening it to a page she had bookmarked. "It's a memory technique."

My ears instantly sharpened. I took the book from her hands and scanned the page. "A memory palace?" I asked. My mother nodded. "Might be useful for you." She handed me my sweater from the floor. A pretty pink woollen one that she had knit for me a few years earlier. Knitting was her secret talent. She would spend the weekends knitting hats and sweaters and would give them to all the children in the neighbourhood, taking nothing in return. I took my jacket from her hands reluctantly, and slowly slipped it on, my eyes still on the book.

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I was in cave 158. This was where I kept sensitive information, mainly passwords. This cave was one of the finest *Nirvana* caves at the site, where the *Nirvana Buddha* was the theme of the cave. I observed him carefully. The great prince Siddhartha, who had all the pleasures and riches of life. I pictured the heart shaped leaves, the outward reaching branches and thick trunk of the Bodhi tree, under which he gained enlightenment. The Nirvana Buddha was in a reclining posture, different from the lying posture adopted by the dead of the mundane world, indicating that attaining Nirvana was different from normal death. I wondered at that moment, whether I would attain Nirvana in this life. Would I be able to let go of all worldly desires? Could I detach myself from attachment itself?

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*If  
Mercilessly,  
I am thrown,  
Broken,  
By the devil's command.*

---

"I visited my mother again." I fiddled with a loose string of my sweater.

"You did?" he asked, looking at me with suspicion.

"She gave this to me." I took a small brown paper pouch from my pocket and placed it in his hand, which was cold and stiff. "You need to start wearing gloves."

He smirked and carefully opened the pouch. "Money plant?" he asked, emptying the seeds into his hand.

"*Ficus Religiosa.*" I said.

Ah, he mouthed. "Did your mother physically give this to you?"

I frowned. "She couldn't have figuratively given it to me could she?" I was confused and a little hurt. This phenomenon of doubting my stories of encounters with my mother was occurring more often. "She thought I could do with some enlightenment in my life."

"Enlightenment doesn't come by itself," he said. "You have to gain it."

"I know." I wanted to change the topic. "Have you planted the lilac chrysanthemums yet?"

"Where's the space?" he laughed.

I walked over to the balcony. I felt a sharp coldness as my bare feet left the carpet "Can I take one?"

He shrugged. I chose a pot with white ones. Just as I was about to pick it up, I suddenly felt dizzy. The world swirled around me as a vision entered my mind. "White dress..." I whispered, gasping for air. For a second I thought I would faint, but after a few seconds I stabilised. I had a pit in my stomach as I walked back into the room.

"White dress?" he asked, studying my face as he was looking for something. "Were you at a wedding?"

"A funeral." I said. "White is the colour of death for us. We wear red at weddings."

He seemed to suddenly become more alert. "Whose funeral?"

I shrugged. "I can't remember. But I remember all the other details."

This was true. I remember the silent car ride, my uncle at the wheel. My sister was too young to understand what was happening, so we had to make up some story. But even after racking my brains I couldn't remember who had died.

"Have you been into the caves yet?" he asked carefully, not wanting to tip the boat.

"There's nothing wrong with me." I was angry this time, but deep inside I felt that something was indeed wrong. I never forgot anything, what was different about this?

"I'm going to talk to my mother." I said, picking up my things and walking towards the door. "Maybe she will know."

"You may be surprised," he said cryptically.

In the moment I was too preoccupied to react. But that night it kept haunting me like a stalker that was always lurking in the shadows. Why would I be surprised? What did he know that I didn't?

---

*Tears.*  
*Not of sadness,*  
*Of fatigue,*  
*Abandoned.*  
*My search decays.*

---

I closed my eyes again. Slowly I entered the cave I had been reluctant to enter. Beads of cold sweat appeared on my forehead, my knees shaking slightly as I opened my eyes. I didn't want to come to this cave because I had lost my memory of it. It was as if a chunk of my palace had collapsed and now it was a void. I knew of its existence but not of its contents. Many times in the past I had tried to enter this cave, but something would stop me. As I looked around, I tried to find something that could possibly trigger my memory. The first three walls had paintings that didn't stir any recollection. Just as I was about to lose hope, I turned to the last wall and... there. I looked at the statue in front of me, cross-legged, intelligent and peaceful, and remembered my mother's explanation many years ago. This was the last cave I had visited with my mother. *Maitreya. He will come in the future and teach pure Dharma.* Suddenly the floodgates of my memory opened. This is the cave where I stored everything related to her. But why had I forgotten about it? Suddenly in the shadows I noticed a figure slowly walking towards me. I recognised the long, straight hair, the small stature and the distinctive pointed nose. "Mama?" I stood in confusion. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been here for many years," she said softly. "And you've been visiting me."

I stood in bewilderment. The reality of my world had just disintegrated into chaos. "Do you not remember?" she asked.

The words were already ingrained in my head. "I came here looking for answers."

In that moment it occurred to me that I couldn't have completely forgotten some memories, there was a reason my instinct brought me to this particular cave. A part of me must have held onto the memory. Entropy. The chaos could only increase, not decrease. I realised now that it was always there, just lost in the maze of the caves. But it was broken into fragments that were waiting to be put back together. I looked around and watched as the pieces slowly assembled. *The white dress.* Now I remembered. "Did you plant the fig tree?" my mother asked.

I nodded but was distracted. "How come I don't remember coming here?" I asked in frustration.

"You were living in the moment," my mother answered, her eyes soft and gentle.

It was as if the frustration that radiated from me melted as it touched my mother.

"I was living a lie." I seethed. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"You weren't living a lie," she walked closer to me and placed my hand in hers. "You just hadn't accepted the truth yet."

Hot, angry tears rolled down my face. Slowly, that anger turned into sweet sadness. I held my mother, not wanting to let go. "Maitreya," she said once my tears had seized. "He is here."

"I thought he would come in the future." I said, looking up at the statue.

"These are *your* caves, *your* locus." She put a warm hand on my tear stained cheek. "The higher power exists eternally in our minds."

I must have fallen asleep in my mother's arms. When I woke up I found myself back in the comfort of my bedroom, with a raven feather in my hand.

---

*One.*  
*Element of surprise,*  
*To lighten,*  
*Brighten,*  
*These tedious days.*

---

That evening I visited the memorial hall. I wore the same white dress I had worn twenty years ago. As I knelt down, I closed my eyes. *Samsara.* The cycle of birth, death and rebirth. To free our souls from this cycle we had to attain Nirvana. I spoke to Maitreya that day. He sat in front of me, cross-legged, and suddenly my doubts dissolved.

Instead of white chrysanthemums, I offered fig leaves. My mother had attained Nirvana.

# Cruelty of Curiosity

*ESF West Island School, Lee, Claire – 16*

Ever since she could remember, it became a tradition for her father to tell her stories from his audacious journeys around the world, and, specifically, China. It was his favourite place to visit, he said, one warm summer night, because her history was so rich, with numerous mysteries in the timeline waiting to be solved by someone, waiting for their story to be spread around the world. Her father's favourite hobby, she observed, was to babble to everybody about historical narratives, from topics of their choosing.

At night, by her lamp's soft yellow ambient glow, a rather popular bedtime conversation was about the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang, on the ancient caravan routes of the Silk Road. She remembered his modulated voice, informing her that its initial purpose was to link Buddhist shrines; other stories also mentioned the monk Yuezun's ambition to build a community for many monks. He'd been there, during the early twentieth century, and described, in great detail, about the endless waves of art waiting to be unearthed by the observer's eyes.

There were many artefacts from the grottoes he showed her. A scroll, containing stories from the Jin Dynasty, a window into life during ancient times, and multiple books binded by bamboo strings.

"Babi," she began one night. "Babi" was a nickname she used for her father.

Babi's black eyes perked up.

"Could you show me some pictures of the caves? I want to see for myself."

"Poppy, I know you're eager," he smiled, "but wouldn't it be better to actually see it, in person, where you can touch the rocks and immerse yourself in the environment?"

Although she had no idea what he meant by smelling the "immerse yourself in the environment", ten year old Poppy thought that it was a great idea, and since then, she never asked again.

What intrigued the father and daughter duo was the fact that the shrines were built into caves. However far it was dug would only reveal a small number of secrets the caves held, deep in the core of the rock. The Mogao Grottoes were always deemed a sacred place to connect to the Buddha. Did the original creators dig more tunnels, to house enigmatic secrets galore, to protect knowledge limited to only a few?

Babi had planted a seed for curiosity in Poppy, a seed of everlasting curiosity to see the caves for herself, to truly be able to stand and marvel at the wonder in person.

A touch more than a decade later, with the Jin scroll held tightly in her hand, she found herself straining her neck, staring up at the decorated stone wall in front of her. Mouth agape, she stepped into the cave, finally witnessing this spectacle, this storyboard with her own eyes.

Red, blue, turquoise, and orange paint faintly skimmed over the rough texture of rocks, the very same texture that breathed a breath of life into these figures in the drawing. What were the sculptures of? She recalled babi telling her that the statues were sculpted after the likenesses of the Buddha and Bodhisattva statues; paintings of apsaras and those who commissioned the painting. *What a great honour, she thought, to be inscribed into history with these sacred handiwork that marked the zeitgeist of the flourishing era of worship in the grottoes.*

With each breath that she inhaled through her nose, she was hit with a whiff of nostalgia, thinking about what her father said and finally understanding what babi meant by immersing herself in the tranquil surroundings, living in the now.

It happened to just be her, a single young woman, in the current cave; other rowdy tourists were eagerly clicking away their cameras in the following cave. (It wouldn't be wrong of her to suppose that their flash was on either, from the tour guide's cries each time the camera flash went off.) Poppy could inspect every nook and cranny of the cave: each wall, each sculpture, each lick of paint. She'd consume as much knowledge as she could from her childhood imaginary Neverland. It was a jungle of discoveries waiting for Poppy. Perhaps a secret passageway into fantasyland that would transport her into the past? Ha. Never.

But still, there was a sliver of hope in her heart, residual from her childhood dreams, and soon, she found herself narrowing her eyes and inspecting the mural not just for knowledge this time, but for traces of peculiar markings. Her fingers brushed the rugged walls as she continued following the outline of the room; perhaps she should stop, her eyes were drying up from peeling wide open in the search, until, she suddenly felt a small gap in the wall. A gap so miniscule that she almost missed it.

No more than a centimetre thick, it was an outline of a rectangle, shaped like a door, until she realised it *was* a door. Behind the sculpture of the Buddha. Camouflaged in the midst of the busy painting, hidden in the outline of an apsara's arm. Her fellow tourists' gapes and cries of amazement ceased: it was only her heavy breathing, and her heartbeat that burst in her ears like a drum, slowly ascending in a crescendo.

*What is this?* Poppy asked herself, as she drew back delicate fingers. A new historical discovery? Something *babi* never had the chance to experience? She tried peering into the dark crack. Nothing, obviously. *Maybe I need to push it.*

And so she did. With a doubt lurking at the back of her mind, preparing her for failure, she rammed her body against the rock as hard as she could, but then, as the wall suddenly gave away, and all she could feel was nothing but the air, she realised that maybe such strength wasn't required on her fall onto hard conglomerate rock.

Immediately a sharp pain screamed from her kneecap, and she felt a sticky sensation trail down her legs. Hissing, she sat down and nursed the wound, and looked to go back, but it was only a wall, as if it innocently a dark hallway, occasionally lit up by pockets of light from sunlight peeking through small square holes.

She was trapped.

Panic boiled in her chest as her eyes widened, her heart raced faster than ever before; the walls began to close into her vision; she began to regret her curiosity, her actions, even her decision to come to the grottoes, she was going to die, and this would be the last thing she saw. A narrow hallway, hollowed out with empty bookshelves, with windows-

Windows. That was it, she could crawl through the windows!

Her legs scrambled to shove her body through it, before she realised her face barely managed to fit through, let alone her obnoxiously bulky backpack and the scroll in one hand. Hit by warm rays of sunshine and crisp air, she witnessed a temporary moment of peace before she realised it was an arduous slope down the mountain. She released a shriek.

"Come down, that won't do you any good." a voice echoed around the walls.

Poppy turned. In the shadows, a smiling young man in a white robe stood before her. What she thought was odd were his glistening pitch black eyes, eyes so burnished that they almost appeared grey, or even white. For some reason, Poppy felt her body relax, and her scepticism fade.

"It's been a while since I've had a visitor," he started walking down the hallway, with a craned neck to talk to her.

"What is this place?" She asked, as she carefully slid the scroll into her bag.

"Neither here nor there."

"I know it's the Mogao Grottoes," she followed him. Why was she following this stranger?

The silky voice, the twinkling eyes, the way his walk made it look suspiciously like he was gliding across the floor, the tall stance... he looked like a leader, a trustworthy one. But.

*Cucullus non facit monachum.* Latin. "The cowl doesn't make a monk."

"So that's what they call it now?" A light formed at the end of the path, and greenery peeked from behind the curve they were turning.

“Not to be rude, but who are you?”

“Zun. And you are?” his eyes drifted to inspect her face.

“Poppy, Poppy Wang.”

“Ah. I see. Pleasure to meet you, Poppy. Perhaps you’ll be able to find shelter here, for a while.”

He stepped aside into the shade once more.

“Here” was a thrilling view, perhaps in the heart of the collection of rocks; a towering cave, held captive under the glare of the sunlight, the cave so monstrous in height that the tip was reduced to a small dot as she looked up. Birds chirped in harmony to the roar of the waterfall that battled against the conglomerate rocks as sheets of water ceaselessly plunged from the heights. Ecosystems of lush vegetation and animals alike lived in tranquillity as this hidden utopia blossomed.

She smiled under the kaleidoscope effect from the shadow of the bodhi tree, brushing across each fig with her index finger, and inhaling the sweet, fruity smell, and when she pivoted on her heel, she nearly smashed her face into Zun’s. With a hitched breath, she sprung back, and narrowed her eyes at Zun’s blank eyes.

All traces of glimmer and light were gone. Mist from the waterfall insidiously weaved into the atmosphere and slowly clouded over anything two metres away from Poppy— it was just her and Zun in this cloud of mist.

He stood oddly still. Staring at her, but not processing her existence. Mouth agape, but sound diminished. Washes of grey slowly swam through the impotent white, and his skin turned a ghastly pallid shade, highlighting the skeleton that Poppy was oddly oblivious to in the beginning. The birds halted their songs, the figs’ scent retreated, and chills crept through Poppy, from head to toe. She gripped her backpack strap.

It wasn’t Zun anymore. The lively and airy aura of a young man was long gone; instead, this decrepit creature craned its neck to one side, and blinked as though a great moment of revelation sparked in it. Its remarkably saggy skin was draped in an ashy orange robe that looked far too big for the frame.

“You.”

The whisper reverberated across the hall as Zun’s frail pasty lips barely managed to move to utter the word.

Populous streaks of incomplete thoughts congested Poppy’s mind: should she make a dash for the door? Then an image of the sealed wall popped into her mind, and she thought about hiding somewhere. Behind the waterfall?

But she never had a chance to properly contemplate, nor react. Although he was drifting above the ground, sounds of footsteps slowly echoed towards her, his dead eyes fixated on his target.

“You did this to me,” skeletal hands gestured to a frail, grey body.

“I.”

As each of his steps walked closer, Poppy’s heartbeat grew louder. She tried to move her legs, to run, somewhere, to escape from Zun, but her legs were glued to the floor, and refused to move, and even if they did barely manage to lift a micrometre, it felt like they weighed a thousand kilograms.

Her only option of freedom from the walking zombie in front of her was to squeeze shut her eyes, but even then, it didn’t block out the thunderous screech.

“If it wasn’t for your grandfather, or your father, the place wouldn’t be like this. The empty bookshelves you saw?”

*Stop, stop it, stop!*

“Your grandfather stole all our knowledge. Our treasures. Raided the area. He wasn’t meant to come here, but he just *had* to nose around, him, his son, and his team of high and mighty archaeologists. I told him to stop. He didn’t.”

“It was a long time ago,” he continued, “but you, as his reckless descendant, should pay his reparation.”

Silence sliced through the air.

*Cucullus non facit monachum.* A creature impersonating a monk.

And suddenly, fueled by fear and adrenaline, Poppy blindly sprinted to nowhere in the fog, feeling her leg muscles scream in pain as they began to tighten from lactic acid, before she saw the outline of a set of narrow staircases carved into the rocks.

One, two, one, two...

A turn. Another turn around the pillar.

*C’mon, don’t stop now.*

She could see the fuzzy bright outline of the sun, just cloaked by clouds. One jump and she’d be out of this mist!

One, two, one, two...

A cold hand tightly grasped her arm and pushed her taut against the wall, slamming the back of her head into the jagged rocks. Poppy grimaced and screwed her eyes shut once more, just so she wouldn’t have to stare into those chilling eyes again.

“Naive girl,” the shrill voice laughed, “your father might have escaped, but I’ll personally see to it that you’ll stay here.”

“Now, stay still, or else I might *accidentally* drop you down this very tall ledge. Gosh, it’s high.”

Dread and resentment towards her father rushed through her body. She blamed his stories that irked her curiosity, the artefacts he showed her, and his encouragement for her to visit the grottoes, to discover mysteries. Was it worth it, to go through this, just to tell her father a story?

*You’re going to die. Do something!*

She screamed for help until her throat ran dry, hoping that someone would hear her.

It cackled again.

“No one will hear you, not with these tunnels anyways.”

*Tunnels. More than one. I can make it.*

“Get,” with all the strength she could muster, she tried to push the bony arm, “*off* me!”

Despite stray pebbles scattering and falling off the dangerously delicate platform, the monster’s mouth twisted into a toothy grin, where Poppy could count every single pointed tooth.

“No,” it pouted, “I’m afraid I can’t, because you and your father, *Miss Wang*, ” he poked her shoulder, “have something very dear to me.”

“I-I- I haven’t got anything that’s yours.” A shaky voice replied.

The creature stood there and pondered for a moment, an opportunity for Poppy to tear its grip off her arm, and continue to dart up the steps, up to a large landing, right under the sunlight gap at the top of the cave.

Wheezing, Poppy thought it to be a moment of victory when the monster was nowhere to be seen, but then a trail of mist began ascending, she immediately positioned herself into a fight stance, tightly curling her fists.

There was no way out now, she knew it. As the creature advanced towards her, she swung her arm at the jaw, causing it to groan and throw its head backwards from the impact. With slanted eyes and arms outstretched, it grabbed onto her shoulders and threw her onto the ground, where the backpack flew onto the floor with a loud *thump*.

The creature pounced onto it, slicing through the air and ripping the bag apart into shreds, as Poppy watched helplessly, trying to overcome the throbbing pain that screamed from her head with each breath she inhaled and exhaled.

Like a champion runner, the creature proudly held up its trophy with a smug smile, it unravelled the scroll, and happily nodded at the stream of words written on each parchment.

The mist slowly began to diffuse into the atmosphere, hiding away behind a series of rocks, and the curtain of clouds shielding the sun high above in the heavens parted. A bold ray of blinding sunlight shone onto the platform, and the creature hummed.

“Well, that wasn’t so difficult, was it? Just a bit of pain in the head. But I must apologise for what I’m about to do.”

Its eyes flickered to shelter of shadow in the murky corner before it flicked back to her, and from that foolish act, a revelation occurred to Poppy: the creature was avoiding sunlight.

In a nonchalant manner, she used her arms to crawl next to the band of light while she waited for its advance onto her, and waited.

*Badump. Badump. Badum-*

Her heartbeat became the seconds hand on a clock, counting down to the moment that would determine her fate.

The split second the creature sliced its dagger-like fingers through the air towards her, Poppy rolled through the territory of light, and cocooned herself into a ball, using her arms to cover her dear head and wait for a piercing, numbing pain to come from the claws.

But she felt nothing. Instead, she heard a cracking roar from the creature, trying to shield itself from the sunlight that placed it in the spotlight of a predicament. Segments of white skin crackled and tore off from the host, like sprinkles of ash, scattering and drifting down to the floor. First its legs crumbled, then its torso, and soon, only a face remained as wide eyes darted in search for Poppy in the midst of the blinding light, and when it couldn’t, it released one final rumble of catharsis, before only the orange robe remained, sat on top of the pile of fragments.

For a moment, the silence was deafening, and Poppy exhaled a breath she didn’t realise she was holding, and her trembling body collapsed from the sitting position she was in. Was this the end to a nightmare? Maybe she was still at home, and her father just finished another one of his tales.

But the clouds gave away and the sunlight graced the cave; birds sang their songs and soft wind brushed Poppy’s skin. Sweet scent of pollen filled the air, a sign to Poppy that this was all too real, and that she fell captive to an illusion of good will.



# Abyss

*Kellett School, Beskhemelnitskaya, Anna – 16*

A low chanting filled the cave. The melodic recitation of Pancasila echoing around the dimly-lit space seemed to charge the air and almost rejuvenate Shen, bringing him out of the trance-like state he was now constantly in.

He coughed, once, twice, and the atmosphere seemed to break and slither apart as the other monks looked at him before continuing the ritual in Pali. He coughed again, now trying to smother his coughing. It did not work. It only seemed to get worse. Bringing a hand to his mouth and silencing himself, Shen abruptly excused himself from the session, staggering away on red-locked and painful feet.

The other monk's eyes followed him.

-

Shen's hands trembled.

"I am sorry, there is really nothing I can do," the village doctor muttered out, not meeting his gaze. "I have seen your illness before and I've tried curing it but nothing ever worked."

"I expected as much." Shen drew his trembling hands to his chest, clasping them together into tight fists. "Is there really nothing? No way to slow it?"

The village doctor only shook his head sadly.

"Is there, at least, a way to alleviate the pain?"

"No, I— I should go," the village doctor said, standing up from his chair picking up his things. He then stilled and looked up at Shen, meeting his eyes. "I am sorry, Shen. I am sorry it has come to this and I am sorry I can't help you, truly."

The doctor then briskly made his way out, not even once looking back.

Shen brought his hands up to wipe the freezing tears that had gathered in his eyes.

"Why me?"

-

Shen couldn't breathe. It was hours later and his coughing had started again; it ripped and tore at his throat and made him spit out dark-red and yellow mucus. He hated it, with all his being. It impacted every part of his life, his days and nights - he could not attend the teachings and rituals like before, scared he would ruin and break them; he could not sleep, waking up each night due to a burning fire that seemed to incinerate and smolder under his flesh.

It hurt to move, to speak and to breathe. He hated it. Whispers seemed to follow him as children ran away at the sight of his now disfigured and discoloured body. Shen did not blame them; he could not bear to look at himself anymore and he thanked his rapidly worsening vision that prevented him from doing that, albeit bitterly.

Shen was not scared of death. He knew he would be reborn and that his soul would find rest at some point or another - he saw his illness as another test or trial before the inevitable Samsara. He prepared himself for his approaching demise, knowing that there was no cure for his illness and that hope was useless. Still, he attended as many rituals and sessions as he could, praying and chanting wholeheartedly each time.

-

It got worse with time. Now, months or days later - he did not know - his vision was mostly gone and he stumbled around on ulcer-ridden feet, trying desperately to cling to his last dredges of normality as he prayed in the caves.

Shen felt his time drawing near. His bones, with every step and twitch, seemed to cry out, sending jolts of pain that seemed to rip apart Shen's heart - he knew that soon he would not be able to move anymore. He was determined though, he wanted to pass away peacefully during a prayer, giving his life willingly for Buddha.

During prayers now, he barely mumbled out Pali, mouth swollen and bitten red. Shen persevered though - he had to be faithful until the end.

-  
It was a cold, spring morning when Shen woke up - if waking up was even the right word - and he knew, somehow, that today was his last. He hobbled slowly towards the caves, leaning on his now ever present cane; he felt no pain though, only a deep relief and a barely hidden fear at the prospect of finally passing.

It took him a long time to get to the ceremonial cave but it did not matter to him and as soon as he got there, he fell into a praying position and started reciting prayers for the dead.

It felt like hours.

He felt his consciousness slowly fade and flicker. His words becoming softer and more mellow until nothing but shallow, ragged breaths remained. Shen's body, once a body of a man in his prime, was now reduced into a trembling, fractured mess of his illness - riddled with pain and agony and the sweet-sour scent of death. A coldness spread through him, starting at the tips of his fingers and toes and slowly slithering up his body and entwining him in icy vines of pure nothingness.

Shen breathed out, slowly, and let himself relax.

There is nothing to be scared of, his slow brain thought, I will find peace.

Breathing out once more, Shen finally fell forward and then, there was nothing.

Just an absolute black that encapsulated all of him.

-  
Nothing.

There was nothing.

Just an unadulterated, stygian abyss.

There was no Shen - just a barely flickering awareness that could not fully perceive anything that was around it. There was peace - a pure and welcome and whole peace that seemed to pervade and suffuse everything around it. Shen, or even, the pneuma he now was, was filled with tranquility and a deep sense of harmony that he had never felt before - it was the purest of feelings and emotions and Shen knew deep down that this was the only thing that he would ever need; all of his trials were worth it. All the suffering and pain he had gone through in his life was worth it.

He had found it.

Just then, a deafening rip seemed to shatter the abyss around him. Cracks, spread over the void, seemed to tear apart the blackness. Shen felt himself be jerked and wrenched in every direction as he saw the bright, brilliant cracks spread all over; seeming to go everywhere, they infected and poisoned and eradicated everything in their path. They flowed and struck and soon, they fully surrounded Shen, leaving nothing but a colourless, chalk-white that seemed to stretch on and on.

There was no peace now, just an all consuming panic that made Shen's whole being tremble and writhe. It was quiet; a grave-dead silence that could not be disturbed.

It shattered.

The white seemed to break and fall apart with a blaring zap akin to a thunderstrike that pulled Shen upwards and he burst through the shattering layer of white. The white shards of oblivion rained down on him, tearing and piercing and impaling Shen's every atom and particle. A ripping, searing pain that seemed to never end surrounded and suffocated him, grasping his throat in its fiery talons.

It tore him apart; splintering him right at his core until there was nothing left that was him, only a gaping, deep fissure. The pain eased then and the white cracks fizzled out and the abyss around Shen suddenly blinked out of existence.

A deep, unimaginable vacuum of space now remained.

A barren galactica.

Shen was floating with no tether or anchor in a crevasse surrounded by universes and galaxies millions and billions of light-years away, completely and inconceivably alone.

Glancing down at his body, Shen froze. A black, pulsating and vaguely humanoid mass was in place of where his limbs and torso should be; tendrils of black smoke and tar slithered and crawled over his body, winding up his arms and legs and waist, tightening and releasing, over and over again.

Lifting up a hand, Shen saw his fingers change shape, becoming longer and sharper before melting like hot candle wax and becoming stubs; they grew in another direction then, and Shen had too many fingers now. The tendrils continued their dance along his hands and he could see his wrist bones widen and pulsate before dissipating and dissolving into a single tendril that kept his hand tied to his body.

“Disgusting,” Shen garbled out in a frenzied voice. “Why?”

Shen was paralyzed, not able to control his body as it quivered and trembled and molded and changed constantly, as if unable to decide on what he now was. He closed his eyes, unable and unwilling to see what was now happening to him. This is all some test - some crazy, fever and illness-ridden dream? There is not a being so cruel as to let one go through this, he thought. This is fake, I just have to endure it - it surely is a trial before Samsara.

Shen opened his eyes and looked up. The stars, far, far away, shined lightly down at him. A brilliant cacophony of colours, of blues, greens, purples and reds and oranges all twirling and revolving around each other and creating ethereal shapes that molded and swiveled and revolved around one another. Constellations, alien and cold, seemed to move and create patterns depicting stories of heroes and beasts long past that all flowed and erased themselves before Shen could fully understand what was depicted. There were comet showers, specks of dust that left trails of starlight as they rushed past Shen at unimaginable speeds. Shen was surrounded by a tenebrous abyss and by shimmering light that seemed to clash and fit together.

It all seemed so close and Shen reached out a hand, as if to grasp a passing comet or asteroid.

He couldn't and the comets rushed past, tauntingly close.

Alone in the deep expanse of space, surrounded by nothing alive for aeons of light years away, Shen felt salty and silent tears run down his face. He wiped them away with a shaking hand, determined to believe that everything around him was just a figment of his dying body's imagination.

-

Time passed.

Millenias and eternities that seemed to stretch on for unfathomable lengths with no end in sight, continued to pass by Shen. Trickling by slowly as the stars moved further away; they still shined just as brightly but their glow seemed harsher and the colour more dull. Shen felt himself be pulled further and further into a deep nothingness and he felt the pressure of the universe slowly start to strangle and crush him. It hurt, but Shen could do nothing about it.

Shen had grown virulent and frightful and had lost any hope of ever returning or finding peace. Truthfully, Shen was terrified of what would happen when he finally reached wherever he was floating; at least now, he had the stars to look at, but he soon felt that they would be gone.

It soon came. Darkness, a Tartarean darkness filled with nothing but empty space.

It was quiet.

Too quiet.

Shen looked down at himself only to see that the dark mass that was his body had stilled, as if waiting for something. Wildly looking around, he could not see or hear anything except for an almost non-existent buzzing static.

Crack!

White cracks seemed to burst through the emptiness, running down on every side and spreading all around him. Shen could not even utter a single yell of protest and fear before a tendril of white impaled him right through the heart and seemed to drag him upwards in its claws; other, smaller, tendrils pierced through his limbs and dragged them apart. Every molecule of Shen seemed to be pulled and molded into something completely different as he was dragged further and further upwards.

The white coils of shimmering, glowing light plunged into Shens eyes and pulled them out of his sockets and there was nothing Shen could do but scream.

Darkness, tainted by the sweet, coppery scent of sanguine blood soon engulfed him.

-

There was birdsong.

It was high-pitched and melodic and warm and beautiful and it surrounded Shen like a warm blanket.

Shen slowly opened his eyes, not fully comprehending as to where he was. He looked around wildly, trying to understand. He was in a lush green forest, filled with all sorts of colours and scents and sounds. It felt ethereal and otherworldly and Shen sprang up in fright.

He shrieked as his legs shattered and he fell forwards, seeming to remold and twist and change behind him, fracturing and breaking and trying to find human shape. Shen froze and looked slowly behind him - his bare legs were covered in misty-black coils of the abyss that glided across his skin.

He let out a bitter laugh then, a laugh stained with pain and fear as he realised that this was no second chance.

Shen was now a twisting, turning part of the void. He was a creature, trapped in human skin that ruptured at the seams, cracking and breaking and unable to contain him. He was a thing of a barren galactica, borne from the pressure of the universe and molded by nothingness into human-like shape - a thing that the gods had given up on and spat out in disgust.

Standing up again, slowly and biting back howls of pain as his legs and feet and bones splintered and cracked under him, Shen took a tentative step on feet that struggled desperately to support him.

The birdsong and the wind stopped and the forest was silent and it was as if time had vanished.

Shen collapsed, unable to bear the pain of standing and dragged himself to a nearby tree. He hoisted himself painfully into a comfortable position and looked up. Through the canopy of thick, green leaves, the cerulean blue of the sky was barely visible; it was cloudless and everything seemed so vibrant.

“Why did you do this?” Shen whispered to the heavens, voice cracked and strained. “Was it just to see me suffer? Haven’t I suffered enough?”

No answer came.

-

Shen did not try standing up again. Unwilling to experience pain, he simply continued to stare up at the sky as the days passed. His body soon deteriorated and started to wither, becoming angular and haggard.

Soon, there was rot. It started with his hands turning green and yellow and soon his whole body was covered in colour. He could not move now, bones frozen and locked in place as he watched himself die again.

Flowers sprouted from his limbs, quickly overtaking and filling every cavity and hole that his body had in reds and whites and oranges. They twisted around his bones and limbs and covered them in thick layers of green and brown.

Shen only continued to stare up, resigned to his fate yet determined to condemn the gods until the very end.

Days later, he was nothing more than husk and his consciousness seemed to flicker and waver.

Shortly after, it all turned dark and Shen was plunged into the ice-cold depths of nothingness.

The abyss welcomed him with cupped and gentle hands.

# The Monk and the Mogao Grottoes

*Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Lam, Errin – 17*

*WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE?*

"I had a vision of these caves," The monk laid a hand on the wall. "Of a thousand Buddhas swathed in golden light."

*THERE IS NO BUDDHA HERE.*

"There is not." Said the monk thoughtfully. "But there could be."

~

The monk's name was Yue Zun. *Yue* meant joy, and *Zun* meant nobility, and the cave had never seen a human like him.

The travellers that passed through were few and far between. The cave gave them the shelter they sought, tucking them into its nooks, standing resolutely against the lashing winds and the seething sands. Because what was a passing storm? It had calmly watched seas rise and skies fall and the land freeze over and burn anew, and it was unscathed but for the slow weathering away of the stone. A thousand years and more it had stood, patiently allowing the wind to scrape and scratch and slice with tiny grains of sand that threw themselves over and over against the rock, steadily hollowing it out.

The cave did not mind. That was nature.

Humans did not stay long. Most simply wanted a shelter for the night, and the cave did not fault them for that. It understood the primal, animalistic instinct for survival. It was practical.

Yue Zun's decision to stay was not.

He was a devout Buddhist. Over his yellow *zhiduo*, which pooled on the ground now as he knelt, he wore a dark *kesa* that wrapped around his left shoulder. A string of wooden *mala* beads was looped around his wrist.

The cave did not expect him to be there when the sun warmed the stone the next morning. But he was awake at first light, and already moving with purpose.

*WHAT ARE YOU DOING?*

"I shall make this a place of worship. This is a beautiful place, and there is beauty in faith." The monk was mixing water into dry dyes. "Have faith, friend."

The cave did not move, but the sands shifted in its wake, grains swirling gently on the ground. It did not consider itself a beautiful place; it was but a splotch of slate grey against a dull, barren landscape. It understood the state of existing. It understood the real, the material, the tangible. It did not understand faith.

*GO HOME, CHILD. THERE IS NOTHING FOR YOU HERE.*

"There is always something if one is looking."

*YOU SEEK YOUR GOD. YOU CANNOT FIND A GOD IN AN EMPTY STONE CAVE.*

"My God is anywhere I look for Him," replied Yue Zun. "He is wherever I pass on His teachings."

Hours later the monk stepped back from the wall, setting the brush down. Buddha smiled down now, the paint still wet as the Yue Zun brought his hands together in prayer, the beads of his *mala* slipping between his fingers one by one in a steady rhythm. The cave was soundless save for the gentle scrape of wood over skin.

It was a hundred and eight beads before the monk opened his eyes again. The cave waited, not out of any sense of faith, but respect for the ritual.

*THAT IS BUT A LAYER OF PAINT. IT IS EPHEMERAL. FLEETING. A MERE SANDSTORM WILL EVISCERATE IT.*

“I shall paint more.”

*YOU WILL NOT ALWAYS BE THERE TO PAINT MORE. IN A CENTURY IT WILL CRACK AND PEEL AND FADE.*

“Then I had better find someone to be there.”

~

The next one was Fa Liang. The cave watched in bemused acceptance as the two monks dug shovels into a weaker area of rock, chiselling the stone loose. “Have faith.” Said Yue Zun, wiping sweat from his brow. “There will be many more caves like this one, all in their own time. I have seen it.” He said, and he sounded so sure of himself that a gust of wind swept like laughter through the cave.

Together they dug an entirely new cavern connected to the cave, and set up burning incense. They prayed. They meditated. One taught the other and the next day the roles of teacher and student would be reversed. Days passed, weeks passed, and more people came. They came slowly, like the trickle of a small brook, and Yue Zun took them all in.

The cave had not had this many visitors in a long time.

Yue Zun taught his new students patiently, preaching his values. He spoke of gods and ghosts, of death and reincarnation, and the cave listened. It did not have much else to do. As the number of people grew, the number of paintings on the walls grew. A few grew into dozens, dozens into hundreds. They dug another cavern. And another.

All that sweat, and for what? The water of their life seeped into the dry air, into the parched ground, and the sands shifted and swirled. The cave - caves? - had never seen a God. It had never seen their Buddha. How strong was this belief, to draw people here in the masses, like moths flocking to the light?

Yet they toiled, and for each person that came, the caves gained another painting of their God. Some were beautiful and some were not, but all were sincere. And when hundreds grew into a thousand, the caves lost count. It was surprised so many people had come, that so many people could believe in a shared concept for which it could see no proof.

*WHY DO YOU BELIEVE?*

“That is the secret, I think,” said the monk. “We do not have to see it to believe it. That is what it means to have faith.”

But faith was useless, the caves reflected. Faith was a concept, intangible and untouchable. They erected a God. They praised him and worshipped him. When their skies darkened, they prayed to bequeath false optimism upon themselves. They imagined him in the place of stars, and they liked to think that his light guided them when they were walking blind across the unforgiving desert.

But the pilgrims persisted, and the caves looked upon its inhabitants with a sort of bemused tolerance. The sound of scraping beads became a constant in the low murmur of conversation that drifted contentedly through the caves. They planted crops, the toughest vegetables that could grow in this harsh climate. What resourcefulness, to be able to nurture life even here!

Then a dust storm came and ripped all the plants up by their roots, bashing them against the dusty ground while the pilgrims huddled within the caverns.

“It is alright,” Yue Zun said calmly when the storm was over and people looked to him for guidance. “We can regrow them and plant them in a more sheltered area.” Once he was alone, the caves spoke again.

*WHY DO YOU WANT TO STAY HERE?*

“Look around.” The monk’s voice was placid as he rearranged his *mala* beads. “Look what they have built. Look how they are so willing to rebuild and recover. They stay for faith. So do I.”

And they did rebuild. They rebuilt and expanded, digging more caverns and filling the grey stone walls with light. Several groups of pilgrims left. The caves wondered vaguely with a stirring of sand if they had gone off to seek better prospects than a life pursuing faith, but then monasteries sprung up around them and although Yue Zun never left the caves, he sent pilgrims to visit them.

Scrolls piled up in caverns, the art and literature all made by people worshipping the religion. They made more paintings and inked scriptures onto the walls. Yue Zun wore an easy smile when he taught the ones who wanted to learn. There were people next to him, teaching and learning in tandem. They wrote poems, they made art, they believed, and every day the golden sun rose on a thousand Buddhas.

There came a time, then, when Yue Zun had to leave. Because he was human. He was ephemeral and he was fleeting and so was that very first painting, but his belief was not.

*I THINK I HAVE FAITH, NOW.*

“That is good, old friend.”

# Prints in the Sand

*St. Paul's Convent School, Law, Hong Yin Louisa – 16*

The most impressive thing about humanity is probably the human mind. It thinks, it creates; it forgets, it remembers. It is inspired, and it inspires.

When the human mind was born, the land and ocean learned of their names. The flowers began to speak of the joy of morning, and in autumn, the remembrance of better days. With a shrill wail, the falcon takes flight from its perch beyond the clouds, no longer as one of the many beasts that roamed the earth and sky. A crown woven of myth and song was bestowed upon the bird; it now surveyed its subjects from the air, its shrieks now the law of the land.

Faced with the beauty of the world that they had been placed in, humans were in awe. They could only create so much with their fumbling hands and primitive skills, yet the natural world had already been laid out before them, way before they came to be, constructed with craftsman-like perfection. Sitting around the fire with their kin, they sang and told tales of the love for the land and its creatures.

It was the will of fate that man would be led into the desert, an arid wasteland home to only the most resilient of animals. If one observed this monotonous scenery, it would seem that the desert had been forgotten by the gods, the vibrant colors and variety of creation nowhere to be found. But it was here in which the human mind would truly shine, like a beacon upon a midnight ocean, like a dewdrop in a pool of ink. Bearing a vision of greatness, man would be entrusted to take hold of the strings of fate and weave them into patterns of his own imagination.

And this is where our story begins.

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The gong of a large bronze bell heralds the end of the day.

One particular monk is seated next to the entrance of the mess hall. No walls are present in the hall, allowing him full view of the adjacent courtyard and the night sky above. He pays no heed to the taste of his food (or lack thereof), or the people around him, as his mind wanders into the distance.

The moon is nothing but a sliver of white today. However, the leaves, the tiles upon the roofs, and the pebbles lining the footpaths are all bathed in silvery moonlight.

How merciful the moon is, he thinks. It is not as large and bright as the Sun, and it cannot produce warmth, but it provides for the world to the best of its ability.

Dinner ends shortly, and the monks retreat to their quarters for the night. Even after the candle is extinguished, filling the bedroom with darkness, he is at peace knowing that the moon's rays will reach him wherever he is.

Sleep comes easily to him, but almost as soon as it comes, he comes back to his senses again. Only now, he isn't in his bed, with the sheets over his body. He's walking, in what seems to be a pitch-black tunnel. The surface of the tunnel feels rough and sandy to the touch. It's definitely not a place he's familiar with, and he doubts he's even been here before.

His legs keep carrying him forward for some time, and the outline of his surroundings starts to become clearer. He quickens pace, eager to find out what awaits him at the exit. A bitterly cold gust whips at his face.

And suddenly the darkness is no more, replaced by searing light that could rival the midday sun. No, this is the light of a thousand midday suns, he says to himself, as he squints, his eyes stinging from the shift in brightness. When he lifts his gaze into the heavens, he is struck with a sight that no mortal could ever hope to witness.

For as far as the eye can see, Buddhas, sacred radiance emanating from their forms, are descending from above the clouds. The winds have died down; the night has become completely still. At first, the monk is gripped with fear at the scene, but then it dawns on him that he's observing an event of the holiest nature, so he has nothing to be afraid of.



The Buddhas are wearing a smile that is devoid of any worry, sadness or disturbance, totally detached from the conflicts and hatred which has become ingrained in humankind, yet people long to be free from. They sit in a lotus position, their hands together in meditation.

As the Buddhas descend lower and lower, the distance between them and the monk becomes ever closer. Soon, he, a common mortal amongst many, comes face to face with the all-knowing, all-seeing deity.

It is at that moment at which he feels all the power in the universe flowing through him. At once, all the questions he ever had are answered. He once wondered about the moon, but now he understands that the moon is merely a messenger who sends down the mercy of the gods. Everything he sees, touches, or breathes, is the work of the gods, so mysterious, yet wondrous in their ways.

Lost in his own thoughts, he almost thinks he's in a dream within a dream. He eventually breaks out of his trance, and notices that all the Buddhas are resting on the ground, as if expecting him to do something. Quickly, he takes the lotus position himself and closes his eyes, as he starts to recite the first words of a mantra.

He can't remember finishing the mantra though, because somewhere during the prayer, a bell tolls, and the scene falls away. He wakes in utter disbelief at what he just dreamt of, and the profoundness of it all.

With the memory of the Buddha still fresh in his mind, he mixes paints in a (mortar) and applies them to a blank parchment. It would be surprising if pigments could convey even a little of the Buddha's holiness, if at all, but he puts his heart and soul into every stroke of the brush, and does everything he can to channel the overwhelming emotions that lingered on after his encounter. On the painting he writes, 'Fozu Mogao' (The Insurmountable Buddha).

Everyone who sees the painting is astounded by the attention to detail given in the depiction of the Buddha. How can an amateur artist, who has never produced any noteworthy artwork, paint a piece that encapsulates the divine tranquility of the deity so perfectly?

Visitors begin to flock to the temple from miles afar, all wanting to catch a glimpse of the painting that is said to be 'delivered by the gods themselves'. The painting is displayed as the centerpiece of the prayer hall among prized Buddhist relics, flanked by offerings of fruits and incense, as onlookers gaze upon it in awe.

The monk stands in a crowd with the other monks to lead the faithful in meditation, watching the visitors fawning over his painting with distaste. Something about the grand, yet ostentatious presentation of his painting feels amiss, like a fireworks show under the midday sun. People come to view the painting for the sake of viewing it, acknowledge its beauty, and leave. But what of the uncertainty of not knowing what would come ahead, the utter bewilderment of the thousand Buddhas appearing out of thin air? What of the honor of being specifically chosen by the gods to behold a miracle? In a stroke of irony, the decorations used to complement the painting's beauty drowned out the emotions he hoped to convey through the painting.

Therefore, the monk makes a bold decision. He sells the painting, and uses the funds he earned to finance an expedition to the desert, the place the gods called him to in his dreams.

The process of recreating his dream is a long and arduous one. A good 3 years of excavating the face of a sandstone cliff ensues, followed by another 3 years of bringing his vision to reality on the surface of a rock. Every day is a battle against the elements: the heat, the cold, the lack of food and water. Whenever he is exhausted from attacking the cliff face with a pickaxe, or from countless trials and errors of cave painting, a thought surfaces within his mind—the thought that the gods and the entire world has their eyes on him, watching, challenging him to create the best work he ever could.

After 6 grueling years, the monk finally leaves the desert, his willpower, strength and vision having triumphed over the odds. On his way home, he meets a young artist, and tells him of the cave painting, so the artist sets off.

When the path becomes completely obscured in darkness, he takes out his oil lamp, lights it, and holds it up before him. He almost drops it in shock when he sees the roughly human-sized Buddha smiling down at him from the wall, levitating in a lotus position. A pale blue tint coated the Buddha's golden skin, as if it was bathed in moonlight. But it's the smile that leaves him mesmerized. It's just a painting, a curve drawn on a wall, but it fills him with calmness.

It feels like the deity is with him in this very room, its protective aura abounding, so that no harm at all could come to him.

At that moment, his brain is whirring with ideas of how he could describe the scene in front of him. However, he doesn't think in words. He thinks in color palettes, shapes, curves, facial expressions, backgrounds. He imagines a Buddha with one palm facing outwards, beckoning visitors to come closer, while several lesser deities attend the Buddha, completing the atmosphere of tranquility within a cave.

The young man then sets out on a mission to bring his vision to fruition. 10 years later, travelers would begin to hear of another miraculous Buddha within a cave.

Within these 10 years, others heard of the monk's cave and paid visits. Like the young man, they too were entranced by the Buddha's image, and were reminded of the blessings they had received throughout their lives. Some were sculptors, and carved out statues of the Buddha from slabs of rock. Some were scholars, and left behind their writings within the desert caves. Others were artists, and they sought to create cave paintings that were grander, more meticulously decorated, and more colorful than the earlier ones. All this was done to show their praise for the gods, which was born out of the moment they laid their eyes upon the painting of the moonlit Buddha.

Alone, humans are far from powerful, but with the persistence to last decades, they gain the might to shape the land. Hence, out of the nothingness of the desert, oases of light and life are forged. The caves eventually take on a new name: the Mogao (insurmountable) caves, for the insurmountable amount of holiness that dwells inside them. Pilgrims from China and beyond begin to travel to the caves, seeking a once-in-a-lifetime spiritual experience.

And from the fruits and meat laid out by the pilgrims in worship, a fly is born.

---

The fly knows no god. It is but an insect.

Its nervous system has evolved to ensure the fly survives and continues its lineage, but not for it to appreciate the religious atmosphere it's in. It can detect danger and fly away from it. It can scent food and feed on it. It can identify a fellow fly and mate with it. Soon, a family of flies call the cave their home.

However, the flies' fortune is not infinite. As time passes, fewer and fewer visitors come to the cave to pay their respects and leave behind food, perhaps due to war, disasters, or simply because the location of the cave was not passed down. Guided by instinct, the flies follow wherever the scent of food leads them, and for the first time in decades, they cling to the clothes of a visitor, and exit the cave.

Centuries pass, and the Mogao Caves becomes no more than a secret, one that has been taken with elderly pilgrims to the grave, forgotten by the same species that created them. Some caves have been swallowed by the shifting sand, their entrances no longer accessible. It seems that all traces of the caves have vanished, save for the bloodline of flies that arose within the caves' rocky confines.

---

It's a hectic day at a train station. People are running about with their luggage, trying to make it to their assigned seats before the train departs. No one notices a little fly hitching a ride on top of a suitcase.

The suitcase is stowed away safely in the train compartment, and the doors close. The fly spends the next few hours just being a minor annoyance, hovering around opened snacks and getting swatted away. Little does it know that when the train doors open once again, it's thousands of miles away from its ancestral home of Dunhuang.

It takes a while of flying over an ocean of heads, but at last, a door opens for it, sweeping it into the great outdoors. Well, the *not so great* outdoors, as it soon finds itself being carried into the air by a warm updraft, forcing it to flap its wings incessantly to stay aloft.

The gust pushes it close to a skyscraper. Disoriented by the wind, it keeps gaining altitude with unfaltering wingbeats, desperate to find something to land on. Its salvation takes the form of a wide open window, impossibly high above the ground, but before it can find a place to rest its wings, its senses shut down and it crashes to the floor, its tiny body wrought with fatigue.

---

A buzzing noise at the window alerts a teenage girl, almost dozing off from the summer heat. She turns around, and sees a black dot entering her room through the window. As quickly as it comes, the dot falls onto the floor,

unmoving. Upon closer observation, she's surprised to see that the tiny intruder was in fact, a fly. Insects flying into her room is a rather rare sight, considering that she lives on the 52nd floor.

She can't help but feel a twinge of respect for the bug, as she wraps it up in tissue to dispose of it in the kitchen bin. It had such miniscule wings that looked like they could be crushed with a pinch, yet they carried it to heights not even birds could reach.

Even after she returns to her work, she can't stop her mind from wandering about that fly. *It really is something special*, she thinks. *Maybe it has supernatural powers, like Superman but among bugs. Oh- maybe, it's on a mission to save the insect world, just like what superheroes do in the movies!* As the ideas keep rolling in, she becomes more invested in her world of make-belief. *Let's see, where could the fly have come from... the rainforest? Nah, there's tons of flies in the rainforest. What about somewhere you wouldn't expect flies to live in... I got it, the desert! Flies can't just live on sand though, but- they could live in little caves that shelter them from the elements, but- these caves are getting buried in sand, and the flies had to send a scout to find them a new place to live, and here we are!*

Her mind filled to the brim with inspiration, she takes a piece of scrap paper and starts scribbling on it, the tragic story of a fly who tried and failed to save his family from an impending disaster. Little does she know, as she writes about the tribe of flies and the lavish life they led in the caves, that the fly did in fact act as a messenger of those elusive Mogao grottoes that lay slumbering beneath the sand.

---

Why is it that people create art, knowing that it will one day be forgotten? Why do people devote their life's effort into something that will ultimately be for naught? I believe I may have the answer, and it all lies within the human mind.

The mind is impressive, yes- but it is not without its limitations. There is so much in the universe that eludes us, so much that we may never understand; sometimes, the neurones in our brains throw completely random images into the mix and cook up a storm, so we experience events in our sleep that seem so familiar and so nonsensical to us at the same time! These have one thing in common: we are unable to explain them, not with logic, not with science, but what we can convey are our emotions. People react differently to the unknown- some are cower in fright, whereas some are hopeful that the unexplored reality might be better than our current reality. It is through these unwavering emotions that they are inspired, as little fragments of thought coalesce, until they form one large picture created out of one's own imagination. Inspiration helps the human mind overcome its limitations, because it is a way of interpreting the unknown, to improve upon what is imperfect, to create beauty where there is none. It is all thanks to art that the feelings of one person are spread throughout many, connecting the hearts of people, near and far, past and present.

So, what was it that was left behind in the sand by that monk, thousands of years ago? Was it just a lost piece of unconventional artwork? Was it inspiration, in a tangible form? Or was it a tiny piece of a person's mind, preserved upon rock for eternity?

# Big Adventure in the Huge Caves

*The Methodist Church HK Wesley College, Tse, Won Huen – 18*

“My son, you have to finish my dream of going to the mystic Mogao Caves. You are my last hope.....”

“Dad.....,” I wept, “I promise I won’t fail you!”

My father gave me one last smile, then he closed his eyes and went west. I shed a few more tears and placed my hand on my heart. I knew I had to fulfill his dream since visiting the Mogao Caves was one of the items on his bucket list.

Oops! I nearly forgot to introduce myself! My name is Flint Lockhart, son of Henry Lockhart, the most well-known explorer. I am an archaeologist from the United States of America. Recently I had been to the famous yet mysterious Mogao Caves in Dunhuang accompanied by my two huckleberry friends. I thought that nothing peculiar would happen since I knew they were so old and no mythical being had been spotted before, not until.....

“Up and at em, Lockhart! We have got a lot of exploring to do!” the excited voice of Thaddeus Rich, who was my old classmate when we were in middle school, rang in my ears. I grumbled, it was 15 degrees centigrade outside and I hate getting up on cold mornings because I just can’t imagine turning into a human popsicle. No one would buy human flavoured popsicles, especially when they taste like snot and body odour and other disgusting gunk. I just wanted to be snuggled up in the duvets and keep warm, so I pulled the covers over my head and ignored him.

“He’s not waking up, what should we do?”

“Move along, Thaddeus,” said Camilla Nilsson, my red headed Swedish friend with strong muscles. “Let me handle this.” She grasped firmly onto my duvet with black checkers and yanked it right out of my hands. “Wake up, you sleepyhead!” she hollered.

“Fine,” I groaned sleepily, “I’m up.”

After a delicious breakfast of bacon, toast, black pudding, roasted mushrooms and tomatoes, we packed our stuff and headed towards our destination.

It took almost like three and a half days to get to the Mogao Caves, which was a very long, long time. My feet were sore after all that walking and I am sure that I had a few splinters. I reached for my water bottle to rehydrate myself, but only a single droplet came out. Rats! I should have bought a spare bottle of water when I was at the convenience store.

“Must need water.....I am going to die.....”

“Oh, Flint.....” muttered Camilla, “How many times do I have to tell you that you must be well-prepared?” She took out her rose coloured water bottle out of her backpack and filled my mouth with some water. I felt much better.

“Alright, I’m good now. Let’s get going. You got the camera ready, Camilla?”

“I am always well prepared, Flint,” she replied smugly, “If we had this on camera, we will tell the whole world about our discoveries in the Mogao Caves and we’re going to be famous just like your dad!”

“Guys! We’re finally here!” Thaddeus called out. I looked up and saw the Caves towering above us. Dad, I thought, I did it! I finally made it! Happy tears rolled down my cheek as I pictured my dad smiling at me.

“Flint?” asked Camilla, “Are you alright?”

“Uh.....yeah,” I lied, “I just got some dust in my eyes. Let’s move on, shall we?”

Camilla put the camera on a funny looking headgear and turned it on. We then grabbed a torch each and headed into the caves. I saw that the paintings on the walls were peeling off, yet they still hold a certain amount of beauty. There were the depiction of the avadana story of The Five Hundred Robbers, the travel of Zhang Qian to the West and more. On the other hand, Thaddeus was gazing at the sculpture of a mighty heavenly king and started taking pictures of it.

"Isn't it great, Lockhart?" laughed Thaddeus, "I first thought that the caves were boring and stuffy but look at that! These marvellous statues, exquisite paintings and stuff.....They really could have cost a huge fortune! Sadly, we couldn't take them and sell them to the public....."

"I know, bro. But let's focus on exploring the caves and stop thinking about getting rich since my Grandma Margaret always said that money corrupts the mind."

We went much further into the caves and ended up in the library cave. It stunk up to high heaven that we had to put pegs up our noses. Still, that didn't affect how stunning the manuscripts and relics looked. I saw that most of them are in Chinese, but some of them are written in some languages that I don't know about. So I turned to Thaddeus, who studied translation back when he was in university.

"Thaddeus, do you know what the other ones were written in?"

He grabbed out a huge book of languages and explained them to me, "Look, that one is written in Tibetan, that one's in Sanskrit, the third one is in Sogadian, and the fourth is in.....uh....." He flipped a few pages in his book and soon found out the answer. "Oh my.....," he exclaimed, "The fourth one is written in a little known language known as Khotanese. Not many people could translate it since it's extremely hard to learn."

"Flint, check this out!" said Camilla enthusiastically, "There are loads of other manuscripts here! And they have one thing in common - they all bear the same seal! Could they be written by the same writer?"

"Probably, I'll write that in my notebook."

I was pondering what the relics were about when I heard a booming sound. Thaddeus dropped his book and looked around in horror. His face was pale like a block of mozzarella, which nearly made me slice it up and put it on pizza.

"Lockhart, what was that?" He asked. I said nothing but shrugged and shook my head, in fact my legs were quivering like jelly and I heard that my heart was thumping like a drum. I turned to Camilla, who was observing The Chinese Diamond Sūtra, the oldest known dated printed book in the world.

"Camilla," I whispered, "Did you hear something?"

"Probably," she said apathetically, "I hear everything all the time." I knew that she wasn't paying attention and I sighed. Suddenly, it happened again.

"Shhh! There it is again!"

Camilla heard it this time. I saw that her eyes were wide open and her teeth were chattering. My first thought was that some tomb raiders were coming to steal the precious treasures in the caves, and they might kidnap us and throw us into some place where nobody could find us, but Thaddeus and Camilla said that it might be a vengeful spirit who knew that we were disrupting his sleep, and I thought they were right.

We heard more stomping from the great hall, and when it got closer we all freaked out. I quickly looked around in my backpack to look for something to defend myself with, but what I could come up with was my titanium pick axe. Thaddeus grabbed one of his spare rubber boots and Camilla took out her Swiss Army knife. When the strange figure approached us, we braced ourselves. But it wasn't a tomb raider, and it wasn't a vengeful spirit either. It was a huge, terrifying dragon with green scales, amber coloured eyes and platinum coloured antlers.

"WHAT ARE YOU MEDDLING HUMANS DOING HERE?" it bellowed. Thaddeus completely jumped out of his skin. His face went completely purple with fear and he almost fainted.

"I'm sorry, mighty dragon lord! We didn't mean to disturb you!" cried Camilla frantically while falling down to her knees, "Will you please spare our lives? We're just three archaeologists who are doing some research!" But the dragon didn't seem to calm down. Instead, it opened its jaws, showing its sharp fangs that look like daggers.

"OH GOD!!!" shrieked Thaddeus, "RUN FOR IT!!!"

We got out of the main hall and started running in the narrow and steep corridors, but the dragon was chasing us at cheetah speed. Camilla and I were quick on our feet, but Thaddeus was falling behind. Thaddeus may be smart and muscular, but he was so heavy that he could not run fast. Knowing that he was in danger, I clutched his hand and dragged him so he won't end up being dragon chow.

We ran up the stairs and we had to jump because some of the stairs disappeared mysteriously, leaving only large holes. Then numerous torches were hurled at us, which made us run for our lives. After that, we had to get across a chamber full of giant rats that eat people. I cringed, rats were my Achilles heel. I couldn't help screaming while we were getting through them, and Camilla and Thaddeus had to plug their fingers in their ears.

A few minutes later, we came to a dead end, which was a bad sign. The stomping noises were getting louder and louder and the ground shook like it was a seismic earthquake. I knew that the dragon was approaching us slowly and I saw that disgusting looking saliva was dripping out of its jaw.

"Now I have got you three," it growled, "I shall teach you a lesson about not trespassing into others' homes without permission!"

I knew that we're definitely not going down without a fight, so I grabbed out my pick ax and tried to deliver a blow, but the dragon's scales were so hard that there weren't a scratch on them. Thaddeus tried hitting it with his boot and Camilla tried to stab it with her Swiss army knife but to no avail. We tried attacking it harder, but it didn't work as well. Instead, my pick ax broke into pieces, Thaddeus's boot sole came off and Camilla's knife became blunt.

"Hm," said the dragon with a menacing grin on its face, "You have given me a nice massage. Now it's time for my supper. I guess human steak is on the menu tonight."

"Guys, I think this is the end of us. Still, we have fought the good fight." I moaned, "Do you have any last words?"

"Lockhart," blurted Thaddeus, "I really shouldn't have stolen your favourite mug. You know, the one with gold polka dots? And.....Please forgive me for accidentally knocking you out cold during that dodgeball match!"

"Well, that was pure badass, but all is forgiven!"

"If we died," quavered Camilla, "I just hope someone would find our corpses and bury us in a proper way so they can still be intact." We huddled together and shut our eyes tight, hoping for the worst to happen.

Suddenly, we heard a thundering cry of agony. We looked around and saw that the dragon was dead as a doornail. A fencing saber was pierced into its heart and it was bleeding like crazy. I was completely spellbound, who saved us from that monstrous beast?

"Well, Lockhart Jr," said a voice with a Scandinavian accent, "It's been a long time." I rubbed my eyes and saw an elderly, muscular man with silvery white hair, a rugged beard and dainty blue eyes. He was wearing a periwinkle blue overcoat trimmed with white faux fur over a white turtleneck sweater with a snowflake pattern, a pair of ski pants and a pair of army boots. A navy blue cashmere scarf was wrapped around his neck. He carried a silver fencing saber in his hand as a walking stick and a platinum one was attached to his back with a pastel blue strap. I recognised him right away, he was Nicholas Snowbell, one of my father's closest friends from Finland and a world-famous swordsman.

"Mr. Snowbell!" I cried, "Why were you here?"

"Well, kiddo," he chortled, "I heard that there was a horrendous dragon lurking around in this mystic cave terrorising those who come here. As a dragon slayer myself, I have to hunt it down before it could cause any more mayhem. I found you three being cornered by that hideous monster and I impaled it my sword before you end up being dragon's dinner. After all, I can't bear to see Henry's kid die without helping his dad achieve his dream."

I gave him a heartfelt smile. "Thank you for rescuing us, and most importantly, you're a true friend to my dad. I really owe you a favor."

"You're welcome, lad," he replied with a chuckle. He glanced at Camilla's camera and asked curiously, "So, how did the video turn out anyway?"

Camilla took the camera off the headgear and was shocked to see that it was broken. "Mr. Snowbell," she lamented, "I guess you won't be able to see it. The camera is ruined. We can't show the public our fabulous adventures and we will never be famous."

Mr. Snowbell was dumbfounded for a few seconds, then the ends of his mouth turned up into a big grin. "Turn that frown upside down, Miss Nilsson," he comforted, "I have been tailing you three and recording your adventure by using my high resolution digital camera." I awkwardly forced a smile, no wonder I had the feeling of being

watched! "I also uploaded the video onto OneDrive so it's still in safe hands," he added while beaming pompously, "Check it out!" He turned on his ice blue laptop and opened the OneDrive app. Then he clicked on the video and it started to play. Every single scene was in there, the exploration of the caves, the interpretation of the monuments, the great chase.....it was very exciting.

"I have to say you three really did an excellent job," he complimented, "This video really blew my mind! Henry must be super proud of you, especially you, Lockhart Jr." I gave him a nod and the tears nearly flowed out of my eyes.

"I am happy to hear that, sir," replied Thaddeus, "And thank you for your help. With this, we could show the history authorities our discoveries. After that, we will be the world's most famous archaeologists and we'll be rolling in money!"

"Thaddeus!" chided Camilla and I.

"Heh heh, my apologies."