



## Chapter 24

## The Old Witch and the Old Fool

I had enjoyed more than a decade of a leisurely bourgeois lifestyle, one should have already been accustomed to comfort, but actually, it wasn't quite so. I always felt like I was waiting for something, expecting something, though I wasn't exactly sure what, until one night in the autumn of 2003.

That night, several friends of roughly the same age gathered at a younger family member's wedding banquet—it was quite a rare coincidence. After the banquet, everyone agreed to come to my house for a drink. Inevitably, a

bottle of Chivas was opened following tradition. In our tipsy state, I voiced the feeling I mentioned earlier. One of the attendees, who used to be a famous writer, now almost impossible to find in stores like Eslite or Kingstone, listened intently.

When I expressed this sense of always waiting for something, he immediately said with confidence: "I know what you're waiting for." "What is it? Tell me," I genuinely wanted to know.

He smiled on purpose, and sipped his whiskey lightly. Everyone put down their glasses, paying attention to his answer.

"Death," he said, taking a big gulp.

“At our age, what else can we look forward to besides death?”

Instantaneously, it was as if everyone present was stabbed at their sore spot. Each one set their glasses back on the table, their spirits dampened. It wasn't long before people started making excuses to leave, and more than half of the bottle of whiskey remained.

After seeing each guest off, I returned with a heavy heart and poured myself another full glass. Could it be that what I was waiting for each day was really death? No, that can't be right. You don't need to wait for death; when it comes, it will be extremely merciless and

inevitable. There's no reason to wait for it. Just as I was settling into a tipsy state, I heard a voice:

“Old man, you've been waiting for me, haven't you?”

Sure enough, it was her, Sunflower. Her hair was cut short and completely white, and she was even wearing a low-cut top, looking exactly like an old witch. I had long since grown tired of her—more precisely, afraid of her. During my leisurely bourgeois days, she had appeared multiple times. Around the night the Berlin Wall was brought down in October 1989, she asked me if I had watched the TV coverage. I said, of course. She asked, what did you think? I replied, it was splendid. With the Soviet

Union disintegrated, East Germany losing its backing, the Berlin Wall would be dismantled sooner or later. I added that it was the tide of the times; no one could stop it. She simply replied:

“Idiot!”

After the 9/11 incident in 2001, she appeared again, asking if I'd seen the TV coverage. I said I did. She asked, what did you think? I replied, spectacular—such a significant event in history, live broadcast on TV, and the enemy was so clever, using hijacked planes as suicide bombs. I also told her, I had even been to the World Trade Center, the landmark of New York, and had taken in the view from up high... She didn't let me finish and left with

just two words:

“Idiot!”

I hadn't expected her to appear now.

“Old man, have you been waiting for me?” So it was her, and she asked me like that.

“Waiting for you is slightly better than waiting for death. Are you here to call me an idiot again?”

“That's right. Those who realize they're idiots are not far from enlightenment.”

“I wouldn't dare say I'm enlightened or anything. Just don't scold me and I'll be very grateful.”

“Well, have you never heard of that great master, who in one of his books, used the tone of a clown to

say: ‘You should learn to be wise before getting old.’ You should have learned to be wise long ago.”

“Unfortunately, I’m innately foolish.”

“Let me ask you, all these years, have you really been ‘thinking’?”

“Nonsense! A person’s mind only stops thinking after death. They say even in sleep, the brain remains active.”

“Well then, what have you been thinking all these years?”

For a moment, I didn’t know how to answer her. To be honest, I hadn’t thought about any serious issues. I said casually:

“World peace.”

She showed a smile that was enough to send chills down someone’s spine. “Using a TV



commercial slogan to brush off an old friend— isn't that too much?"

"But world peace is at least humanity's common wish, right?"

"Old fool!"

"What did you say?"

"I said besides being an idiot, you're also a fool—getting more confused as you get older."

"You old woman, old witch! Getting scarier with age!"

There was a moment of silence, then her voice softly came over to me:

"You don't have to think, but do you even have memories left?"

Remember, on the train in

Guazhen, for whom were you so

sad that you turned pale? In Baoji,

on a cold snowy night, for whom did

you shed tears? When you wrote 'Peacock,' you still had a bit of harsh self-discipline. On your 70th birthday, your children toasted you, and while slightly drunk, you called yourself a failure. They couldn't understand what you meant, but I did. I understood that as an idealist, you still felt a bit of self-blame at 70. But now? You live your days in a numbed bourgeois stupor, don't you think about others at all?"

"Enough, I've never been someone who only thought about my own wellbeing."

"So, what are you thinking?"

"Of course, world peace and everyone living healthy lives..."

"You old..." She only uttered one word, and did not finish the

sentence.

“Are you about to scold me again?”

“I won't scold you, just ask you. Do you actually look at the world, think about the Earth?”

“I look at it every day.”

“What do you see?”

“Taiwan is about to have a presidential election. The U.S. invading Iraq has been surprisingly smooth...”

“You contemptible old fool!” Her voice was so powerful it was almost shrill, it stunned me! “With America being so domineering, can the world be peaceful?” For a moment, I didn't know how to respond.

Gradually, I regained my composure and stammered:

“America's dominance is inevitable.

The Soviet Union is gone. Although China is rising, it's still far from dominance..."

"What did you say?" The voice was interrogative. "Say it again!"

"Did I say something wrong?" I asked, shocked.

"Old fool, can't you see that today's China is one China, but two worlds?"

"Yes, one Mainland, one Taiwan!"

"Despicable! Are you really suffering from senile dementia, or are you just unwilling to think anymore? The two worlds in China consist of the rich people in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, who waste and show off extravagantly as if competing with Americans in

squandering Earth's resources. And the other world is the one with people living in poverty-stricken areas. The rich flaunt their wealth, and the poor sigh in despair. Are you unaware of all this?"

"But people say—"

"Say what? Speak up!"

"People say the 21st century is the century of the Chinese."

Her face changed suddenly, her severe expression becoming even more prominent. She gave a few cold laughs and then said:

"Old fool! How could you be dumb

enough to believe that? That's a spell of self-hypnosis by the Chinese people, and one day it will bring great misfortune upon them. What exactly does China want to do? Replace the US? Is that necessary? And even if they did replace the US, what then? Old fool, use your brain a bit more. You probably think the 20th century was the century of the Americans. Were the American people happy? The 19th century was the century of the British Empire. Look at the life of the textile workers in Britain back then, and the child laborers in the mines. Even earlier was the Spanish century, with ships full of gold being transported back to Spain—so what? Old fool, have you

forgotten your own words that 'we are all Earthlings'? Once we enter the era of the global village, the world of one nation no longer matters. What matters is that every villager on Earth receives justice and fair treatment, and no one has the right to squander Earth's resources. Whether they are Americans or Chinese, no one can waste resources. Understand, old fool?"

"I know, I understand, Sunflower. You don't need to be so angry..."

"How can I not be angry, seeing you like this? Let me ask you again, what are you thinking about?"

"As I said, I wish for world peace and for everyone to live a healthy and happy life."

"Darn it! Have you ever thought that with so many poor people, can there be peace in the world?"

"Exactly! The poor are indeed growing in number, it's hard—"

"What do you mean by 'hard'? Is it difficult to achieve world peace, or is it difficult to solve the increasing number of poor people?"

"Both are difficult. Very difficult."

She finally smiled, not a smile on her face, but in her voice. She



stared at me and asked:

"Come on, let me ask you, do you have any faith? Answer me."

"I'm not sure whether you mean religious or political faith, probably none."

"Don't lie to me. I know you once believed in communism."

"I haven't even read a single book by Marx or Lenin, only some poems by Mao Zedong like 'Changsha' and 'In Praise of the Plum Blossom.' How does that count as communism? Don't mock me, please."

"You don't need to read 'The Wealth of Nations' by Adam Smith to understand capitalism; just know how to make money by any means possible."

"But people say, if you don't believe in communism before the age of twenty, you have no heart; if you still believe in it after thirty, you have no brains."

"See! You gave yourself away, old fool. Once you became bourgeois, you thought you became wise. Let me tell you, if all your intelligence is devoted to making money, no amount of wisdom can match a shred of conscience. Understand? My old friend, I know you so well.

When you were young, you thought that if you could ensure everyone has enough to eat and wear, even those who once broke your heart, you would be willing to become Loyal King Li Xiucheng and sacrifice your life. Is that true?"

"That was just youthful recklessness."

"But you don't think that way anymore."

"It's not feasible. Those dreams are unrealistic and unachievable."

"Not because they're unachievable, but because you've turned selfish. You're afraid of dying, aren't you?"

"You old witch!"

"When you were young, you dared to secretly believe in communism. Now you see that communist regimes have failed, and you think communist ideology has no wisdom. Don't you know that communist regimes are not the same as the Communist Party, and the Communist Party is not the same as communist ideology? How can a noble and kind ideology be wholly dismissed because of a few dictatorial rulers' blunders? Think about it, old fool. Is it communist ideology that lacks wisdom or those loathsome politicians that are shameful? No matter how advanced

human civilization becomes, the concept in 'The Great Unity' of everyone having food, clothes, and a home will remain a universal ideal. Do you believe in the predatory economic system of "survival of the fittest"? And their expedient social policies and welfare acts—how long will it take before they extend benefits to the nearly half of Earth's population who are poor? Answer me, old fool!"

"Sunflower, my old friend! I know you're the only one who understands me, but I'm so old—"

She unexpectedly chuckled and said, "Others are so busy they have

no time to age, but you keep complaining about it."

"Aging is the same. I feel I'm beyond repair. Sometimes seeing disasters and tragedies around the world, and power-holders vying for control, with billions of helpless people—where can they seek help or file complaints? The more I think about it, the more troubled I feel. The more I think, the harder it is to sleep. Sunflower, forgive me, I really can't do anything anymore."

"So you waste your days at the mahjong table, foolishly laughing along with the idiots on TV. Do you know how it feels for me? Old friend, my heart feels like it's being

slowly shredded by a dull knife, cut by cut, bleeding drop by drop. My lifelong friend.

"We had beautiful memories when we were young; we even built dreams. Though our recollections are mostly tinged with melancholy and the dreams never came true, I firmly believe you were not wrong, we were not wrong, and neither were we naive, were we?"

"My old friend, do you still remember the vow I made to you? I promised to grow old with you. Time is so ruthless, flying by so quickly, so quickly! We are now full of white hair, our hands trembling. Aren't I getting old too? I also promised you

that I would die with you! That day will come, and I will follow you and drift away with the wind."

"Sunflower, thank you. I've let you down. You can see that I really cannot do anything anymore."

"Who says so? You can. Listen, with the distant sound of piano music in the background, let's dream once more! We will build grand dreams, absurd dreams, children's sweet dreams—dreams that will make us smile as we sleep, where princes and princesses live happily ever after..."

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And so, over many years and fragments, under Sunflower's coercion and encouragement, the shadow of Malakos took form.

Some say the current state of the world is like a madhouse managed by lunatics. Some say it's very difficult to reform this world, and revolution might be a better option.

Well then, Malakos was a grand dream built half with revolution, and half with madness.