

# The Monk of the Bitter Cucumber

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Earl Ganz

That's why Mr. Weiss was a millionaire. When he bought a building he knew it was sound. And that's why he was staring at the door next to the elevator. Because it was painted white he had almost missed it. He had opened the one upstairs in the lobby, an empty room, had expected at least a sink. Now he figured there was one of these rooms to each floor. But why? And as he stared the elevator door and the white door became matching scars in the patterned whiteness of the brick. That was it! The measurements of these rooms and those of the elevator shaft must be the same. Take out the ceilings and they'd form a second shaft. Certainly a building this size could use a second elevator. Why hadn't they put it in? Probably something to do with the Depression. He'd known lots of builders who'd run out of money. And Mr. Weiss got out his tape measure, knocked, didn't think anybody was inside but waited. Then he turned the old metal knob, was surprised to see a light, and he stuck his head into the crack made by his own weight.

What the hell! he thought. If the door was a scar the tiny room was a wound, the walls red and blue and yellow but mostly red. It was really startling. Mr. Weiss pushed it open all the way. But he didn't go inside. If only they'd paint something real, he thought, something that could be understood. But he knew they made lots of money this way, wondered if these would make lots of money, didn't think so. Then his eyes settled on a canvas standing on the desk. Except for a few lines it was blank. Yet Mr. Weiss could tell it had something to do with the picture in the open book beneath it, an old Chinaman in a funny hat. The caption said his name was Tao-chi, and that he was sometimes called the Monk of the Bitter Cucumber, greatest of early Ch'ing landscape masters. Mr. Weiss liked him, thought his appearance refined, large staring eyes, a pale face, and yet determined, a noble expression befitting, as the caption said, the cousin of the last Ming Emperor.

But Mr. Weiss didn't see that the face also showed defeat, not just the defeat of advanced age or the downfall of his family, but something much more immediate. It's doubtful that the Ming ouster at the hands of the Manchu had ever really defeated Tao-chi. In the Orient, under certain circumstances such as those prevailing at the outset of a foreign dynasty, retirement was not seen as defeat. Further resistance was useless, collaboration distasteful, disengagement the

only remaining course. In time of transition many men renounce their worldly affairs. And certainly old age was no defeat. For one thing Tao-chi had never expected to reach it. For another, it had given him wisdom, his book the very reason he had been brought into this room, the *Hua Yu Lu*, one of those oriental writings on art rarely attempted in the West where criticism is pointed toward the enlightenment of the audience, not the artist. 'In the sea of ink is the divine essence. Life must be brought in at the point of the brush. The single brush stroke is the origin of all existence.' And whether or not one agreed with these aphorisms, one had to agree that an old age granting such insights was not a defeat.

Yet tonight there was the look of defeat about him. It could only be explained by the unfinished thing above the book, the strokes carved, chiselled, the lines stiff and weak. The man who painted it had been beclouded by things, the dust of the world. Tao-chi had seen many like this. They used their brushes like knives, cut their pictures, wore themselves out. When it was like this there was no advantage in continuing, no joy for the heart. He had wanted the man to stop, let things be concealed by things, the dust settle in the dust. Eventually the man had. Angry and frustrated, the painter had thrown his brush and fled. Now the man was inching his way down an utterly dark hall, the metal wand of a vacuum cleaner moving about his feet in slow sweeping semicircles, his shirt soaked with sweat though it wasn't hot. Slowly he moved, shuffled forward like a wary boxer, an insane match against the darkness too fast for him. Then he reared back, brought the wand down like a sledge, the heavy metal flying down the hall, mocking the man with ringing thumps. He was left with only the pipe, a cheap alloy, hardly even a metal, that he knocked against the wall. Help, he pounded. But the alloy only clicked quietly. Help! And he looked toward the faint glow beneath the double fire doors. Help! The light answered with a moving shadow. And madly he beat the floor.

Mr. Weiss heard nothing. He had put away his tape measure and taken out his flashlight. Now, in another part of the basement he was shining its rays on a plexi-glass dome, one of the many meters that made up the long double row that stretched on into the corridor darkness. He wasn't reading them, just making sure each horizontal meter wheel was turning. More than anything, it was these meters that would tell him what he wanted to know, how many vacancies, how much remodeling. You couldn't believe an agent. But here it was, the evidence, meter upon turning meter, twice as many as called for in the original floor plan. They told him of the disposessions, of the break-up of the large rent-controlled apartments into one and two room control-free units. From the look of the tenants, young career people, Mr. Weiss had suspected as much. But he had to be careful. In winter old tenants didn't go out much. Now he knew. Five hundred and six apartments. A hundred and fifty average rent. And a little quick figuring told him that it grossed . . . over a million! Suddenly he became anxious, hadn't thought it was this big. Was he really in the market for such property? Would they sell?

He walked on where the corridor ended, allowed his light to play over the whitewashed wooden walls. Coal bins, he thought, and he saw furniture through

the large cracks between the boards. There were storerooms like this in almost every old apartment house that had converted from coal to oil. His father had made a living from them. A dresser, a sideboard, a couple of couches, chairs. "Fifty dollars," Mr. Weiss offered. It was an old habit and therefore a relaxing one. "Fifty dollars," he repeated as if he expected a counter proposal, and then he moved on to the next bin. Of course there were no takers. No one heard. Tao-chi could have, for Mr. Weiss had left the door open. But the old Chinaman was listening to something else, the sound of the painter, knew how hard the man had been working. Chinese painting was difficult, sometimes opaque, sometimes translucent, but almost never textured like western oils. You had to really paint, use the brush. Tao-chi loved the brushes, the bamboo handles, the feeling they were still alive. In his country, for certain crimes, men were sometimes spread over young shoots. In a day there was pressure, in two penetration, in three sunlight. Such was the delicate power of bamboo. And the tips were different, too, the way the hair was set in, the way even the thickest of them were made to taper to a single fine-point filament. In skilled hands any brush could draw the thinnest line. But Tao-chi always looked for something beyond mere skill. He had watched carefully when the young man tried the reproductions in the books, watched how he grasped the movement from light to heavy, how he sensed right away the amazing flexibility of the brushes, the fact that the slightest hand pressure caused a marked variation in the stroke.

All the old monk had to teach him was how to hold his arm to achieve the correct wrist movement. It wasn't easy, the art of calligraphy, first teacher of all painting, not practiced in the West. He had to think of another way to explain what the delicate pressure was like, how the gently flowing power was to feel. He chose the movement of turning necks, had the man paint the turn of his own neck and then those of animals, great round horses and tiny puffy birds. But it was the necks of Wang Yu Chen's geese that had done it. The man had painted a picture of the exact movement it took to do the picture. And he had known it. Elated, he had leaped into the air. Now he was leaping in the darkness, coming down with his wand smashing, leaping again, not giving it a chance at him. Then, unbelievably, he landed on it, firm for an instant, then popping, something mushy inside. Again and again he brought his feet down, slipped sometimes but recovered himself in order to leap higher and harder. There was a smell he thought could be blood and he felt wetness on his face. The thing was dead, he knew that. But he couldn't stop, not until he had exhausted himself, emptied himself. He jumped, the wand in his hand, the smell of blood in his nose, the feel of it on his face. Then he ran for the light switch.

Eyes burning, he turned, expected to see its crushed body. There was nothing on the floor but a small patch of whitish slime. He looked at his shoes, the same slime on their edges. And there was the vacuum's sucking device cracked in half. He left it, walked back to the spot, saw the shreds of skin, almost laughed. A potato! But what was it doing out here in the hall? And as he wondered a large piece of darkness ran between his legs toward the fire doors. He swung the pipe down, hit the bar of the right-hand door, gave the darkness and himself the impetus to get through into the other part of the base-

ment where it dodged toward the open office door. And Mr. Weiss finally heard. Whatever was going on he didn't want to get caught. He'd been sure there was no janitor, never was these days. So he had no idea, just knew that if he had to say who he was, what he was doing, it would queer the whole deal. So now, in the elevator, he pressed for the roof, stood reading the Inspector's card, the signatures after the OK's. He knew the inspector, would slip him something and find out. A bum elevator was a real drain, the quickest way to a tenant's strike. And Mr. Weiss examined the metal walls, looked for scratches, dents, signs of abuse. But the machine had been freshly painted with green enamel. He felt tense, didn't like the new paint, wondered what it was hiding. Once he had enjoyed riding elevators, when he was a kid, particularly going up. He would watch the small diamond window in the door, wait for the tell-tale light from the bottom of the outer door. Then he would crouch. Not so anyone could see. And then, when the top of the diamond of the inside door touched the bottom of the diamond of the chosen outside one, he would flex his legs, push down hard. He could make an elevator drop a foot sometimes, make it so the door wouldn't open. The old ladies would panic. But he would save them, press on to another floor and then back to the one they wanted.

He crouched now, a big man, two hundred and fifty pounds, flexed, the floor pushing hard against his feet. But the automatic door slid back, the car lining up perfectly, and he was glad. If he could have made it drop it meant the ropes had slipped, a sure sign of wear. Now he didn't have to pay any gone of an inspector. And pleased with himself, Mr. Weiss stepped out onto the landing of the twelfth and last floor. There were the stairs to the roof. Yet he hesitated, turned back toward the elevator. There it was, the same door as all the others, this one painted the tan color of the plaster walls. He stood looking a moment, was definitely offended by these rooms, their lack of use. He pulled it open. Downstairs, Tao-chi was taken by surprise. It had once been said of him that when he painted he was like a great general who held back until he saw what was needed and then supplied it. It might even be said that he had made an aesthetic of this. 'The method is complete when it is born of the meaning. The method which follows no method is the perfect method.' So when the old Chinaman saw what the painter had locked into the room with him, he decided to do nothing, wait, lie there, become what he really was, a reproduced outline of a man, not even alive enough to play dead. Still the thing came for him, climbed the chair and then the desk to nuzzle the folds of his gown. And it seemed forever until the door opened again, just a crack, enough for a metal pipe to poke through nervously. Then the top of a head. Tao-chi watched the creature watching the door, thought it was going to spring. Then he saw the painter was carrying something. The animal seemed to relax, faced the man, its pink-rimmed eyes showing intelligence. A bag of garbage! And the old man knew that it must be terribly hungry to expose itself like this.

As if to test this thesis the painter threw some bits of potato on the desk. The creature moved toward them, pitiful, more mechanical than alive, its legs hidden somewhere beneath its skirt of low-hanging black armor, its tail dragging stiffly and at a right angle to its body like a scythe blade. But from the way

it ate the old Chinaman knew what it was, a rat. Something had happened to it, its fur matted with a thick tarry substance. It must have fallen into something, and he could see where the hairs came out of the skin. But then it moved, changed angles, and its surface picked up the gleam of the bare bulb overhead. I could get that, thought the old Chinaman. He had always been fascinated by evanescence. I could do it with one stroke. But it was only after the third potato, when it had settled down to make its toilet, that he realized in what extremity the rat was living. He watched it dart its pink tongue against its blackened forepaws, watched the super effort that brought the forepaws across the face. Its head dipped stiffly and to no avail. The saliva beaded on the oily surface and the paws skidded down off the eyes and snout. But it was persistent. Again and again it tried, a little oil finally coming off, blackening its tongue. Only then did it stop, its body shaking beneath its armor. Then came the coughing. Then the vomiting, small white bits mixed with blackened saliva. The young painter watched also, reasoned that it probably vomited after every meal. It's starving, the painter thought, watched until the animal was through, until it was breathing quietly. He waited to see what it would do. It did nothing, sat looking into the puddle, its tail still at a right angle. It's going to die, he thought and approached, reached out.

What he didn't see was the animal coiling beneath its oily armor, then leaping toward his face. It was only the lucky reflex of the painter's hands that caught the stiff tail, jerked it straight, and instinctively began to whirl it. He looked down the length of his arm. The rat, trying to climb over the centrifugal force of its own body, looked back. And Mr. Weiss sensed something unusual. He was standing at the front parapet, a three-foot wall overlooking 2nd Avenue and the snowy side streets. It was because of the snow that he had come up, didn't want to get stuck for a new roof this summer, snow very hard on roofs. He had dug in several places, wanted to get a look at some of the seams. But he couldn't get down to them, too packed, too deep. He was over fifty, couldn't remember snowstorms like these last three, over sixty inches. Yet it was beautiful, St. Mark's Church like a postcard. Even from here he could see a corner of the graveyard, the stones all but buried. The mayor's fault, he thought. That's what everybody was saying. Mr. Weiss smiled. It had been in all the papers. The Mayor of Oswego had been picked up on a morals charge in a BMT men's room. Of course the man had pleaded innocent, refused to resign. It had happened last month. In Oswego it had been snowing ever since, the town completely cut off, a disaster area, food airlifted, wolves eating the cattle. Mr. Weiss shook his head. The religious nuts were having a field day. Confess, they were screaming, and stop the snow! And the millionaire looked out over the whiteness as if it were some kind of cosmic joke. Yet in a way he agreed with them, at least to the extent that he thought the man guilty, was quite a moral man himself, knew the law had to work at all costs. "Confess, Mr. Mayor," he said to the cold snowy night. Then he smiled again. "Confess and save my roof."

It was at this moment that the banging began. He looked at his watch, only a little after four, pretty early for the heat. If he bought the building he would have to reset the timer. Not a bad plant, though, three York-Shipley ro-

taries and three huge old Federal boilers. But the worst kind of distribution, the steam rising in the same pipes that returned it as water. Tao-chi heard it too, even saw the first blow coming. There was a sudden looming of black, then a powerful force, a loud sound, and then it was gone. The old monk thought he'd been struck, was surprised to find himself untouched. But something had happened, something behind him, a kind of noise, a vibration where he had been sure there was only blank whiteness. And just when he had gotten used to it, there came another. His whole world shook with the power of it. He sensed what was happening, a kind of dawn, the white mists beginning to move, the peaks of the grey mountains coming into view. Then came another, this time near his hand. The world jumped, definitely went up. Tao-chi wanted to turn, couldn't, looked instead to the painter. The pale man had turned bright red, seemed to be glowing, giving off heat or light or something, his whirling arm producing some kind of energy. Tao-chi had never really understood Western power sources. But it was terrible, the look of fire in the man's eyes, the heat. The old monk wanted to turn away, to the coolness of the morning being created behind him. But he couldn't. So he resolved to watch, not shut his eyes at the last minute, at least know what was happening. The answer wasn't long in coming, its little legs spread, claws out, head pushed sideways into the force of its turning, eyes pulled white, chinless mouth open and crooked. Tao-chi remembered the knife thrower of Ahnwei who used his wife for his target. What if he misses, he had asked her once. He never misses, she had answered. Neither did the painter. It hit below his left elbow. The world jumped again. This time there was water. He could hear it, a falls, a pool. The old man was afraid but exalted, too, wondered if it was like this with the woman?

Mr. Weiss had decided to wait, see how bad it got. This kind of banging might mean some real damage, maybe not to the pipes but certainly to the plaster. If he had built this building he would have put in separate returns, a vapor system. That would've meant no valves on the radiators. Valves were no good. Sooner or later they'd stick and then there was banging. Of course the best thing was a vacuum pump to suck the heavier cool air down to a central valve. The steam really moved up fast then, and the faster it moved the quicker it shut off. Vacuum pumps were cheaper in the long run. And Mr. Weiss noticed how much louder the banging had become. There's something wrong, he thought, and for the first time he was afraid. He could feel it in his shoes, feel it right through the snow. It was as if the building was trying to destroy itself. Why don't they complain, he thought, and moved toward the door in the little pent-house built over the stairwell. He didn't take two steps when there was a tremendous crash. An earthquake, he thought as he went down, skidded on his chest, the snow flying. It burst through right in front of him. A bright yellow flash and then the same tiny basement room he had peeked into. Someone was in it now, a face lined in agony, a shoulder twisted down, forward, an arm grown too long. To Mr. Weiss it seemed to be the paint brush doing it. The thing seemed alive, twitching with a pain of its own as the man moved its pulsing red tip over the canvas, the receding figure of an old Chinaman. Mr. Weiss was amazed, didn't even notice the tailless rat twitching on the floor

or that he was skidding toward the hole from which the room had risen. A shaft, he noted just before he went down, and then he thought of putting in a second elevator.

Tao-chi was climbing a steep mountain path, entering a thicket of bamboo. The bamboo are like hermits, he thought. The lonely flowers like pure virgins. And he saw red birds flutter the branches that moved flowers moist with rain. There! A rustle among the leaves, a pair on the point of soaring. There! A bee sucking flowers, filling its loins with their honey. And joyfully Tao-chi watched himself emerge further up the path. A mist rose off the waterfall beside him. He could almost feel it against his cheek, the back of his hand. But then he raised his eyes, looked out of the little room. It wasn't spring but winter, the snow coming strong, not day but night. He could see the animals frozen in the fields, the people imprisoned in their houses. And he could feel the wind even through the warmth of the painter. And the old monk felt tears of disappointment on his cheeks. Only a copy, he thought, the worst kind of foolishness. Yet even as he despaired he thought he could hear something, someone calling. And this time he was able to turn, to discover the blank whiteness he had imagined all these years was really sky and that he was looking out a window and down a path at a figure coming up. Who was it? Another painter? Scrolls bulged out of the pack on his back. "Hello!" he shouted to the climbing figure. And then he turned back to the painter. It was agony to watch, pure pain, tears out of his eyes, the man's arm dislocated from his shoulder. "Come see!" he shouted over his shoulder. "The man's a devil!" And it was true. He was a sorcerer of old, a painter of caves to dwell in! Who cared if it was a copy. He had got it by nature and there was no one he could not follow and transform.