

A bookmark

One night in 1993, under the limpid and starry firmament, one can still enjoy the unpolluted air. The 22-year-old Zhang Yijun plucked up his courage, and made one of the boldest decisions in the first half of his life. All the college classmates were gathered together in the cinema as one of the graduation activities, undoubtedly a great chance for him to put on a show. The dim, dark atmosphere in the cinema, together with the blinking old screen became his assistance, making it hard not to notice his masterpiece on the subtitle, where wrote impressively “Ms. Zhang Juan, out of the cinema, one would like to see ya”. It was, perhaps, kind of restrained for him not to directly show his love confession. As the movie was over, students came out of the cinema one after another. He leant himself towards the handrail on the stairs, rendering himself a little blue, thinking about the exact words of the coming confession of his ardent affection. Finally he saw her, walking slowly out of the shadow, with a worrying expression on her face---his surprising gift was a little frightening for a normal college girl. The moon came out, splashing the exquisite accessories of moonlight onto her face, her breast, her hand...No. Wait a minute. It was not just her, but as well the male holding her hand. Goddamn, her boyfriend! It was a shock for our protagonist, though he had already known about his existence, he didn't expect that they would come out together, and with their hands tight. The sweet, sooth sentences he had just constructed in his mind now became a fishbone stuck in his throat. Exactly the same time she noticed him, asking carelessly,

“Hey Zhang Yijun. Is that you? What's the matter?”

“Eh...nothing. Nothing.” For a long time, maybe an hour for him, he could not let out a single word, and finally ran away frustrated like a child.

The moon hid herself into the clouds. I guess she was chuckling.

However, he at that moment wouldn't realize, that even if he was not bold enough to cut in by force on that unforgettable night, destiny had tied them closely together.

Conversation

In the silent study room sat me and my father, staring at each other with speechless embarrassment. It was not the first time for us. It was the same last time I interviewed him to complete Daniel's illness profile. So, to some extent, he was an experienced interviewee.

It requires some time to go back deep in the past. I guessed the tic toking clock and the roaring air conditioner helped accelerated the progress. After a few cups of drinking, he began to speak. It was always fortunate to have a good story to tell, I thought, and even more fortunate to be its audience.

Struggling Childhood

On a normal late spring of 1971, Zhang Yijun was born in a normal rural village. But at that time, he was not named as Yijun. Junhong was the name his father gave him. Yet name was a loose oral concept in his age. Everybody had got much liberty of changing his own name. One could name himself whatever he would like to. In high school, with a developing ego and the fashion of Louis Cha's novels, he named himself Yijun (意君). It was a little difficult now to appreciate it, but he was quite satisfied at that time with the hidden sense of Jianghu in that. But there was more. One day after class, as he took back his notebook from the math teacher as always, he found besides his small signature a bigger one by the teacher, “张一均”. Now he could not recall exactly the reason why it was there, or how. One thing we can be sure of is that these simple characters struck him deep in his heart, and accompanied him so long along the way.

Despite the changes of names, please allow me to use “Yijun” only to refer to him in case we all get confused.

The childhood of Yijun was the same struggling as any other rural kids. And he grew up in adversity. Let’s say, though he was not that ambitious in his early ages as those heroic figures in history, he had got aspiration in his heart. At that time, the rural area in China was not yet civilized, fights and rumbles were quite common. If words could not help resolve the problem, fists became the only solution. If the law abdicated, destiny would come to help decide one’s life or death. There were not many male members in Zhang’s family, so it was natural that they got bullied. He remembered one night, the brother of his grandfather was carried by a few men into the house, his head bloodstained, hit by someone with a hammer. With a little more strength, he would have seen the ancestors. There was not much emotional link between Yijun and the poor man, but this bloody scene did strike him, who had just entered primary school. He was determined then, that he would struggle to enter a university, so that he could come back inversely bullying them. It was not at all an elegant motivation, but at least he acquired the minimum condition of climbing upward, an original, emotional, devout goal to fight for.

As a convention, one’s misfortune in his childhood, congenital or not, would be foreshadows of his final success, although most of the time we cannot see how these events are logically connected. As he began to remember things, Yijun has got a nodule in his throat. His parents inspected the horrible things for a long while, worrying and hesitating. Finally they decided to pool the money to carry a surgery for him. In the rural hospital, in that age, no professional anesthetic technique was available. He got fainted by drinking what we call now “Menghanyao” before cutting his throat open.

“I could have been smarter if I had not drunk it,” Said the father in the study, smoking his cigar, “Even than you.”

“Or maybe quite the contrary.” I replied.

However, a few days after the surgery, maybe because the nidus was not excised thoroughly, the nodule came swollen back. As a result, the same operation was done a couple of more times, and it turned out to be in vain. Then his father told him, “No money for it, son. If it was not growing bigger, just let it be”. Then this nodule became his partner from primary to college, and from college to work. It was not until a few days before his marriage that the thing was totally cut off from his body. After acquiring this part of story, I couldn’t help recalling those biography subjects I had learnt, and that early physical abnormality would be seeds of over sensitivity or self-abasement. But luckily, he felt nothing about it. It was true. Proved by the following story, he was not a bit sensitive, but a little dull.

In junior high school, he had got an admirer. Although the girl had confessed her affection in many ways, he knew nothing about it. Puppy love is always glittering like a rainbow, pure and pretty, full of vagueness and ambiguity. But the entering of a third one is always the most interesting part: it makes the story tastes like popcorn. The class monitor liked the girl. And the girl liked him. What a classic triangle. Whenever the night classes were over, three kids would stick together, running and chasing in the village. However, triangle was not a stable figure, not when it comes to love, especially when one of the angles was him the wooden head. As the entrance examination approached, recalling his initial ambition, he spent more time in studying. But he didn’t expect the triangle would collapse after his leaving. One day after school the monitor came to him, with tears in his eyes. The girl no longer played with him since Yijun would not come. He was astonished: before that he had taken it for granted that the monitor and the girl were a couple, and he was the outsider.

Thus, the misunderstanding was solved, and the two walked together naturally. But it was also likely that he didn’t perform well in the entrance exam exactly because falling in love. He entered the key high school in the county the fourth year of junior.

Unconstrained, Crude Love

My father became very talkative when we began to talk about his stories of love. It was quite astounding for me that the father, a stoutly built middle aged man over his fifties, with such a traditional appearance, showed me about his value of unconstrained, crude love filled with romantic sentiment. In other words, he was totally a romanticist when it comes to love, where sensitivity overwhelms rationality.

The love we have just talked about lasted in his high school, but was terminated by an accident. The girl was not in the same village with Yijun, which was convenient for their secret love. But for some reason, maybe part of her future plan to build a family, she visited Yijun's parents on her own and confessed their relationship. As Yijun, in his high school, learnt about the news, he somehow got furious, thought that it was only the business between him and her, why bothering the parents to make constraint? Under the wrath he cut down all the contacts with her, and drew an end to that relationship.

"I wonder if..." I could help but asked, as he himself used to be a practitioner of unconstraint love.

"No, you can't." Answered the father

"I mean..."

"No. You would have to let us know." said him, "Just call it double-standards."

Another good example happened after he started to work in the bank, the construction bank of China, in his hometown, Puyang. Appreciated by the superior, Yijun was invited in an appointment with the deputy mayor and his younger sister. After the dinner, he was even asked to chat with the lady privately in the neighbor room, which was quite

obvious a signal of making a match. According to his description she was a fine lady, not that pretty nor bad. But such a good chance of “marrying up” was discarded by the young man just because of the first few questions she asked him. Well, she only asked about his siblings, where and what they were working...with hindsight these were all just normal questions, yet for him, it was blasphemy. Violation of his crude love. And once these got involved in love, like Kierkegaard has said, they killed it.

Such unconstrained and crude love in its primeval form was indeed quite hard to find, thus maybe my birth was quite a miracle, for he was just lucky enough to have the very encountering arranged by the destiny. One year after his graduation, he was sent to Kaifeng on business. It was a complete strange city to him, so the help of an old local friend was indispensable. Looking through the alumni book, he found Zhang Juan’s name in Kaifeng with a mixed, complex feeling. Due to the embarrassing meeting outside the cinema, they haven’t contacted with each other since graduated. It was one year’s duration, but he eventually had the cheek to asked her for help. So that was the very start of their story. Here is the scene, and because it was quite blurry in their memory, or they were just too shy to tell me, please allow me to add a little bit of my own imagination.

Now, suffered from a long, weary journey, Yijun finally arrive at Kaifeng Station with fatigue. But the bad weather turned his tiredness to depression. It was a pouring rain, with thunders and lightnings. Now she wouldn’t come for sure, he thought, ordeals lie ahead. But at the moment, through the curtain of the rain he saw, across the street, under the bus stop, a faint figure. She sat on the old bench, two umbrellas lay next to her, one was wet, the other was still dry.

Aside, under the big sycamore tree stood silently two bicycles, leaning upon each other.

Spark and Firewood

My father kept repeating in the conversation, that he was a shy, introvert person at heart, and that he was not always intended to be remarkable or different. Honestly, it would have something to do with his rural origin, but I guessed it was also about his nature. However, notwithstanding the rhyme of his life is peaceful in general, he would play a few high-pitched notes occasionally: under certain circumstances, courage would spring up from somewhere inside, encouraging him to be brave, bold, or even reckless. I think there was always a spark at the bottom of his heart, you just need firewood to light it out.

I have mentioned about his unique failure of confession at the beginning, so let me give you some more examples. It dated back to his middle school. Yijun's mathematic used to quite terrible at one time, especially geometry, even hard to distinguish between a rectangle and a circle. But someday suddenly these geometric figures ran alive in his brain, he had got better grades, and even attended and won the first prize in the Olympic competition. Such mystery made his story kind of enigmatic. After entering the high school, a few students were selected to build a "top class", in order to further cultivate their mathematic. He checked the list for many times and finally confirmed a fact: he was not on it. Though it was still strange for him even now, he somehow got the courage to find the vice-principal, who was also his mathematic teacher, the man who endowed him with his current name, to argue about this. After knowing his former achievements, the principal surprisingly did arrange him with an extra chance, letting him participate the selecting exams in the corridor outside the classroom. When the exam was over, he thought it doomed. Despite all the bragging he made to the principal, he thought he could hardly reach the pass line. As the grades were published, he got 57, surely didn't pass, but he simultaneously ranked the first in the whole school.

"If so, why haven't you entered a better university?" In a facetious tone I asked, "Is Peking University too low for ya?"

"Oh...my English was poor. Poor enough to offset all my advantages in mathematic."

“Then I have quite much liberty in my composition, since it was written in English.”

After graduation, his work in Puyang bank was fair enough indeed. He wouldn't acquire great wealth or power, of course, but what he earned was definitely adequate to afford an easy life. Yet he longed for the higher, and the better. These years of mediocre work made him realize that only in banks of big cities could one make great achievements. That was when the spark was about to blaze. The fifth year of his work, he abandoned his job in Puyang, accompanied with Juan (my mother), and came to Zhengzhou. It was truly a bold decision, for they had to start from zero and nothing. He had been doubting this decision, when they had to live in the spared dormitory of a friend, when had to two single beds together to save the space, and when had to use the dry public latrine late in the night. Yet what his son enjoyed now eventually proved him right to make such determination.

The spark can only be ignited when there is firewood. On most of the occasions, let's say, he remained to be prudent. After a period of hard work, they decided to take a trip to Beijing. They had never been to the capital before, thus he made exhaustive plan of everything before departure. In order to parade his achievements in the presence of the girlfriend, he took 8000 yuan in total with him. All in cash. It was a great number, and in case the money got stolen on the train, he thought of an excellent place to hide.

After arriving at the hotel on that night, just as they were going to check in at the reception, Juan was surprised to found him disappeared like a wind. She had panicked for a while, until he showed up from the toilet.

“Where have you been, for what?”

“Nothing.” He replied with great calmness, “Just taking out the money.”

It turned out that there was a pocket on the back of his underwear.

Conversation

At the end of the conversation, we inevitably talked about death, the destination of all.

“Mostly the end of a biography would be the death of the subject, but since that’s still far from you, let’s just imagine one. How would you depict your death?”

“I don’t know, son. I had little fear about death now. I have done mostly what needs to be done. But still, I don’t know. People said one would desperate to stay alive as death really approaches. I cannot understand that, at least at present stage.”

“Well, fine. Let’s try this: if you were me, what would you write as the end of the biography? You know, maybe some summarizing comments?”

“If I were to write...like this: I was just a man with a little talent, some diligence, and much luck. To be frank, luck is important. And I should be grateful to have the luck, to have your mother, to have you.”

“Oh, come on, old man. That would ruin a literature of art. Too sentimental.”

“Then it is your job to construct a better one.”

“I am still thinking...maybe this one: Life is like a book indeed, there is always things yet to read, yet to write. And it was great pleasure for me to do him a bookmark.”