

蘇童：序：水缸回憶

Foreword: Remembering the Water Jar

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IN RECENT DAYS, for no apparent reason, I've been fondly recalling the big water jar at our house.

The colossal and sturdy water jar had disappeared from the doorway of our house for many years, just as it had, for a long time, disappeared from my life. My sudden fond recollections of the lumbering but useful vessel may have something to do with my writing, or perhaps it was simply triggered by life itself.

When I was a child, houses did not have running water, and everyone living in the same street would share a single tap. This was why every household had a jar for storing water. I recall that it was most often my two older sisters who had to draw water from the water-station. They would fill up two buckets made of plain sheet metal, and then with shoulders hunched, carry them back home. With an anger that often comes with involuntary labour, they would pour the water into the jar with a thunderous whoosh. Naturally, I just stood and watched. Whenever I saw the water in the jar swell up within the blink of an eye, and the brown walls of the jar swallowed up by the clear water, I felt an inexplicable thrill. Recalling it now, the thrill was typical to that of any child holding a secret deep within his or her heart, and the heart of my secret was a river clam hidden deep down in the jar.

You will of course accept my apologies for repeating this too-childish story for the benefit of grown-ups. Once upon a time, a poor but kind young man picked up a river clam that had been discarded on the riverbank. Filled with pity for the clam, he took it home and put it into the only water jar in his house. According to the rules of fairy tales, the river clam was, of course, no ordinary mollusc. Inside the clam lived a person—a fairy, naturally. Perhaps she wished to repay the

young man for his kindness, or she might have fallen in love with him, but the fairy would leap out of the jar every day after the young man had left the house for work. Transforming herself into a capable young woman, she would prepare a meal for him and leave it on the table before returning to the jar. Henceforth, the impoverished young man who had led a hand-to-mouth existence became free from hunger and want, leaving his poverty behind him without quite knowing how or why.

To this day I am a little embarrassed when I try to explain why, having heard so many strange and wonderful fairy tales as a child, the fairy in the clam story holds such a special place in my heart. Perhaps it's in my nature to loathe hard work so that, like so many mortals, I am always waiting for pie to fall from the sky. As a child I didn't have to boil the water, but I still liked to lift the lid off our water jar. Whenever I removed the lid, an unreal but nonetheless fervent dream would play out before me. Where is the river clam in the jar? Where is the fairy in the river clam? I wanted to see the clam at the bottom of the jar open up, and the fairy worm her way out of the shell—small like a pearl at first and then rising, rising up from the water, slowly getting bigger, and by the time she rose out of the water, she would look like a proper fairy. What followed was a series of gratifying and practical details. The fairy would head straight towards our hexagonal table and gave it a quick wipe before fetching dish after dish of delectable victuals from within the jar. There would be plates of chicken, duck, stir-fried liver and a large bowl of braised pork dripping with gravy that smelt heavenly! (There was no fish among the fairy's dishes because I never liked fish as a child and still don't.)

Obviously, I never once saw the re-enactment of the fairy tale in our water jar. It was the same when I lifted the lids of the jars at other people's homes. There was only water, no clams and certainly no fairies. On occasions when my mother bought back some river clams from the market to make a braised tofu dish, I would have other plans for the clams. I always thought that I should experiment by dropping a clam into the water jar. Once, I did just that. Given the fishy smell exuded by the clam into the water, my experiment was soon discovered. Someone fished the clam out from the bottom of the jar and threw it out, saying—Now look what you've done. All the water that's been hauled back is undrinkable now. Idiotic child! And with such a clever looking face too!

I never thought myself stupid. I stubbornly extracted the intelligence factor from even such compulsive childish behaviour, and attributed everything I did to curiosity. I came across Federico Fellini's childhood curiosity in his autobiography. He unabashedly recalled how he had crawled under the

dining table to look up the maid's skirt. He even wrote, 'It was black and unapproachable there. It held no attraction for me whatsoever.' I believe that a child's exploration of a maid's body is not sexual desire at work but curiosity. Curiosity is a strange plant. Even as it grows in a dark place, it will eventually burst into gorgeous blooms. I have seen many flowers of curiosity blossoming in Fellini's films. They also made me come to the sudden realization that, even as so many artists tirelessly explore and portray sex in their works, the sex in Fellini's films is singularly both innocent and at the same time exhilarating. To think that the combination of innocence and exhilaration can exude such warmth! Other children of Fellini's time were greatly influenced by family, church and school, all of which were imbued with fascist ideas. For Fellini, however, sex, the circus, movies and pasta were his childhood influences. Sexual desire was his exploration of self, circuses were the chance encounters in his travels, pasta was daily life, and the cinema was the place where he experienced his first 'epiphany'. This is a simple yet surprising fact. In Fellini, all the curiosity of childhood, all the passion of juvenility converged in an 'epiphany', and was transformed into an artistic urge, into a productive force.

My pining after that water jar is in fact a pining for my curiosity. The children of our time had Mao Zedong Thought, a fanatical and unfathomable political life, as well as a material life of simple poverty. No one was at a disadvantage; every family had a water jar, and each water jar was enough for a child's dreams to swim in, like a fish. Like a child's body, the world in a child's eyes has yet to mature. Like the future, reality is unknown. The stimulation of the sex glands, the stimulation of the imagination, the stimulation of the intellect—what kind of stimulation is most conducive to a child's growth? I'm not sure. But I am grateful for the stimulation of the water jar.

Not for only the water jar, but I am also grateful for the other romantic, mysterious or terrifying stories that circulated in the streets in those years. There are various ways of telling fairy tales. When there is no one telling tales, go and hear what the water jar has to say. I have always believed that the oh-so-serious artistic endeavours of grown-ups and the curiosity of their childhoods may be complementary. For ordinary grown-ups, curiosity is a non-essential cloud in an immense sky. Sometimes this cloud is a burst of brilliance; sometimes it is bleak and dark. And sometimes it is a barely-there wisp. Towards people, events and objects, curiosity behaves in a manner similar to a cloud's: what appears to be weightless and floating is in fact mysterious, unpredictable and unstable. All the residual curiosity left in grown-ups becomes utilitarian and profound, some of which turns directly into knowledge and skills. Curiosity about the

conundrum of human affairs has led to the study of history, philosophy and other fields of the humanities, while a limitless curiosity about matter has led to innumerable scientific disciplines and technological inventions and allowed us to move step by step into a material civilization. Curiosity about people has two manifestations: half of it crosses the threshold of art and culture, and enters hallowed halls on exalted ground; the other half strays readily into dubious alleys, percolating down the gutters as gossip and scandal, at times hailed as voyeurism, almost like a dark cloud that hangs above other people's heads. As for so-called writers, their curiosity is retained deliberately. In the realm of curiosity, their roles are at once the luckiest and the most baffling, for they seem to possess good and bad luck simultaneously. The writer's curiosity has been goaded on by himself and others, as well as by the demands of textual organisation and character psychology. Their curiosity is all-encompassing and, since it has no real practical value and clear direction, somewhat vague. With only this vague curiosity, yet attempting to dissect and explain the real world in the most pointed terms, I sometimes feel this profession is fated, a challenge, and most of all, miraculous.

A miraculous profession needs the support of miracles. As a child, all my longings for miracles were tied to that single water jar. Time passed, taking with it the jar as well as a part of the miracle. I have never liked romanticising my childhood, nor do I wish to sit atop the tree of memory and flaunt my overflowing emotions. But I can never bring myself to discard my childhood memories of that jar. It has disappeared from my life, but for years I have, as a writer, continued to repeatedly lift that lid. Who knows if this is an action of waiting or of pursuit? I cannot see life in a water jar but I can see the river clam. Inside the clam, I cannot see the fairy making her way out of the shell, but I can see the gleam of a miracle.

The American poet E. E. Cummings wrote a poem in his thirty-first year, almost a childish doodle, but for some reason I like it. I reproduce an excerpt:

who knows if the moon's
a balloon, coming out of a keen city
in the sky—filled with pretty people?

The moon is definitely not a balloon. There are beautiful cities in the sky but they can only be mirages. Are all the people in beautiful cities pretty? Not necessarily, I reckon. Even in the most beautiful of cities, there will live a number of vicious and ugly murderers. But how pretty it is to write poetry this way!



I have no more rhetoric left in me and so, it's back to the water jar. Ultimately, I want to thank the jar for the immensity and disorderliness of its symbolic meanings. Our real lives are also a huge water jar. The water in it decreases with every passing day, even as it becomes murkier. Given the existence of the fairy in the clam, however, we can look on the bright side. Since she can cook, she should also be able to provide drinking water or water for daily use. Therefore, we must believe in the water jar.

To believe in the water jar is to believe in life.