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The Fife of Bodidharma
by Cordwainer Smith

Music (said Confucius) awakens the mind, propriety finishes it, melody completes it.

-The Lun Yu, Book VIII, Chapter 8
I

It was perhaps in the second period of the proto-Indian Harappa culture, perhaps earlier in the very dawn of metal, that a goldsmith accidentally found a formula to make a magical fife. To him, the fife became death or bliss, an avenue to choosable salvations or dooms. Among later men, the fife might be recognized as a chancy precovery of psionic powers with sonic triggering.

Whatever it was, it worked! Long before the Buddha, long-haired Dravidian priests learned that it worked.

Cast mostly in gold despite the goldsmith's care with the speculum alloy, the fife emitted shrill whistlings but it also transmitted supersonic vibrations in a narrow range—narrow and intense enough a range to rearrange synapses in the brain and to modify the basic emotions of the hearer.

The goldsmith did not long survive his instrument. They found him dead.

The fife became the property of priests; after a short, terrible period of use and abuse, it was buried in the tomb of a great king.

II

Robbers found the fife, tried it and died. Some died amid bliss, some amid hate, others in a frenzy of fear and delusion. A strong survivor, trembling after the ordeal of inexpressibly awakened sensations and emotions, wrapped the fife in a page of holy writing and presented it to Bodidharma the Blessed One just before Bodidharma began his unbelievably arduous voyage from India across the ranges of the spines of the world over to far Cathay.

Bodidharma the Blessed One, the man who had seen Persia, the aged one bringing wisdom, came across the highest of all mountains in the year that the Northern Wei dynasty of China moved their capital out of divine Loyang. (Elsewhere in the world where men reckoned the years from the birth of their Lord Jesus Christ, the year was counted as Anno Domini 554, but in the high land between India and China the message of Christianity had not yet arrived and the word of the Lord Gautama Buddha was still the sweetest gospel to reach the ears of men.)

Bodidharma, clad by only a thin robe, climbed across the glaciers. For food he drank the air, spicing it with prayer. Cold winds cut his old skin, his tired bones; for a cloak he drew his sanctity about him and bore within his indomitable heart the knowledge that the pure, unspoiled message of the Lord Gautama Buddha had, by the will of time and chance themselves, to be carried from the Indian world to the Chinese.

Once beyond the peaks and passes he descended into the cold frigidity of high desert. Sand cut his feet but the skin did not bleed because he was shod in sacred spells and magical charms.

At last animals approached. They came in the ugliness of their sin, ignorance, and shame. Beasts they were, but more than beasts—they were the souls of the wicked condemned to endless rebirth, now incorporated in vile forms because of

the wickedness with which they had once rejected the teachings of eternity and the wisdom which lay before them as plainly as the trees or the nighttime heavens. The more vicious the man, the more ugly the beast: this was the rule. Here in the desert the beasts were very ugly.

Bodidharma the Blessed One shrank back.

He did not desire to use the weapon. "O Forever Blessed One, seated in the Lotus Flower, Buddha, help me!"

Within his heart he felt no response. The sinfulness and wickedness of these beasts was such that even the Buddha had turned his face gently aside and would offer no protection to his messenger, the missionary Bodidharma.

Reluctantly Bodidharma took out his fife.

The fife was a dainty weapon, twice the length of a man's finger. Golden in strange, almost ugly forms, it hinted at a civilization which no one living in India now remembered. The fife had come out of the early beginnings of mankind, had ridden across a mass of ages, a legion of years, and survived as a testimony to the power of early men.

At the end of the fife was a little whistle. Four touch holes gave the fife pitches and a wide variety of combinations of notes.

Blown once the fife called to holiness. This occurred if all stops were closed.

Blown twice with all stops opened the fife carried its own power. This power was strange indeed. It magnified every chance emotion of each living thing within range of its sound.

Bodidharma the Blessed One had carried the fife because it comforted him. Closed, its notes reminded him of the sacred message of the Three Treasures of the Buddha which he carried from India to China. Opened, its notes brought bliss to the innocent and their own punishment to the wicked. Innocence and wickedness were not determined by the fife but by the hearers themselves, whoever they might be. The trees which heard these notes in their own treelike way struck even more mightily into the earth and up to the sky reaching for nourishment with new but dim and treelike hope. Tigers became more tigerish, frogs more froggy, men more good or bad, as their characters might dispose them.

"Stop!" called Bodidharma the Blessed One to the beasts.

Tiger and wolf, fox and jackal, snake and spider, they advanced.

"Stop!" he called again.

Hoof and claw, sting and tooth, eyes alive, they advanced.

"Stop!" he called for the third time.

Still they advanced. He blew the fife wide open, twice, clear and loud.

Twice, clear and loud.

The animals stopped. At the second note, they began to thresh about, imprisoned even more deeply by the bestiality of their own natures. The tiger snarled at his own front paws, the wolf snapped at his own tail, the jackal

ran fearfully from his own shadow, the spider hid beneath the darkness of rocks, and the other vile beasts who had threatened the Blessed One let him pass.

Bodidharma the Blessed One went on. In the streets of the new capital at Anyang the gentle gospel of Buddhism was received with curiosity, with calm, and with delight. Those voluptuous barbarians, the Toba Tartars, who had made themselves masters of North China, now filled their hearts and souls with the hope of death instead of the fear of destruction. Mothers wept with pleasure to know that their children, dying, had been received into blessedness. The Emperor himself laid aside his sword in order to listen to the gentle message that had come so bravely over illimitable mountains.

When Bodidharma the Blessed One died he was buried in the outskirts of Anyang, his life in a sacred onyx case beside his right hand. There he and it both slept for thirteen hundred and forty years.

III

In the year 1894 a German explorer—so he fancied himself to be—looted the tomb of the Blessed One in the name of science.

Villagers caught him in the act and drove him from the hillside.

He escaped with only one piece of loot, an onyx case with a strange copperlike life. Copper it seemed to be, although the metal was not as corroded as actual copper should have been after so long a burial in intermittently moist country. The life was filthy. He cleaned it enough to see that it was fragile and to reveal the un-Chinese character of the declarations along its side.

He did not clean it enough to try blowing it: he lived because of that.

The life was presented to a small municipal museum named in honor of a German grand duchess. It occupied case No. 34 of the Dorotheum and lay there for another fifty-one years.

IV

The B-29s had gone. They had roared off in the direction of Rastatt.

Wolfgang Huene climbed out of the ditch. He hated himself, he hated the Allies, and he almost hated Hitler. A Hitler youth, he was handsome, blond, tall, craggy. He was also brave, sharp, cruel, and clever. He was a Nazi. Only in a Nazi world could he hope to exist. His parents, he knew, were soft rubbish. When his father had been killed in a bombing, Wolfgang did not mind. When his mother, half-starved, died of influenza, he did not worry about her. She was old and did not matter. Germany mattered.

Now the Germany which mattered to him was coming apart, ripped by explosions, punctured by shock waves, and fractured by the endless assault of Allied air power.

Wolfgang as a young Nazi did not know fear, but he did know bewilderment.

In an animal, instinctive way, he knew—without thinking about it—that if Hitlerism did not survive he himself would not survive either. He even knew that he was doing his best, what little best there was still left to do. He was looking for spies while reporting the weak-hearted ones who complained against the Führer or the war. He was helping to organize the Volkssturm and he had hopes of becoming a Nazi guerrilla even if the Allies did cross the Rhine. Like an animal, but like a very intelligent animal, he knew he had to fight, while at the same time, he realized that the fight might go against

him.

He stood in the street watching the dust settle after the bombing.

The moonlight was clear on the broken pavement.

This was a quiet part of the city. He could hear the fires downtown making a crunching sound, like the familiar noise of his father eating lettuce. Near himself he could hear nothing; he seemed to be all alone, under the moon, in a tiny forgotten corner of the world.

He looked around.

His eyes widened in astonishment: the Dorotheum museum had*been blasted open.

Idly, he walked over to the ruin. He stood in the dark doorway.

Looking back at the street and then up at the sky to make sure that it was safe to show a light, he then flashed on his pocket electric light and cast the beam around the display room. Cases were broken; in most of them glass had fallen in on the exhibits. Window glass looked like puddles of ice in the cold moonlight as it lay broken on the old stone floors.

Immediately in front of him a display case sagged crazily.

He cast his flashlight beam on it. The light picked up a short tube which looked something like the barrel of an antique pistol. Wolfgang reached for the tube. He had played in a band and he knew what it was. It was a fife.

He held it in his hand a moment and then stuck it in his jacket. He cast the beam of his light once more around the museum and then went out in the street. It was no use letting the police argue.

He could now hear the laboring engines of trucks as they coughed, sputtering with their poor fuel, climbing up the hill toward him.

He put his light in his pocket. Feeling the fife, he took it out.

Instinctively, the way that any human being would, he put his fingers over all four of the touch holes before he began to blow. The fife was stopped up.

He applied force.

He blew hard.

The fife sounded.

A sweet note, golden beyond imagination, softer and wilder than the most thrilling notes of the finest symphony in the world, sounded in his ears.

He felt different, relieved, happy.

His soul, which he did not know he had, achieved a condition of peace which he had never before experienced. In that moment a small religion was born. It was a small religion because it was confined to the mind of a single brutal adolescent, but it was a true religion, nevertheless, because it had the complete message of hope, comfort, and fulfillment of an order beyond the limits of this life. Love, and the tremendous meaning of love, poured through his mind. Love relaxed the muscles of his back and even let his aching eyelids drop over his eyes in the first honest fatigue he had admitted for many weeks.

The Nazi in him had been drained off. The call to holiness, trapped in the forgotten magic of Bodidharma's fife, had sounded even to him. Then he made his mistake, a mortal one.

The fife had no more malice than a gun before it is fired, no more hate than a river before it swallows a human body, no more anger than a height from which a man may slip; the fife had its own power, partly in sound itself, but mostly in the mechano-psionic linkage which the unusual alloy and shape had given the Harappa goldsmith forgotten centuries before.

Wolfgang Huene blew again, holding the fife between two fingers, with none of the stops closed. This time the note was wild. In a terrible and wholly convincing moment of vision he reincarnated in himself all the false resolutions, the venomous patriotism, the poisonous bravery of Hitler's Reich. He was once again a Hitler youth, consummately a Nordic man. His eyes gleamed with a message he felt pouring out of himself.

He blew again.

This third note was the perfecting note—the note which had protected Bodidharma the Blessed One fifteen hundred and fifty years before in the frozen desert north of Tibet.

Huene became even more Nazi. No longer the boy, no longer the human being. He was the magnification of himself. He became all fighter, but he had forgotten who he was or what it was that he was fighting for.

The blacked-out trucks came up the hill. His blind eyes looked at them. Fife in hand, he snarled at them.

A crazy thought went through his mind. "Allied tanks . . ."

He ran wildly toward the leading truck. The driver did not see more than a shadow and jammed on the brakes too late. The front bumper burst a soft obstruction.

The front wheel covered the body of the boy. When the truck stopped the boy was dead and the fife, half crushed, was pressed against the rock of a German road.

V

Hagen von Griin was one of the German rocket scientists who worked at Huntsville, Alabama. He had gone on down to Cape Canaveral to take part in the fifth series of American launchings. This included in the third shot of the series a radio transmitter designed to hit standard wave radios immediately beneath the satellite. The purpose was to allow ordinary listeners throughout the world to take part in the tracking of the satellite.

This particular satellite was designed to have a relatively short life. With good luck it would last as long as five weeks, not longer.

The miniaturized transmitter was designed to pick up the sounds, minute though they might be, produced by the heating and cooling of the shell and to transmit a sound pattern reflecting the heat of cosmic rays and also to a certain degree to relay the visual images in terms of a sound pattern.

Hagen von Griin was present at the final assembly. A small part of the assembly consisted of inserting a tube which would serve the double function of a resonating chamber between the outer skin of the satellite and a tiny

microphone half the size of a sweet pea which would then translate the sound made by the outer shell into radio signals which amateurs on the Earth surface fifteen hundred miles below could follow.

Von Griin no longer smoked. He had stopped smoking that fearful night in which Allied planes bombed the truck convoy carrying his colleagues and himself to safety. Though he had managed to scrounge cigarettes throughout the war he had even given up carrying his cigarette holder. He carried instead an odd old copper fife he had found in the highway and had put back into shape. Superstitious at his luck in living, and grateful that the fife reminded him not to smoke, he never bothered to clean it out and blow it. He had weighed it, found its specific gravity, measured it, like the good German that he was, down to the last millimeter and milligram but he kept it in his pocket though it was a little clumsy to carry.

Just as they put the last part of the nose cone together, the strut broke.

It could not break, but it did.

It would have taken five minutes and a ride down the elevator to find a new tube to serve as a strut.

Acting on an odd impulse, Hagen von Griin remembered that his lucky fife was within a millimeter of the length required, and was of precisely the right diameter. The holes did not matter. He picked up a file, filed the old fife, and inserted it.

They closed the skin of the satellite. They sealed the cone.

Seven hours later the message rocket took off, the first one capable of reaching every standard wave radio on earth. As Hagen von Griin watched the great rocket climb he wondered to himself, "Does it make any difference whether those stops were opened or closed?"