

韓松：乘客與創造者

The Passengers and the Creator

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1. The Passenger Cabin

A TREMOR under my rear-end.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. We are experiencing some turbulence, and there may be some bumpiness in the cabin. Please remain in your seats and secure your safety belts. The restrooms will be closed.’ A hoarse female voice emanating from the speaker overhead is broadcast throughout the cabin.

I quickly fasten my safety belt and turn my head sideways to the window, looking out in trepidation. A shroud of darkness. Legendary turbulences come and go but you never see them in reality. You suffer through it for a while, the nauseating jostling finally stops, and precious stability and tranquillity are restored. The air conditioning system releases a thin stream of warm air, unknottling the apprehension that has gathered in the pit of everyone’s stomach.

My seat is 31A. I stretch out my legs and watch them stick out akimbo like a crooked index and middle finger.

Beside me, passenger 31B has fallen asleep. There are three hundred and some people in the whole World and the majority of them are already under the spell of deep sleep. Throughout the journey, sleep, like a dog, has been mankind’s faithful companion.

Whisks of pale yellow light flow down from the overhead lights, and I begin to get drowsy. Before I fall asleep, I force myself to stand up, and straddle my way over the unmoving 31B, following the aisle to the back as if I were setting foot upon one of those rugged mountain paths I only see in my dreams.

I walk alone, the cabin is filled with people, but it seems as if no one is here. Trembling, I pull my gaze away from the procession of faces that bloom out of the rock-like seats, looking instead at the unending rows of silvery, oval cabin-windows.

—Darkness, nothing but darkness surrounds us.

A small cluster of lonely and wary human shapes stand by the door of the restroom. They're waiting. Maybe the guy inside is defecating, or maybe having a shower (the restroom doubles as a shower stall).

After a long, long time the door opens and a pair of gaunt middle-aged men emerge, their flushed faces covered in sweat. The people in the doorway hang their heads in embarrassment: they're a gay couple. No wonder it took so long. Not an ounce of public decency.

Eventually, it's my turn. I piss noisily, then flush. Seeing water gives me a bitter taste in my mouth. In this metallic World, it's impossible for human beings to know where water really comes from. This is the kind of thing that makes you wonder, but then again it does not matter.

As I piss, I stare at the sign on the wall:

No Smoking

The rest is mostly graffiti, but as far as I can tell, it's the same old stuff:

I like you, 35G

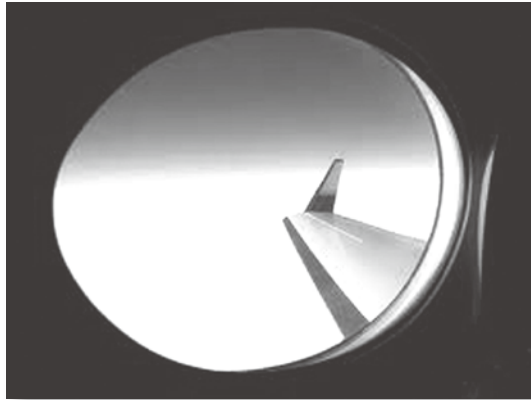
22A was here

18C is a sonofabitch

After that, I drag my feet back down the aisle to my seat, row upon row of motionless black heads arrayed before me.

Seat—aisle—bathroom—aisle—seat, this is the only path in life. This is how we live our lives.

Darkness, always darkness. A boy firmly tied down by his seat belt cries out, but the sleepers keep on sleeping.



2. Passengers

31B'S SLEEPING POSTURE is a bit odd.

I give him a nudge. His breathing is shallow and thick, white, pungent foam burbles from the corners of his mouth. Heart disease or brain embolism? A skinny cockroach is perching vigilantly on the fatty folds at the back of his neck.

I press the button to summon the stewardess, and a slender figure glides over. The flight attendants work on a rotating basis, selected from among the female

Economy Class passengers. She gives 31B an indifferent look, and calls another attendant over. They exchange a quiet glance, then carry 31B off.

The cockroach loses his footing and falls to the floor. He seems desolate, crawling away down the aisle all alone. Gaze fixed on this creature, I watch it make its way silently under the many dull leather shoes and disappear through the winding path formed by them before I breathe a sigh of relief.

The flight attendants strain to support the sick man, the three of them cobbled together like a makeshift toy, headed straight to the back of the cabin. A few passengers glance up briefly but most pay them no notice. As for what would be done with 31B, no one is interested.

A fetid odour wafts up from the recently vacated seat. It will soon be filled by a new person, which means that some woman from the Economy Class will soon have the good fortune of being given the right to bear a child.

But the person chosen to sit in 31B will not necessarily be that unborn infant. Seats have to be reassigned. This is a rule—passengers are not allowed to sit next to another for too long; if they become too familiar and begin to interact, problems could arise.

Who gets to sit where will be discussed in the Business Class cabin, and then decided in First Class. They have a passenger manifest that lists all human beings. A maroon velvet curtain always hangs between the First, Business, and Economy Class cabins—though it's soft, it's as impenetrable as iron. Economy Class passengers such as myself have no chance of crossing over, and no way of seeing what's on the other side.

The grating sound of the woman on the loudspeaker blares out again. The passengers called to their seats stand up like languid marionettes, on their faces the seemingly comprehensible smile of one for whom a heavy burden has been lifted. As if practising t'ai chi, bit by bit they open the ashen-grey overhead compartments, remove the valises and suitcases that they never have and never will use and carry them off to their new seats in a somnambulatory torpor, and the moment their bottoms hit the seats, they are asleep again.

I have been assigned to 18G. Next to me, the man in 18H is already seated comfortably. 'Hi,' he says to me. In this world, no one would introduce himself of his own accord. My heart leaps like a frog in my chest. My new neighbour looks like he's twenty-six or twenty-seven years old, his face shines clearly like a starry night, suffused with a jadeite glow. My jaw nearly drops. It has been a long time, so all the passengers in the Economy Cabin know one another's faces, but this man looks to be a complete stranger.

But it doesn't matter; in this World nothing matters.

3. The System

SOME SLIGHT but noticeable changes take place in the space outside of the cabin-windows. The darkness is not an even mass; some clear cracks exist out there which we have no way of understanding. Sometimes, stars display themselves. Sometimes flashes of lightning and claps of thunder ring out. Sometimes a golden orb emerges, and washed in its gentle glow, indistinct rows of serrated black clouds billow forth, like a chorus of demons performing on an empty stage.

All of these wondrous transformations occur out there just beyond our World, just like that. But passengers are separated from it by a thin membrane, and can only see it through their windows. In reality, they are partitioned off and completely unfamiliar with one another.

Sometimes, out there, in those very dark recesses down below, tiny sparks like clusters of stars form into a structure, silhouetting the shapes of chessboards and mazes; still others resemble spurs jutting forth, inside of which one can discern loops of differing lengths, glimmering in the depths of the darkness.

But they are no more than temporary splotches and patches whose time in our field of vision is short-lived, drifting lazily away behind, their size rapidly diminishing as they are absorbed by the infinite darkness and can be seen no more. Could they be like us, bouncing along on the turbulence?

Clearly, outside our World there is some macro-system. And maybe out there in its midst are other different and independent worlds. But what are they really like? There are explanations. But there is always a sense of doubt, a murky plasma that sometimes churns forth, coursing back to the cacophony of the heart.

4. 7X7

THE CHILDREN born in Economy Class will gradually grow up. During this time, the monitors in the backs of the dilapidated seats flicker on at irregular intervals. Their specialized education has begun.

I vaguely recall having received such an education myself while growing up, but I can't be wholly certain.

Basic education includes fastening safety belts and changing seats. Politics is mostly the prohibition of smoking and admonitions against graffiti.

Natural sciences are a bit more important. When the holographic instructor on the 3D monitor is done lecturing, homework is given. These are standard questions presented by a voice simulator that has seen so many years of use that it has become a clamour of crackles and skips:

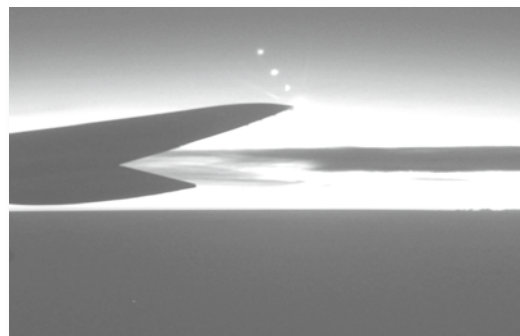
‘What—is—this—World—ca-ca-ca-ca-ca-called?’

The correct answer is:

‘7X7.’

7X7, that’s what our World is called. Some of the children get it wrong, saying ‘seven’, ‘seven-one’, ‘seven-six’, or ‘seven-eight’. Then, like spiteful housewives, the flight attendants will slap them on the palm with a little steel spoon.

Yes, this is our World. The spacious cabin always seems to be immersed in an undulating cloud of light purple fog; on the two dark foot-worn aisles with ragged carbon fibre compound flooring, the tightly packed and regularly spaced old seats are fixed, their covers worn through revealing the rotten foam padding; and then, outside the window and in the midst of the infinite



darkness, the indistinct rise and fall of two long wings jutting forth from the centre of the World. X is just a symbol, it is used to represent uncertainty.

The holographic instructor is an expressionless, wizened woman wearing traditional folk dress. I can’t tell how old she is but she also serves as the voice of the announcer on the loudspeaker. She says the World was created 7X7 years ago and then time stopped. That’s the essence of the story.

Then there’s us, put here in this sealed system by the Creator, a system that floats in the midst of what is said to be a vast atmospheric bubble that revolves around 7X7. We spend most of our time sitting still like potted plants, our countenances facing the same direction, expressionless as if carved from wood. The bright objects we occasionally see outside, those faint stars, are nothing more than evidence of small bubbles wriggling along the walls of the air cell, or what is referred to as a ‘mirage’.

7X7 is the only thing that stays constantly still, a self-sustaining ecosystem full of lives, supporting what seems to be the only meaningful thing in this bubble of a universe.

5. Meals

WE SLEEP at the appointed time, and after that we take our regular meals. All of the Cabin Attendants wear a blank, unsmiling expression as the four-wheeled metal cart swishes along the aisle and they dole out our meals. Steam

wafts up from the chicken or beef and rice wrapped in foil packaging, but the portion is too small, so we never get to eat our fill. Along with the main course, there's orange juice, coffee, or green tea. Sometimes, we are offered a bowl of watered-down, stale broth. This costs extra.

Before eating, the passengers intone a prayer:

'Boeing bless us. *Amitābha*.'

As we speak, we trace the outline of a five-pointed star on our chests using our left index finger. Boeing is the honorific name of the unseen Creator, and *Amitābha* is a modifier of respect.

Food and drink is produced as if by magic, in an endless stream. Of course, when it comes to the source, they are provided by the Creator, Boeing.

His existence can be verified empirically. Sometimes, in the abyss of darkness outside the cabin-windows, a long slender shadow like a spectre reflected on the water will suddenly appear. Just like our World, two delicate wings protrude from its sides. It hums softly as it comes closer to us, extends a long, flexible hose from its front end, and docks with our World.

We commonly refer to it as '7X7 the Provider'. Of course it is dispatched to us by the Creator—*dispatched* is jargon used to refer to the meaning of existence. However, if the Creator only made one actual 7X7, then we might surmise that the Provider was merely our doppelgänger. It supplies us with sustenance and energy—but there is no communication, and then, as elegantly as all parallel universes, it disappears into the dark vastness like a dancing ballerina, returning to the side of the unseen Creator.

The existence of the Provider 7X7 is affirmation of the precision and logic of Creation.

When the carbohydrates in your stomach begin their intense chemical reaction, focus intently upon the metallic shimmer of the unfoldable fine silverware laid out upon the seat-back table, and that glass that is almost unimaginably transparent, you can't help but marvel that the World is itself a miracle.

O, Boeing.

Amitābha.

6. Scepticism

EVERYTHING is quite normal except my new neighbour, who is a bit strange.

When everyone else is asleep, he is always awake; when everyone is taking their meal, he is talking to himself. The time he takes going to the bathroom is longer than others, and sometimes, I suspect he is the graffiti artist that no one

has ever caught in the act.

‘And why did the Creator banish us?’ He says once, sitting calmly in his seat but also mumbling to himself, almost startling me into leaping out of my own.

But I quickly regain my composure, think for a moment, and determine myself to classify this as a minor issue. This helps me gather the courage to say:

‘Because we have done wrong.’

‘But, what sort of wrong have we done?’ He seems excited to hear my unexpected response.

‘It is Original Sin. But even if we know this, what can be done? It doesn’t matter.’ My heart beats wildly. Exchange. Is this a dangerous exchange? How could I have done this?

‘Have you ever wondered where we were before we were banished?’

I feel a pathetic urge to laugh, and just shake my head with a sophisticated air. Then, a wave of caution that feels like measles or a blister fills my chest. I have lived this long, and received all this education and yet I have never known that among the three hundred and some members of the human race there could be a person who talked like this. This fellow is too weird, and a little bit dangerous. I trembled as I answer:

‘Another pointless question.’

‘Have you ever wondered what those twinkling lights outside the windows are?’

‘Wondered? About those mirages?’

‘What if they aren’t mirages, but are other very real worlds with life on them?’

Inconceivable. I hold my breath, turning my head to look at the stars outside the window. The stars overhead are so small and faint, they don’t seem to move at all, so you can’t really make much of them. But the chessboards and mazes of stars slipping slowly by below aren’t the same. The spaces between them and the paths they trace are fairly distinct. They look like glistening cubes of gelatine on a food tray, and looking closer you can almost make out traces of human artifice in their formation. Could there be humans dwellings down there? What is their relationship to the Creator? Unsettled, I turn my gaze away.

‘Have you ever wondered if they have been absolved?’ says 18H.

Worried and yet curious, I glance at him again. In comparison to the rest of the passengers in Economy Class, there is nothing noteworthy about his clothing and grooming; but an aura of indescribable strangeness radiates from someplace on his person.

I decide to close my mouth and say nothing, closing my eyes like a dead fish, but the blood only courses through my veins more violently.

Before long, under the influence of 18H’s suggestion, it dawns upon me that the

stars sweeping slowly by below always appear at regular intervals. That is to say, that which we have seen in the past will eventually return as before, floating by once again before our eyes and flashing out again before casting itself back into the darkness. Counting your heartbeats you could prove beyond a doubt that this is a regular cycle.

Why are there cycles outside of the closed World? The 3D Instructor's explanation is that the bubble surrounding us is constantly rotating. But why would a bubble rotate? Why do the stars overhead remain unmoving? What is outside the bubble? Could there be an even bigger bubble? Trying to figure out questions like these leads only to more questions, and it'll give you a headache. To be honest, I'd never wondered about this sort of thing before.

The other question 18H asks is, 'Why are our surroundings always dark?'

That's right, he asks about our surroundings.

7. Flight

THERE'S TOO MUCH food and water in my stomach, so I go to the restroom again. I run into some of my old seatmates, and we nod indifferently to one another.

We don't chat, but it's not because loose lips sink ships. Generally speaking, in life, at least in Economy Class, passengers don't develop close relationships, since there's really no need for mutual assistance.

When it comes to women, of course no one has any improper thoughts. The Code has been clear for a long time: the young ones among them will be summoned at set intervals to Business Class, while the young and beautiful will be summoned to First Class. A while after they have returned, the bellies of some of them will begin to grow like ugly tumours until eventually they can't even fasten their safety belts.

The Economy Class women all sit properly together, maintaining a stipulated distance from the men. Aside from the Cabin Attendants who bring food, it's very hard for men to get near them. If you get the urge, you just do it with the man next to you—reach out your hand to rub and tug underneath his zipper, or go to the bathroom and have a poke, that's okay. But the women are strictly off limits—that's forbidden in Economy Class.

There was one person who violated the taboo. When everyone was sleeping, he seduced a Cabin Attendant, and they did it in the bathroom at the back of Economy Class (he must have thought he was a Business or a First Class passenger, but how could they use that sordid bathroom?). Such a situation, if discovered, is generally disastrous for the man. According to the custom of our

World, he is castrated; one of the senior Cabin Attendants wields the knife, and they are never the least bit gentle.

When a woman gets pregnant, and there is no extra seat available at the time—that is to say, there hasn't been anyone recently disposed of due to illness or some similar matter—that also becomes a problem. The baby will have to be aborted. That is a custom as well.

All in all, because of the general reverence for custom in Economy Class, serious incidents rarely occur. For the most part, the men abide by the rules, and no one thinks to go out of their way to break them.

But how could it be this way?

This time, there is new graffiti in the bathroom.

—*When will we stop flying?*

What does 'fly' mean? It is without doubt quite special, as the 3D instructor never taught us this term. I stare blankly at it for a while, my heart feels as if someone has poured a cup of scalding coffee over it, and hot blood courses through my whole being. Suddenly, I feel that rare hardening sensation down between my legs.

8. Cruising

'SEEN something?'

18H watches me as I return. He seems to know everything, but asks as if he has no knowledge of what's going on, flashing me a gentle, blue lotus like, grin, dusted with cynicism.

It feels as if something inside me has awakened. Unfortunately, I can't seem to soften up down there, and my cheeks sear as if they were covered in gunpowder, burning and erupting across the surface of my epidermal cells. I can't help stuttering as I tell 18H about the graffiti. Half covering his mouth, he snorts out a laugh, as if choking on some food. That's it, just one chuckle, as his gaze drifts toward the bizarre protuberance in my lap, and says:

'You ever wondered what would happen if we flew faster?'

'What do you mean?' I hasten to take my seat.

'What if it's 7X7 that's moving, and not the bubble?'

'Hush, please.'

Fear crawls up the length of my spinal cord, creeping like a snake into the dark, chaotic morass of my thalamus. Preposterous—what's *flying*? What's *flying faster*? Right now, I'm really hoping there will be another reorganization of our seating so I can get away from the frightening 18H; but I feel conflicted—I'd actually hate to

leave 18H, I want to hear more of his novel cosmological theories.

And 18H is also one of those pretty good-looking young men.

I do my best to cover up what's going on down there, as beads of sweat roll down from my forehead, soaking my pants. Slimy ... I can't take it. Maybe I've caught some kind of disease. Am I going to die? That would be a relief.

9. The Luggage Compartment

OFF in some corner, another passenger has died, and so another rearrangement of seats is underway. *Finally I can get away from 18H*, I think, a sigh whistling from my mouth. But little did I imagine, as I take my new seat, there he is again like a spectre who has followed me over, plopping down next to me. This is really odd—unless has he got some sort of special authorization from First Class? Nothing could be more alarming than that. The strange thing is this secretly pleases me.

Then I realize that 18H—no, now I should call him 25E—has begun to follow me to the bathroom.

Is he after me as well?

Every time I come out of the bathroom, I see 25E leaning against the dingy doorway, mouth half-covered, giving me a furtive smile. My legs are like jelly.

'You ... need something?'

My heart races as I ask; thinking about my own age, I feel a sense of inferiority. I look worriedly at the other passengers, but no one has noticed us. Having sat there so long, human beings have lost the desire to keep tabs on their own kind.

'Got some stuff I'd like to show you, you in?' 25E asks me in hushed tones, infused with male affection.

I feel overwhelmed by his offer, nodding assiduously, feeling as if I've become young again. At this, 25E takes me by the hand, and leads me to the back of the World. His hand is cool and soft, brisk and stimulating like early spring. My heart is dancing in my throat. I've never been to the back of the World before, as usually only Cabin Attendants are allowed here. This is the galley and storage station and the women also use it to organize the supplies that are sent over from 7X7's doppelgänger.

Two girls are immersed in their work, and when they catch sight of 25E, they exchange a knowing grin as if they are familiar with one another. My face must be flushed. I feel both suspicious and envious, letting go of 25E's hand in shock, but feel bad about it afterwards. The Attendants leave as soon as they've finished up their work, at which point 25E reaches down, and with practised ease pulls open a trapdoor in the floor. Below, I see a capacious space.

In a hushed whisper 25E says mysteriously, ‘The Luggage Compartment.’

I hadn’t imagined that he was merely taking me to see this. I’m somewhat taken aback and my boiling blood suddenly cools off a few degrees. But the Luggage Compartment has sucked me in anyway—it only exists in myth you know, and now it appears right in front of me, and inside I can make out a cluster of bobbling green lights. Upon further inspection, I realize that these glowing pinpricks are a cluster of human eyes. Never before had I known that there were people actually living in the Luggage Compartment.

Someone looks up, and greets 25E, ‘Hi!’

‘Hi!’ 25E laughs back.

For the sake of politeness 25E has me greet him as well. I stare blankly at him, then utter timidly, ‘Hi.’

Thirty or forty people are crowded into the Luggage Compartment, but there is no assigned seating. Customs here are clearly different from up in Economy Class. There are elderly people and children. The children are playing with cockroaches and mice. A naked man is pressing a naked woman to the floor beneath him (this is the first time that I have ever seen sexual intercourse with my own eyes in this World). Two men are hard at work operating a small plastic grinder, beneath which a crimson liquid is oozing out, flowing down an aluminium spout, and into the mouth of a Coca-Cola bottle. An ugly, middle-aged woman standing to one side heaps scoop after scoop of a viscous, chunky, yellow, congee-like substance into the grinder.

This congee-like substance is being taken from the body of a stinking corpse lying on the floor. A few husky young men carve up the body enthusiastically. I count five or six corpses, and among them I recognize 31B, who has been reduced to little more than a glistening carapace of skeleton. His head still rests untouched atop his neck, making him look like a hydrocephalic infant.

10. Cabin Attendants

I DON’T KNOW when it began, but trade between the Luggage Compartment, Economy, Business, and First Class has been quietly taking place all along, though this is secret shared by only a few.

The Attendants sell the corpses of the dead or soon-to-be dead to the passengers in the Luggage Compartment, who process them, then give the finished product back to the Cabin Attendants, who sell it in First Class. And thus, short-rib soup (the only locally produced, gourmet nutritional product in the World) came to be sold in great quantity in the First Class Cabin—who

knows why, but the passengers in First Class have endless streams of money. Then the Cabin Attendants split the earnings with the people in the Luggage Compartment, usually seventy-thirty, with the latter taking the larger share. However, when they are buying corpses from Economy Class, the guys in the Luggage Compartment have to pay up as well. In the end, the Cabin Attendants can get about forty to fifty per cent of the total profits from this chain of exchange and as a result they have become the wealthy of Economy Class.

All of this has been hidden from us.

In Economy Class, every woman has the chance to become a Cabin Attendant. For this reason, the economic status of women is much higher than that of men, which is perhaps why we simply and meekly play by the rules and make no fuss.

Sometimes the supply of corpses exceeds the demand, and First Class has eaten their fill, so the surplus goes on sale in Business Class at a discount. If even more becomes available, Economy Class might eventually get to share.

Have I ever drunk the soup? I can recall the taste of watered-down short-rib broth.

The Luggage Compartment is the first hidden world that 25E takes me to see. That 7X7 is a World of multiple layers has already been established. But, what I wonder now is ... is what I see before me actually real? And if not, then has everything I have seen before been an illusion?

11. The Landing Gear

AS THE TRUST between myself and 25E gradually grows stronger, he comes to reveal his true origins to me. He comes from the Wheel Well World—yet another unknown level of 7X7.

In order to get to the World of the Wheel Well, we first have to pass through the Luggage Compartment. Only by following 25E's lead do I dare pass through that maggoty, fetid congregation of men and corpses, but I am stricken with terror nonetheless. Then we have to worm our way through the hydraulics compartment, whose spiderweb of pipes and assemblage of scarred spare parts lining the walls is truly an eye-opening spectacle. The World is such a complex assembly, a gigantic and precise machine, and had I not seen it with my own eyes how could I have known about it?

We have arrived. With a clank, 25E opens a metal door beneath which the locus of his life before he ventured out is revealed.

A cold gust of wind buffets my face. The lonely hermits residing in the cramped confines of the Wheel Well are bundled up in thickly padded clothing against the

cold. There are very few of them, but they are the elite of this multi-layered World. They call themselves the Seekers. They don't want to be bothered by anyone, so they've hidden themselves away in the Wheel Well to conduct their secret work. But I have a sense that, at the very beginning of Creation, they had already made the decision to live here in the Wheel Well. They were never normal passengers in our World.

But what's a *landing gear*? Such a terrifying question. Suddenly, the feeling of coming to begins to well up again and my whole being is awash in a wave of desire to remember something. But I can't do it, nothing comes to mind. 25E cocks his head to one side, gazing at me with keen interest. But why has he brought me here to see this? Who am I?

The people in the Wheel Well don't say 'hi' to me. They are all hard at work reading, and no one has time to pay heed to visitors. The reading materials all came from the Luggage Compartment. There used to be a huge pile of baggage there, but eventually it was cracked open by the residents of the Wheel Well. Inside, they found some valuable texts which contradict the teachings on the television in Economy Class.

Based upon what was gleaned from these texts, the Seekers carried out a series of experiments. They stole the necessary materials from various corners of the World—things like fuel and oxygen tanks—and cobbled together what they call a 'rocket pack'. Strapped tightly to one's back, and then ignited, it allows one to leave the 7X7 World, and explore the vast bubble of gas out there.

Is this where the notion of 'flight' comes from? If the entirety of 7X7 is indeed in flight, and the bubble of gas is not moving, then it is a true challenge to the human capacity for reason.

A passenger like myself can't help but feel envious of the passengers in the Luggage Compartment or the Wheel Well.

'Do the First Class passengers know about your existence?' I ask cautiously.

'If they did find out, they'd pretend they hadn't,' 25E answers paradoxically.

25E is one of the agents dispatched by the secret Wheel Well World. He entered into Economy Class life, but he can change seats according to his own free will. This in and of itself is most puzzling, as there are strict population controls in 7X7, among them the passenger manifest system, which makes it an act most people would not even dare to think of.

I ask how he does this and he says, 'It's easy. I bribe the Business and First Class passengers.'

That's how I learned for the first time that there is in this world a thing called bribery.

When the jet pack is ignited, it evokes a very subtle feeling. A Seeker, bundled in a puffy jacket, covers his face with an oxygen mask stolen from the passenger cabin. A pair of short, thin, awl-shaped nozzles protrudes from the half-metre long metal tanks strapped to his back, like some extraneous extension of his backbone that emits two piss-yellow bursts of flame. His body drops through the opening in the floor of the Wheel Well and falls away from the immense body of 7X7. With a *whoosh*, he disappears into the thick blanket of darkness, as if he were embarking on a rendezvous with the fading stars. At this point, all of my internal organs feel as if they have seized up in a malarial torpor.

Upon his return, the adventurer says he has seen ‘The Light’.

12. The Three-Dimensional Diagram

‘THE LIGHT is a difficult perception to put into words, but I’ll do my best to explain it to you,’ 25E says. ‘If you were to turn around and fly backward, or if you increase your speed and fly forward, you would be able to see some traces of it. By then, the Seekers are already far, far away from 7X7. A part of the apparently limitless blackness begins to become uneven and fade away, bit by bit. The edges of the universe grudgingly begin to allow a sliver of red flame to emerge. It is capricious as a woman’s face, varying from rosy to reddish black. Then the world becomes differentiated by a riot of colours, the tones shifting constantly as they fatten out. It’s as if your eyes have been wasted on you before. Then, you get scared and you want to return to the darkness.’

It’s hard for me to believe any of this. The holographic teacher never mentioned The Light. The reason is simple: if the Creator put us here in infinite darkness, what need would there be for him to call attention to light? How are we to know that what the Seekers have described to us isn’t just an even greater mirage?

25E says that since the jet packs can only travel so far, none of the Seekers have managed to fly all the way into The Light, so no one can know for certain how far away from us The Light really is. All you can do is observe it from far, far away.

‘So, aside from going backwards and forwards, has anyone ever tried going down? Have you ever tried descending into those drifting chessboards and mazes of stars down there? ... you said they aren’t mirages.’

I feel like I’ve scared myself with my own question, and 25E’s expression has shifted subtly as well. His countenance elicits tender feelings like those toward a sick child. He does his best to explain, ‘Those are two different questions. Going down involves greater levels of complexity and technique. Most crashes happen during take-off and landing. Among the Seekers, a clear solution to this question

has still not been worked out.'

He stops and sighs, eyes misted over in sadness as he gazes at me, speaking more slowly, 'We did, we had people go down, but it's not like flying horizontally and they didn't make it back. Clearly, the Creator made a vertically acting force whose effects are imbalanced. We've been calling it "gravity".'

An oppressive silence settles over us. We gaze at one another for a long, long time, until gradually breaking away. In the depths of his eyes, I see a spark of reverence and despair. 'Aiya,' I sigh quietly to myself.

'No matter what the difficulties are, once you have been out, you will gain the objective frame of mind and perspective to see the true nature of our World.' 25E quickly regains his composure, forging bravely ahead, 'It floats like a great suitcase in the indescribable vastness of space. Lights that shine dimly as if through an orange peel wink faintly through the windows. It roars with an unending stream of thunder and spits out roiling tongues of heat that can shred all inorganic matter. It has a vigorous and terrific sensation of motion, so we say it is flying, and while the flickering lights on the surface of the bubble of gas are immobile, they are the authentic background. How long are we actually going to keep flying? Where are we flying to? What kind of Creator could design such a perfect and unending journey? Who, after all, is Boeing?'

And this is not the most amazing discovery. According to the observations of the Seekers, in the darkness of space there are an infinite number of 7X7s, each of them a floating agglomerated mass, their geometrical shape just like our World, differing only in size. They fly steadfastly and silently along with us. When the Seekers put on their jet packs and wander about, they eventually come to see this vast array. It is a soul-stirring sight.

'We have calculated it: within the range of jet pack flight, we have observed at least 5,000 7X7 Worlds. Their never-ending roar echoes across the gas-bubble universe. Starlight pours over their silver-grey bodies like water, they are like a pod of migrating whales seen only in dreams.'

The Seekers have tried to establish contact with those worlds, and were eventually successful in gaining access to their Wheel Wells and Luggage Compartments. In the end, they discovered that only the passengers aboard our 7X7 World had managed to invent jet packs. The other worlds all remain mired in the age of prehistoric ignorance.

'This made us feel a sense of obligation—a mission to enlighten. And most importantly, we have finally proven that we are not alone. If we have been cast off by the Creator, then perhaps we are a whole race of outcasts,' 25E says. 'It is hard to believe that it could just be coincidence: the passengers of different Worlds are

all separated from one another, but everyone speaks the same language, even the graffiti in the restrooms is written in the same script.'

13. The Captain

FOR THE FIRST TIME, I realize our 7X7 is not the entire World, and the three hundred and some passengers are not the whole of humanity.

Little by little 25E is making me smell danger. Truth is, the danger has always been there; it comes from his having consciously approached me and his deep interest in me. Perhaps he has some motive I cannot fathom, but it is not the kind of innocent feeling that I had yearned for. Is it a conspiracy or a trap?

All this time, I've been feeling by turns depressed and excited, ashamed one day and hopeful the next. I want to ask 25E if I can use their jet packs to try flying outside myself and confirm what he told me (what I really want is to satisfy my own curiosity). But I'm so afraid of an embarrassing rejection that I swallow my request.

Gradually, I am struck by a premonition that something very important is about to happen to me.

Finally, one day right after I enter the bathroom, 25E pushes his way in behind me. He locks the bathroom door and patiently watches me finish peeing, then says to me solemnly,

'Based upon our extended investigations, we've confirmed that you are the one we have been looking for. I can officially announce that to you now.'

'You've been looking for me all along? Who ... am I?'

I feel a sharp, wet shadow surge toward me, as if a hole is being drilled in the top of my fossil-like cranium, penetrating into my brain, whipping it around and stirring up something very old. In the mirror above the sink, I see my face has gone ashen. Tense and anxious, I lick my lips like a black bear, my hands pausing in the act of fastening my belt.

25E calmly utters the strange word, 'Captain'.

These syllables stir in me a cyclone of fear and excitement, as if they were both familiar and completely foreign. I try to turn it over in my mind for a moment, but it slips from my grasp as quick as a loach in the mud.

'The Creator created you so that you might control this World. You aren't a common passenger. Only you can guide 7X7 into The Light. I came to the Economy cabin to look for you.'

25E encourages me, 'Zip up your pants, wash your hands, and come with me.'

14. The First Class Cabin

AT THE ENTRANCE to Business Class I instinctively come to a halt. This is a restricted area. But 25E is calm and collected as he leads me by the hand into territory familiar to him. For the first time, I am seeing a special group of passengers who have lived in the same World but whom I have never before set eyes upon. They all have the countenances of hypocrites, wearing fine clothing and maintaining a collective silence as if engaged in solemn contemplation.

25E greets them, and they smile and give 25E a nod. I wonder, *what did 25E use to bribe them?*

Later I learn it was cigarettes—a prohibited article in the World of 7X7.

Passing through the Business Cabin, we begin to approach First Class—‘approach’ is another piece of jargon used to describe the particular characteristics of the World. First Class is not nearly as intimidating and luxurious as I had imagined; only the seats are a bit more spacious. The passengers look the same as us—no extra noses or ears, but their average age is a bit higher. They are more sanctimonious, their clothes are finer, and their deportment more dignified—and they are all men.

One other difference with Economy Class is there is a stronger odour here. To be specific, it’s the smell of death. I notice that some of the passengers have their seat belts fastened tightly about them, and their bodies are in an advanced state of decay with a mess of white bones protruding from their half-empty chest cavities.

But here, no one takes the bodies away to be made into broth. I suppose this is the custom in First Class. The seats are coffins, and people won’t leave them even after they have died.

I can’t help thinking that if we keep on ‘flying’ like this, the prospects are pretty grim. If the last person in First Class dies, and they don’t make room for someone else, does that mean their spirits determine the birth rate in Economy Class? Chaos will surely follow.

This makes me realize the importance of 25E—and the role that I may have to take on. I feel distressed rather than excited. The fact is, if not for 25E, how could I have found out these frightful secrets? And our lives would have just gone on as they had before, as utterly perilous as that would be. But is there anything I can do about it?

Yes, I’m totally ignorant. Business and First Class are cordoned off from Economy Class, and aside from the secret sexual services and trade in human flesh, there is no other communication between them. The lips of the women who come out from there are all sealed—they must have been paid off.

But 25E doesn't stay in First Class for long, and quickly leads me instead to approach the front of the cabin, out of nowhere producing a key that he uses to open another door.

15. The Cockpit

BEHIND THE DOOR, there is another cabin. Again, I am seized with wonder—the apparently seamless World is actually divided into so many subsections, each possessing its own wonders. What hidden plan was there in the Creator's design?

The cabin before me is completely unoccupied. 25E calls it 'The Cockpit'. Laid out in front and on both sides, the usual oval windows are replaced by irregular rectangular ones, providing an unequalled field of vision. Beneath the windows are two leather seats, in front of which six LCD monitors are arrayed with green numerals and lines flashing on the screens. Top to bottom and left to right, hundreds of dials, switches and lights cover every surface. This orderly arrangement of objects smoothly comes into view, but in my heart it stirs up a turbulent sense of *déjà vu*. I still don't remember who I really am, however, and that pressing question bubbles to the surface: what is the job of the 'Captain'?

25E points to the seat on the left, and says solemnly, 'That is your seat.' His face suddenly reveals a look that seems like respect. This saddens me.

25E digs around in the pocket of his jacket for some time, and pulls out a yellowed ID (a pilot's licence) to show me. My picture is on it, and on my head is a strange-looking peaked cap, printed on the bottom are the words:

NAME: Wang Ming POSITION: Captain

In 7X7, we had always referred to one another by our seat numbers. Having just learned that I have a first and last name, I am dumbstruck with shame.

After a while, I ask 25E hesitantly, 'Do you have a name too?'

'You can call me *Something*.'¹

Now, this young man named *Something*, who comes from the Wheel Well, pulls out some more IDs, labelled 'Co-Pilot', 'Navigator', 'Flight Engineer', 'Communications Officer', and 'Flight Attendant'. I know the people in all of the photos, they are all passengers in Economy Class. It turns out they also all have names, like 'Guohang', 'Quniao', 'V1', or 'Daigan', What is this all about?

'A flight crew,' says *Something*. The ID cards have been recently found in a suitcase. This is the latest breakthrough, and it serves as an important piece of evidence. The Seekers are hard at work establishing contact with the other

¹ This word appears in English in the original text.

members of the flight crew.

‘Flight crew?’

‘We infer that this World used to be operated by a group of people, and you were their leader, so you had control over everyone.’

Everyone? Control? All three hundred and some passengers? I look again at the chair, the dials and switches. A vague sense of familiarity begins to well up in me, then just as quickly evaporates. Does this separate space really belong to me? For a long time, I have sat benighted with everyone else, cramped into Economy Class, changing seats every so often. But suddenly, here is this empty cabin, and it is said that I used to control it; all this seems to spark an insecurity in me. Furthermore, our names sound awkward and harsh; it feels as if they couldn’t possibly have been given to us by the Creator. One can’t help but feel uneasy with all of this. A wave of fear passes over me, and I ask:

‘Is this the head of the World?’

‘Yes. Right now it’s unoccupied, which is a problem.’

‘The World—you mean to say it’s not automatic?’

‘Technically speaking, the Creator may have made the World completely automatic, but we don’t want it to continue this way.’

‘Why not?’

‘It doesn’t feel natural.’

‘Is it because of The Light?’

‘Yes, perhaps ...’

Something’s face suddenly turns deathly pale, radiating brilliance in the darkness, suffused with an ingratiating delicacy. I gather my courage, then put my arm around his waist, hugging him tightly. It doesn’t matter, even if it’s dangerous, I like the tranquillity of the Cockpit.

After that, we sit down. The darkness suffused with the light of scattered stars pours in through the windshield before us. *Something* and I sit there silently for a long time. His face is like an ivory carving, with a scarlet translucence emanating from deep within. I thrust my hand into his palm, and feel an icy coldness beginning to melt there, as it shakes like a typewriter.

16. Airspeed and Direction

‘THE REASON why we can’t fly out of the darkness is because of our speed and direction,’ *Something* says, looking at me seriously, his eyes radiating a deep blue wisdom. The first thing that attracted the attention of the Seekers was that all 7X7 Worlds were flying in the same direction at the same speed. 7X7

is a bilaterally symmetrical physical system on either side, but this is not so from front to back; this bears a clear relation to the direction of flight. With our frequent encounters with turbulence, this layout makes sense in terms of the principles of 'aerodynamics' (but what is that?).

Something says: Based upon our study of the cycles, we have been able to deduce that 7X7 is constantly revolving around a large, ball-like object beneath us, never ceasing. This is the only explanation why passengers could have observed the recurring disappearance and reappearance of specific patterns down in the depths.

But why do we never arrive at the realm of Light glimpsed by the Seekers? Theoretically speaking, this is because the ball-shaped object is rotating at the same time, and therefore we were either flying too fast or too slow. Which is to say, the angular velocity of 7X7 is the same as the angular velocity of the ball-shaped object's rotation; this seems to be the result of a meticulously calculated arrangement.

Continuing on like this, the Creator ensured that 7X7 would always be mired on the side of darkness. In other words, our flight is always chasing after the darkness and we will never catch up with the constantly shifting line that divides darkness and daylight.

But another question presented itself: why must He exile us into darkness? Trying to find out what the passengers' Original Sin was is no longer a meaningless question.

'No matter what, the only way to find the ultimate answer is to guide 7X7 out of the darkness,' *Something* says poignantly. 'After all, the Seekers have already caught a glimpse of The Light, and based upon what we can glean, only you, Captain, know how to break away from the constant speed of the World. Perhaps in the end we will learn how to make a jet pack that flies farther and faster, but we cannot ignore the fact that our 7X7 alone is home to more than 300 passengers, and all around us there are so many other 7X7s. Only when all of these Worlds fly together into the light will it all make sense. Wang Ming, you must take control; things start with you.'

'But won't this violate the will of the Creator?'

'Why don't we apply reverse thinking here; what if this was exactly what the Creator was hoping for? Maybe we weren't driven into exile by Him, and this exile has been self-inflicted all along, do you understand? But no one has self-knowledge. Now is the time to press forth on the path to our true destination.'

Suddenly, as if awakening from a dream, I feel as if I have realized the purpose of the landing gear.

17. The Flight Crew

THEN, with the help of *Something*, I quickly make contact with the rest of the flight crew. Including me, there are fourteen people—four men and ten women.

That's right, four men and ten women, and together we become a unit. Of course, this sort of unusual relationship between men and women could only take place in unusual circumstances. Its formation and structure are admittedly a bit awkward, but there is also a certain sense of secret excitement about it. It will be necessary for us to overcome our psychological discomfort. This World has never before had the concept of a 'collective', and for me, the most urgent need is to recover a sense of what's known as 'leadership'.

And so, the real work begins. From what we have been able to glean from the main monitor on the flight deck and the flight checklist, we all dedicate ourselves to remembering our fabled 'flight skills'. According to *Something*, this includes how to make 7X7 accelerate or decelerate, make a turn and change the direction of flight, and descend from a higher point in order to approach the chessboards and mazes of stars that lie below.

But very soon we realize that all attempts from the Cockpit to regain control of the resources at hand are in vain. Without a doubt, some sort of brainwashing had occurred. After that, the Flight Crew were made into regular passengers, and we were all banished to Economy Class, where we received our education in politics, general knowledge, and natural science. And at the same time, the Omnipotent Creator succeeded in switching over to autopilot, or perhaps I should say, He took over the Cockpit, hidden away somewhere in command by remote controls. Maybe 7X7 was facing some grave threat at the time? Maybe if this had not taken place, it would have disintegrated. The Creator had lost faith in us.

—This is *Something's* explanation. What he and his mates want to do is restore the Creator's faith in re-establishing the dialogue between man and machine so that 7X7 could be controlled by the 'liveware' that had been bred inside it.

But what if these things *Something* is saying aren't true? There is no third party to make a final determination. This could all be just a drama put on by the Creator. Its title would be 'The Farce of the Light' or something like that. *Something* and his mates would be the props, without being aware of it themselves. Stemming from their own selfish needs, the heretical, uncultured Wheel Well had shamelessly counterfeited both us and our flying licences. Maybe there was no such thing as the Captain and the Flight Crew.

—Among the flight crew, there are those who suspect this to be the case.

‘Our world has always been a stable place, and everything is provided for. There is no need for us to fret; isn’t that our aim in following the Creator’s purpose all our lives? And what’s wrong with staying in the dark? I don’t see any harm in it,’ the young male Co-pilot, whose name was Guohang,² said. ‘But now that we’ve made a mess out of something originally quite simple, we may as well follow it through.’

There seems to be something profound in what he is saying. I give him an anxious glance. Meanwhile, the putrid scent emanating from First Class keeps growing thicker in the air.

18. The Monitor

THE REBELLION against the First Class cabin breaks out during a particularly strong episode of turbulence.

The instigator is Guohang. He secretly drew in all the members of the flight crew except for myself, and using the sharp-edged cutlery as weapons, they carry out a surprise attack on First Class.

A struggle ensues. The First Class cabin has grown old and senile and naturally lost out, resulting in their being driven into Economy Class. Guohang takes a seat in First Class, and the passengers in Business Class express their unanimous assent.

Guohang had not invited me to participate in the uprising, calling our relationship into question. This is of course related to my position as Captain. What had we done together before? Thus, our recently-formed team has been transformed.

After that, *Something* and I no longer have the opportunity to enter the Cockpit, which has become a crypt filled with the rotting corpses of those cleaned out of the First Class cabin. A seal is placed over the door by Guohang, and it has become a truly restricted area.

The Co-pilot assumes his true role in the World: The Monitor.

And *Something* catches wind of an even graver danger. During this time, he leads me about, surreptitiously collecting the ‘life jackets’. As it turns out, these strange objects had been stuffed underneath everyone’s seats, as if their purpose were predetermined. Then he gives the life jackets to the residents of the

² ‘Guohang’ is the abbreviation for ‘Zhongguo Guoji Hangkong Gongsi’ 中國國際航空公司—Air China.

Wheel Well. The Seekers tear them to pieces, then began reassembling them as ‘parachutes’.

In no time at all, they produce ten parachutes. *Something* forcibly encases my body in the vest containing the parachute. He then goes and picks out nine more passengers, and gives each of them a parachute. There are more than three hundred people in this World, but only these few are given parachutes. I am seized with an unshakeable apprehension: have the Seekers given up on their plan to bring everyone to The Light?

Ashamedly, *Something* explains, ‘This is the last resort for escaping the darkness if everything else fails. You haven’t had any professional training so you can’t yet operate a jet pack.’

The critical moment is drawing nigh. This seems to have been apparent ever since Guohang started the insurrection. *Something’s* eyes look bloodshot, for the first time, as if this were a final farewell. He continues:

‘Since we can’t recover control of the World and successfully fly it into The Light, we’ll make it fall.’ My heart sinks at the despairing tone in *Something’s* voice. ‘Come what may, if it keeps on flying like this, it eventually has to fall. We have already found out that this creation of the Creator has a limited lifespan. The insulation for 7X7’s cables, electrical outlets and circuits has already begun to deteriorate. The fire alarm has already signalled three false alarms, and components of the propulsion system are beginning to wear out. If one of the bearings fails, we won’t be able to restore it. According to our analysis, the end will be upon us any day now. There is no more time. If we can’t save everyone, we’ll just have to pick some representatives for an escape.’

Two fine streams of tears roll down my cheeks.

‘When the time comes, you ten will use the parachutes to drop down to the constellations below, and tell them what happened here.’ He struggles to smile as he issues this earnest exhortation, lifting his hand up to gently brush away my tears.

‘And what about you?’ I look at him, touched.

‘I have to take care of the passengers first, and you will bear witness to the disaster. There is a limited number of jet packs, and not even all of the Seekers will be able to escape.’

19. Change of Command

VERY QUICKLY, Guohang institutes a new order. He dismisses the Flight Crew and selects a group of boys to act as Flight Attendants, charged with instituting

strict monitoring. The children prove to be apt for the job and as a result, the graffiti in the bathroom—that left one in palpitations, between tears and laughter—is soon eradicated.

After that, the cleansing begins. The boys plunge, screaming, into the Luggage Compartment and the Wheel Well, arresting the residents of the lower strata. The majority of them have no time to grab a jet pack and make their escape, and they are dragged up to the main cabin. The Flight Attendants execute them by strangling them with seat belts. Their crime: ‘disruption of World balance by a stowaway’.

Illegal commerce is uprooted, so the basis for the bribery is removed; the female passengers reassume their rightful places. It seems as if a great new world is about to be born.

Passengers in Business Class ‘volunteer’ to carry out the task of processing the new corpses, and a spoonful of the resulting soup is given out equally for the common enjoyment of the Business, First, and Economy Classes. It is to be like this from now on; no one has special privileges, and equality and fairness are the ultimate standards championed by Guohang.

The jet packs are seized as contraband, and the boys hoist them up for display in the common area. These were the tools of subversion, and they had almost shaken the foundations of Boeing’s legitimacy.

20. Evasive Action

AFTER the death of *Something*, I stop getting hard-ons.

I have not been killed, but am put on lockdown, and when I go to the bathroom a Flight Attendant accompanies me. I have no way of making contact with those nine passengers who have secretly gotten parachutes. Luckily, Guohang is not aware of the parachutes’ existence.

More and more, I meditate on the question of ‘falling’.

‘You will use the parachutes to drop down to the constellations below, and tell them what happened here.’

Something’s last testament echoes in my ears. Who is ‘them’? I’ve never looked forward as much as I do right now to finally meeting those strangers who don’t live here in 7X7.

The Flight Attendant monitoring me also has a name. He is called ‘Wake’, he’s twelve or thirteen, and he sat by me once a long time ago.

‘Wang Ming, what did you do wrong? Did you do it with one of their women?’

‘Is that what you think, Wake?’

‘Mmmhmm, were they good?’

‘Well, if that’s what you mean, then yes, they weren’t bad. Very different from the women in Economy Class. Unfortunately, you guys killed all of them.’

‘Made them into broth? That is too bad.’

Wake chuckles, and I am suddenly struck with the realization that a profound change is taking place in the World—the ordinary folk in Economy Class have begun to get interested in the opposite sex.

He constantly pesters me for stories about the women down below. I tell him about the erotic scenes I witnessed in the Luggage Compartment, carefully choosing the tidbits I recount. He listens so raptly as to stop breathing, purple arteries bulging out on his sinewy neck. Eventually, he pulls down his pants in front of me.

‘Do it,’ he says.

‘It’s not like that ...’

This is a great disappointment. The precocious boy spins around, rearing up spitefully as if he is about to strike me. But he doesn’t actually hit me; instead he turns back around and tittering as he leans over the sink, he sticks his stringy little ass into the air in front of my nose.

This is an old habit of our generation, and it has finally been passed on to the children. Wake had the chance to escape it, to break free of us, and to go in search of the other half that really did belong to him, but now it’s gone. This is a World filled with regret.

I take a stainless steel fork and shove it up his rectum. Blood dark as ink gushes out, soaking my face.

I try my best to imagine that this is revenge for *Something*.

21. Ruination

I TAKE A LOOK at the sign that says ‘No Smoking’, and begin to waver.

This was, after all, the only World that had reared me. I had never imagined that I would tear its order asunder. And the new generation—so different from us with their first and last names and their interest in the opposite sex—has already begun to come into their own.

Is the world outside really worth the venturing out into?

But *Something*’s face appears in the mirror. Actually, the face is a hovering instrument panel, inching its way out of a crevice in the autopilot relay.

‘Who are you?’ *Something* inquires mournfully.

‘Who am I?’ I respond in a firm voice to the blood-drenched face in the mirror,

standing my ground. Pitiful as a fading mist, he disappears.

I make up my mind to stop vacillating. Trembling, I withdraw three objects from my pocket. These were given to me by *Something*: cigarettes, a lighter and a bottle of alcohol. I take out a cigarette, light it with the lighter, take a drag and then nestle it in the hair of the dead boy, then I pour the alcohol over his head and body. After that, I carefully scrub my face clean, slowly exit the washroom and return to my seat.

A short while later, the alarm begins to howl and a cloud of thick black smoke wells up in the aft of the cabin. A group of Flight Attendants, armed with fire extinguishers, charge down the walkway all-a-clamour. Since the creation of 7X7, this is the very first fire in the World. The boys don't show any fear, they are enjoying themselves as if playing a game.

Amidst all the chaos, I shout out the seat numbers of the nine passengers. Five of them come running over to me, their anaemic faces tinted with a soft white sheen of hope. I lead them quickly into the galley, where I assign them their duties. Some are to go into the main cabin, locate those special spots marked in red, and pry open the emergency doors; some are to sneak into the hydraulics compartment, and destroy the cylinders that maintain stability; others are to make their way into the wings, and puncture holes in the fuel tanks.

Alone, I stride off towards The Cockpit. I can't say exactly what I am going to do, but it feels as if I must do this. Just then, I notice a flaming cockroach struggling to move in the same direction. Immediately, my face is covered in tears.

The cabin is filled with the popping and banging of explosions. Fire, smoke and debris rain down all around. The passengers scream incessantly. No one has ever experienced anything like this before. I shove my trembling hands into my pants pockets, and begin whistling tunelessly. Suddenly, I remember the tune of the song 'Waiting for the Condors', and march forward following that brave and unwavering cockroach. The outer layers of the World peel back with a howl, revealing never-before-seen cracks; shimmering beams of starlight clatter as they spill in. Pa-clack, pa-clack, the oxygen masks clatter as they drop out of the compartments overhead. A cyclone of chilled wind, sparks, and smoke swirls wildly about. I can't breathe. I don't know what is about to happen.

At this point, 7X7 begins to nosedive, shaking violently.

22. Resolution

IT'S TRUE, our precious stability and balance have been lost.

The 'fall' prophesied by *Something* has begun.

In the suffocating, bitter cold, low-pressure air, I scream to myself 'DON'T PASS OUT!'

Then, amidst the smoke and shock waves I see the indistinct figure of Guohang stumbling toward me, looking bewildered and exhausted.

'You're trying to get to the Cockpit now?' he asks, apparently concerned.

'I ...'

'You have done the worst thing you could possibly do,' he says, dejectedly. 'You're the Captain, but you've neglected your duty to keep the World safe,' he says listlessly as he smashes the cockroach, crawling indefatigably forward, under his foot. It emanates a loud cry of despair as a burst of black liquid squirts from its body.

In that same instant, I feel as if a foul handful of my own brains has been squeezed out, polluting the World. I do a double take, as if awakening from a long dream. What have I done indeed? Is this really what I should do? I start to feel guilty, losing my resolve to approach the Cockpit. I glance to one side at the gaping hole, hesitate, then make my way over to it. Guohang makes a flustered swipe at me.

We are rapidly losing altitude.

The moment of resolution has arrived. I leap out.

But I don't begin to fly, instead I immediately begin falling. I have the vague sense that behind me, someone else has jumped as well. Is it the other five passengers, or is it Guohang?

Darkness, unending darkness. The immaterial, untouchable outside world seems like a lie. Overhead, I hear a thundering roar, an unrestrained, unfiltered rumbling that sounds as if the universe is about to be turned on its head. Five thousand, ten thousand, maybe a hundred thousand 7X7 Worlds are flying in formation above me. I turn my head up and suddenly see millions of shimmering windows, like pearls scattered in a dazzling array across the vault of heaven.

I can't help but feel a profound pity for them.

Those 7X7s keep steadily on their courses in the darkness, while I, the 'Captain', have abandoned myself to plummet from mine.

This has been a long time coming and has never happened before. I catch sight of the stars below, and dream of the far-away Light.

I don't know how much time has passed, until suddenly my body becomes light as if I have been seized by a great hand and am lifted up.

23. Touchdown

WHEN I awaken, I find myself hanging from some object, my body still wrapped in the parachute made of life jackets.

I am hanging from some soft, green, branchy thing and roughly ten metres below me I can vaguely discern a vast expanse of some hard, ochre substance. It is nothing like the double walkways in 7X7 that I am accustomed to seeing, and there are no rows of seats placed one next to the other.

Is this the starry world of chessboards and mazes that I saw through the windows?

But it's not round, like they predicted it would be.

For the very first time, the darkness that has been with me my entire life suddenly begins to fade away. In the distance, a faint glow gently floats up. The memory comes back to me in a flash and I conclude it must be the 'horizon'. I am startled. This alien landscape is exactly as *Something* described.

Delicate tendrils of crimson light seep through the thick mists, scattering all about me. This really is another world. It is unusually steady, without the slightest jostle of turbulence, fraught with an abundant life force.

Beginning in front of me and extending back, the world grows more and more brilliant, but it isn't the man-made lamplight of 7X7.

... Is this The Light?

A red orb, shimmering all over, emerges unsteadily from the depths of what must be The Light, and soon it has become so bright that I can no longer look directly at it. In that instant, I hear the arrow of time shoot past my ear with a whirr.

Ashamed, I lower my head and see a pile of broken human bodies emerging from the water-stained shimmer. The passengers who jumped with me are still wearing their orange parachutes, which they could not open.

A bit further off, a great pile of twisted metal is spread about, and there is a raging conflagration which pops and bangs as it burns. Broken limbs and severed body parts are scattered all around. On one of the larger, trapezoidal pieces of wreckage, I can make out a letter 'X'. Now I remember, that was the world I used to live in, and X represents uncertainty—actually, I finally realize that in reference to the passage of time, it in fact represents the future.

In the next instant, every cell in my body is overcome with the sorrow of having destroyed the World. A new World that was still unborn has been torn asunder by me.

And *Something*, did he ever really exist, or will he ever exist?

And once we had broken free of the fetters of speed and course, only our World would descend and fall to the ground. What about the tens of millions other Worlds? And what about my fellow men who go on flying through the darkness?

24. Boeing

THE NEXT STEP is the clarification of some essential questions:

Just who was it who had banished us to flying through the darkness? Had we actually done this to ourselves? And who was the Creator, Boeing?

I am anxious to liberate myself, and begin to try to release myself from the parachute, preparing to drop down to that solid and expansive ochre surface.

At that very moment, the sound of an ear-piercing whistle rings out all around. Soon after, I spy a group of black metal carapaces like cockroaches riding on four spinning wheels speeding toward me. They stop and surround me, forming a skirmish line. From inside the metal carapaces, a number of golden-haired, tin-white-skinned men leap out, speaking in a garbled tongue I cannot understand.

Is it 'them'?

They raise some sort of metal sticks, aiming the ends at me.

Bless and Protect me, Boeing.

Amitābha.

2005

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