

A bus to Inferno

(An excerpt)

I had been waiting here for two hours. The city was in full swing: cars darting through the dazzling streetlights, billboards blinking with passerbys, an electronic mall with a seventy percent promotional banner, people with shopping bags and people without shopping bags, people walking in and people walking out, people disappearing behind the mall's gate and people appearing from it, just to disappear again in the darkness. They all disappeared in the end. These scatters of lives, never knowing what will savor them.

Standing about two hundred meters away was me. Just two hundred meters but it seemed the distance between me and other people is as far as two ends of the universe. From the position where I was standing, the sounds of the City were like unfiltered white noises or babbles of red-eyed flies. The bustle and hustle were being swallowed up by something invisible. It was so dreary here.

So I was standing at an old bus station. There were two rusty waiting chairs made of iron, a huge advertising poster with a beautiful woman's face being bitten by termites, her bright teeth being half destroyed. Across the street, a desolate restaurant was open. It looked like a grave, with a cold stove, some gray corpses of sausages and stinking bottles of soy milk.

I sat down on an iron chair at the bus station. Sitting next to me was a gecko. The gecko looked dizzy and took no notice of me. It just laid there, shriveled and frozen, like it was sleeping. I wondered if it was dreaming, and if it was, what was it dreaming of? Did their dreams have anything in common as ours? I don't know these kinds of stuff for sure, but I know for sure that the gecko was terribly haggard. A starving gecko. A malnourished gecko. A famished gecko.

"Isn't it too thin for a gecko?"

Another voice rose. I forgot to mention that there is another person who was waiting at the bus station. He had stood there long before I came. He was carrying a bag. And in the dim lights, as dim as a broth in a bowl of phở, I caught a glimpse of his scarred face. We hadn't talked anything with each other until he began talking about the gecko.

- I do think so. - I replied.

- But do you wonder why? - He asked.

- Wonder what?

- Do you think even a gecko can be classified by weight? Have you ever spotted a fat gecko?
- Maybe not.
- Me, either. So I don't know why I think that this gecko is too thin. Thin compared to what?

I had no answer to give him.

- Do you think the world of gecko is too much like the human world? Suddenly you see someone and you tell him that he is too thin. But how thin? Thin compared to what?
- People usually comment that you are thin?
- No.

We exchanged no more words. I was still standing here and three hours had passed.

The bus sped up on the straight road. Finally, after four hours, the bus showed up. It was a ragged bus, its windows were stained with mud. I sat on the chair right behind the driver. There were four people on the bus in total: the driver, me, the scarred-face guy, and Flamingo. One more time, I forgot to tell you that there was another person who was waiting at the bus station, a girl wearing a pinky dress like a flamingo and having hair braided.

And I forgot to tell you that this was a bus to Inferno. For the convenience of death, the City had built some routes going straight to Inferno. They were called bus to Inferno. You may ask what Inferno is. Simply put, Inferno is Inferno. Whatever you think of Inferno in your mind, it is the Inferno that I was talking about. If you think of nothing, you can look it up in a dictionary. Inferno is Inferno. No metaphors. I am a poet but I don't like metaphors. I prefer to describe things as they are. Metaphors to me are old fashioned devices that people should have abandoned since Dante and The Divine Comedy. Forget Dante. I just want to turn back to the buses to Inferno. Around 50 years ago, when these buses were first put into use, there were a lot of passengers who chose it to go to Inferno.

Going by bus to Inferno is a civilized way of dying. Pain-free, dirt-free, hassle-free, and cost-effective. You can skip the grand funeral. You don't have to suffer for months, even years, rotting on your deathbed with a bunch of tubes injected into your body. Here are some advantages of going by bus to Inferno:

1. If one day you have a desire to die, or feel like you are going to die, and you don't want to bother anyone else. Just pack things up, go to the Inferno Bus Stop, and get on one to come to Inferno.

2. Instead of splitting your soul and your body like in traditional ways of death, this option allows your soul to be forever with your body. What a reward for whoever seeks death.

3. There are billions of ways to commit suicide. Jumping from a building, drug overdoses, hanging, drowning, cutting your wrist. But all are painful. But getting on a bus is different. The only thing that takes your effort is trying to figure out where the nearest bus stop is. You should walk to the place as there is no parking lot. And there is a gang that may steal anything that you leave behind. So if you don't have any relatives to care about or pass down your property (like me), you can drive your car and just leave it there for any bastard who needs it. But if not, you should just go there on foot or by public vehicle.

4. As long as you haven't reached Inferno, you can get off the bus. Tell the bus driver that you don't want to die anymore, he will stop right away and guide you on how to come back home. This is definitely the advantage of this dying method. In comparison, imagine that you decide to jump from a 24th-floor building. How can you withdraw your decision once you have jumped?

5. And there are more benefits. Many more that even I can't list down all at once.

As I said, when this bus route was first put into use, there were many passengers. Statistics showed that there were 200 buses running in the City on a daily basis, each bus carrying 20 people, which means 4000 people going to Inferno everyday by this way. Hospitals were no longer overloaded. No truck drivers needed to feel as guilty just because they accidentally knocked down someone running into the truck. Hoteliers became the happiest. They no longer had to quietly clean up the bodies of lovers committing suicide in hotel rooms. Death had become easier and within reach. Every single person could die in a pleasurable and relaxed way. However, now as the government has constructed an airport at Inferno, high-speed rail to Inferno, submarine to Inferno, people all fall out of love with the bus. Well, we can die only once, why not opt for the most luxurious way, the most modern way, the most extravagant way? Since then, the buses started to crumble. And from 200 buses running, last year, there were only buses, and now, this is the only one bus running through the City.

- This is the last bus to Inferno. All the bus stations will be closed down from tomorrow.

The driver announced while his fingers groping for the power button of the radio. The broadcaster rambled about two citizens being beheaded by a group of terrorists abroad. The driver switched to another channel. An audiobook program. *Anna Karenina* sounded so different when being read out loud. He continued switching channels. An advertisement about home plumbing systems. One more channel. Nothing there except a meaningless sound. He went on switching, again and again.

– And here is a confession that an anonymous woman dedicates to her friend who has gone far away.

The voice of the broadcaster was as soft as a sugar cube melting in a warm mug of espresso: “Dear K., you must be on your way by now. I’m not sure if you are listening to this. I hope not. I guess not. Today I woke up at 9 in the morning and the sky was so blue. A blue summer sky. Blue sunshine. Blue sunshine relieved me. And I suddenly thought of a poem that you wrote a long time ago.

They kept complaining behind the City’s back:

“A chaos that is incorrigible.”

“A race that is unstoppable.”

“Just a downfall and the crabs would overwhelm the streets like in the village of Garcia Marquez”

Even on sunny days

The City refused to behave better

The number of houses is proportional to the inflation of loneliness

The lonely houses can’t help sobbing all day long

Until yellow flakey walls sloughed off

Somewhere over the street, a shadow so gloomy that he whispered to a hawthorne

The doorbell on a motel room was suspended

A postman knocked, knocked, knocked in vain

So bad that I can only remember a few lines. You just went away but I already forgot half of the poem. Memories are fragile, aren’t they? If only you would make up your mind and return home, but I know there is no hope that you would do that. I regret that I could not accompany you. I’m so sorry for not accompanying you. You once said that if one day the Death knocked on your door, the last thing that you wanted to do was begging him to grant you enough time to listen to a whole song...”

“Damn it, the Death is unemployed now.” – The Driver laughed out loud.

“... I would like to send you a song. A song that I recorded myself. Do you remember a poem by Robert Frost that you and I read together when we were... God, I already forgot when and where we read that poem. But I do believe that you know the poem in your heart.”

The girl started to sing in a hoarse voice: “My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still, / And there's a barrel that I didn't fill / Beside it, and there may be two or three / Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.”

“I don't want to jump to a conclusion but it seems her lover is on the way to Inferno. Do you guys think so?”, asked the driver.

“It is a possibility.”, I told him.

“She is not your lover, isn't she?”

“I wish she were. I am also a poet like her lover. But there has never been any woman in this damn world that can recite my poem. The poet who wrote that stuff was a lucky guy.”

“So that's why you decided to go straight to Inferno? Just because there has never been any woman that can recite your poem?”

“Unfortunately, I'm just a sad man, not a foolish one.”

“Why don't you recite one of your poems to us?” Flamingo raised her voice.

“Great suggestion. Maybe she will be the first woman that can remember your poem. Who knows?”, the driver teased me.

“Sorry. I forgot all of them.”, I admitted.

“How could you forget your own poems? How could you forget what you created?”

“Can you give me one poet that remembers all their writings?”, I smiled.

“So if they themselves don't bother to remember, who else will?”, the driver confused.

Only until now did the scar-faced guy who had been silent for a while, join the debate: “This is the sad side of being a poet.”

“How sad is it?”

“It's obvious. Even poets are aware of the fact that poems are void and poems don't worth a penny”, the scar-faced guy gave a short speech, “You should only write poems for fun, not for any serious purpose. Let's face it. A critic even asked if poetry is really necessary.”

Millions of people are living without poems and they are more than fine. They are ignorant when it comes to poetry but they are still perfectly happy. They don't feel that they are lacking anything and they even avoid quite a lot of pointless sorrows..."

"Don't tell me that you are also a poet. Then there are too many poets for a bus to Inferno", the driver interrupted.

"No way. Who wants to be a poet? If I can choose between having a bowl of eel porridge and being a poet, I will opt for the sizzling porridge."

"You reminded me that my stomach is empty. What about you guys? Are you hungry? There is a restaurant on the way to Inferno where I always take my passengers to. Before dying, at least have a good meal", said the driver.

"Up to you", said I.

"Alright", said Flamingo.

"My pleasure", said the scar-faced guy.

My luggage to Inferno was only three books, a notebook, a pen, and a copy of Stephen Shore's photo in which there were twenty blue armchairs on a neatly-planted green lawn. And a pack of peppermint candy, a toothbrush, a scarf in case of coldness, a smartwatch, a fully-charged cell phone, a headset, a dagger for self-defense, toilet paper, a little money, a pair of sneakers, an umbrella. That's everything. When I reach Inferno, I have to leave behind all electronic devices, jewelry, money and weapons. Money and weapons are useless in Inferno. Once you are dead, richness can't help you anymore. A cell phone is even more useless. Whom do you want to contact as long as you are already dead?

I brought it along just because I needed something that could play songs. I needed music to be with me on this journey to the end of the earth.

"What are you reading?", asked Flamingo when she caught me taking out a book.

"Nothing, just a science book."

"But you are a poet."

"Do you know that thanks to Picasso, Bohr had discovered the orbit of an electron?"

"That sounds weird."

"Yes, it is."

“So what is this book about?”

“How to say, it argues that humans have already known all the basic laws in physics, and the only mission remaining for our generation is to find tiny little theories to fill in diminutive blanks”, I tried to explain the book to her.

“So, it means we haven’t known all of the laws of physics yet?”

“Basically not. New laws are discovered every year. An exhausting job. It seems like humanity has nothing else to do rather than finding laws of physics.”

“So what should we do instead of that?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Anything is better than burying your life in the laws of physics. Don’t you think so?”

“Do you have any other books?”

“I’m just bringing three here. This one, and another one written by Kafka, and one book about how to grow apple trees properly”, I honestly told her.

She gave me a perplexed look: “What are you going to grow apple trees for?”

She sounded as if I were doing something strange. But there was nothing ridiculous in my plan. I told her that I would like to grow some apple trees in Inferno once I settled down there. “There is no more land to plant apple trees in the City.”

“You are coming to Inferno to grow apple trees?”

“Unfortunately, I’m just a sad man, not a foolish one.”, I repeated the most appropriate description about myself.”

“I think they are the same. Okay, so which book of Kafka are you bringing?”

“A poem collection.”

“I never heard that Kafka ever wrote poems. I thought he was a novelist or something like that.”

“But he did write poems. I mean, no, he didn’t write poems. There was indeed a novelist named Kafka that never wrote a poem. But the man I mentioned was not that man.”

“Pardon me, there was another Kafka?”, it seemed that she really cared about this subject.

“100%. There are quite a lot of Kafka who have walked on this planet. The man who wrote *The Castle* might be the most reputed, but he was not the only one.”

“To tell you the truth, I haven’t read *The Castle*.”, she whispered in a guilty tone of voice as if she were confessing that she had murdered her best friend.

Maybe she didn’t overact. Not reading this novel could be considered an intellectual crime. “But you should have read it, because who knows, maybe you won’t find any copy of it in Inferno”, I teased her, even though I myself haven’t read that novel either.

“What are the benefits of reading it?”

“Perhaps after reading it, you will delay your schedule to Inferno, because you want to read all of his bibliography.”

“So have you read all of his oeuvre?”

“You can say so. Otherwise I will regret it all my life. Sorry. It must be: I will regret all my death.”

“What about the poet Kafka?”

“This Kafka just wrote poems. And Kafka was his real last name, not a pen name. He was a poor poet. No one remembered him. He lived many years after that Kafka. And every time he introduced himself that I was Kafka, everyone looked at him in awe and asked him if he was related to the great man who wrote *The Castle*.”

“He must have felt depressed.”, Flamingo said in a sympathetic voice.

“He was. Finally, he committed suicide. Unfortunately for him, there was no bus to Inferno so he had to buy a 2-meter-long rope, cut it down to 1 meter, and hang himself on a rafter.”

“And you? What made you go to Inferno?”, suddenly she leaned toward me, gazed at me with her wide-opened eyes.

“Nothing made me go there.” I swore that I told her the truth.

“Are you going to tell me that on a beautiful morning, you just woke up with sunlight beaming on your face, you stretched your arms, you yawned, you felt bored and the idea of going to Inferno all of a sudden crept into your mind?”

“How do you know so clearly?”

“You must be joking.”

“No, I’m not.”

“So, you are an idiot.”

“I’m just a sad man, not a foolish one.”

We returned to silence. I read a few pages of the poem collection and fell asleep for how long I don’t know, but after waking up, it was still dark outside. It was dark when I started opening the book and I couldn’t figure out whether this was the same darkness, the same night, or I had slept through days and it was another day’s night. I felt starving. I looked around and everyone was stuck in their dreams. Now I realized that the bus had stopped, and the driver was nowhere to be seen.

The bus parked at a deserted refueling station. A Norwegian forest cat was pacing and looking around. I gently carried it in my arms. It had the eyes of a mischievous goblin. It was feeble and freezing. The coldness of the cat just barely scraped my hand when the unexpected creature slipped away from me. The refueling station looked like an inflated dilapidated Lego block. A poster about looking for a nanny was posted on a station pole. I don’t understand who is hiring and who is going to be hired in a place so near to Inferno.

A drop of rain fell down. Many drops of rain fell down. The driver stepped out from the refueling station with a cigarette on his lips.

“Poet, you already woke up?”

“How far are we from the last stop?”

“We are halfway.”

He invited me for a cigarette but I shook my head.

“This is the last bus to Inferno. That’s why I drove slower, just half of my usual speed. Are you in a hurry?”, the driver took a deep breath and said, his voice rustling like the sound of a knife being sharpened.

“Hurry? Am I in a hurry to die?”

“Yes, are you?”

“If I had been in a hurry, I wouldn’t have waited until now to go there. I have been living in a hurry all my life. Why do I need to hurry to my death? My conscience won’t allow me to treat death like that.” This time, I also told the truth.

“A sad man.”

“Uh huh?”

“You say you are a sad man, not a foolish one.”

“Actually, she was right, they are all the same”, I thought of what the Flamingo told me.

“Do you ever think that you will be happier when you reach Inferno?”

“How can I be sure? There is a possibility that I will regret it.”

“It’s not too late to change your mind.”, the driver slapped me on my back.

“How long have you worked on this bus route?”

“This has always been my career, if being a driver can be called a career. This is the only thing I know. Ironically, I have lived for so many decades and the only thing I know is how to seek Death.”, he took a puff of the cigarette.

“What will you do from now on?”

“My future is unplanned. I doubt there is any business which is willing to hire an employee with such a one-line resume: “driving to Inferno, from 1980-now”. Never mind. I don’t want to worry too soon. After this trip, all of the bus drivers will hang out for a farewell party. After all, we have spent half of our lives here.”

“I happened to know a small pub serving the best blood clams in the City. I can give you its address. The price is good, too”, I told him, but I didn’t let him know that this was the place where I saw my father with his gay partner. My parents got divorced not long after that. But even that memory cannot erase the fact that the blood clams were delectable. We should be fair with blood clams.

“Thank you in advance.”

We stood as still as statues for a while. The rain fell down, then stopped, then fell down again, then stopped again. As if something was holding it back. And if even the rain couldn’t be totally on its own, how could we humans expect the idea of freedom?

The bus resumed its journey. All of the passengers were still somewhere between their dreams. I looked out of the window. Silhouettes of withered trees press against the dim light emancipated from lampposts with broken bulbs. The road was empty, with no blocks, no barriers, no obstacles. Nothing would prevent me from going straight to Inferno with

these people, with everything that is composed of me, like my heart, my lungs, my prone-to-allergy skin, my ganglion, my empty stomach. And my loneliness. Though loneliness was a cliché, at this very moment, I was so lonely. It was the only word that could describe exactly what I was feeling. How could a human be so lonely? I couldn't work out how loneliness functions. I wished there was a pipe inserted into my blood vessel to suck all my loneliness. Or an algorithm that could delete it. The bus was still running.

"Everybody, let's take a break. This was the restaurant that I told you", the driver shook each person to wake them up.

The restaurant was nestled in the middle of nowhere. There was a sign saying "Don't become a hungry ghost". Maybe that was its name. There was a small bar and some ramshackle tables and chairs. It looked more like a university's canteen than a proper restaurant. On each table there was a tarp. The tarp would be taken out if eaters sat there. Other than that, it had a charming waitress. The driver said that there was a passenger who fell in love with her at first sight and he decided not to go to Inferno anymore. Now they were married. Instead of dying, now he washed the dishes. "Not bad, isn't it?", asked the driver.

"Do you have eel porridge?", the scar-faced man asked without taking a look at the menu.

"Yes, one eel porridge", the waitress wrote down his order as though there were many eaters around.

"My order is as usual", said the driver.

"Me, uhm,..." – Flamingo flipped through the menu – "a tuna sandwich?"

"A tuna sandwich. Great."

"One more tuna sandwich. And a coke", I told her.

We didn't have to wait for our meals too long. I gazed at my tuna sandwich, which looked like a fossil sandwich. "How the hell could the driver said that the food here was good?", I asked myself while looking at two gray buns with a distorted slice of tuna wrapped between.

"It looked bad but its flavor is awesome", the driver comforted me. In front of him was a plate of fried Si Chuan vermicelli and a bowl of soul which was as inky as sewage.

I made up my mind that I was so hungry and this tuna sandwich couldn't kill me before I got to Inferno. So I took a bite. It didn't taste like a sandwich, but a rubber sheet with a musty buttery smell. Anyway, they were right that I had better not become a hungry ghost. I

opened a can of coca-cola which had expired. But perhaps it wouldn't have enough time to kill me either. And while sipping the coke, I thought of how beneficial a bus route to Inferno was. The City's government could get rid of the headache of building a billion-dollar waste disposal system to deal with date-expired food and drinks. They could just send them here to people who would no longer care about living a worthy life.

I swallowed the slice of tuna without chewing and feeling it in my palate. And I felt like the slice of tuna was moving, like an alive creature. Was the slice of tuna alive? No way, maybe I imagined that movement. How could a slice of tuna be alive? This was not a whole tuna, but just a slice of it. It couldn't be alive. I tried to cheer myself up.

We ate, chewed, and digested in quietude. I saw the scar-faced enjoying his eel porridge. The skinny eels didn't look like eels. But looked more like geckos Perhaps they were geckos. Perhaps they were brothers and sisters of the gecko sitting next to me at the bus stop. The world was small.

Some newspapers were lying on the table. They seemed to come from a thousand years ago, tinged with the yellow-brown color like decayed teeth of a smoker. On the front page of a newspaper, a bank went bankrupt. The last blue whale on earth was found dying on its way to the Arctic. In another newspaper, an actress had a heartbroken while she was in a hair salon. She was a familiar face of horror movies about exorcism and incantation. All used to be sensational headlines. And now they are here, flapping like wings of a dying pigeon, in a soon-to-be-closed restaurant on the route to Inferno. Nonsense. A small nonsense world.

We got back to the bus and the driver played the Adagietto in Mahler's symphony no5. A bus driver listening to Mahler. Strange, but I guess there were stranger things in life, like psoriasis.

"We are only twenty minutes from Inferno. If you are hesitant, you can still go back home. Because once you enter Inferno, there is no way back. Otherwise, check your luggage. Remember that no money, weapons and jewelry are allowed in Inferno", announced the driver.

"Were there a lot of people who changed their mind?", Flamingo asked.

"A lot. Not everyone is truly ready to die. Especially young people. They all thought dying was easy but it turned out that they were all wrong."

"Maybe that wasn't my case."

The scar-faced guy kept silent, immersing in his thoughts about who knew what, maybe about the Saturn's rings or the recipe of cooking oxtail ragù. I opened my backpack to check

all the things inside. Three books, a notebook, a pen, a copy of Stephen Shore's photo in which there were twenty blue armchairs on a neatly-planted green lawn. And a pack of peppermint candy, a toothbrush, a scarf in case of coldness, a smartwatch, a fully-charged cell phone, a headset, a dagger for self-defense, toilet paper, a little money, a pair of sneakers, an umbrella. Everything was here. I checked again. Three books, a poem collection of Kafka, *A different universe* by Robert B. Laughlin, *Diary of a farmer who grew apple trees*. I felt hopeful. I would grow an apple tree. No, not just one apple tree. I would grow a garden of apple trees, or a forest of apple trees. Would it be possible to grow a forest of apple trees? But I would think about that later. First, I would start with a single apple tree. No, first, I would go to Inferno.

It was at that very moment that I realized the apple seeds were not there. How could I forget it? I knew that I had put them in my backpack. Or did I drop it somewhere? Calm down. I had made a mistake somewhere. But where? This was absurd. But what would I do at Inferno if I had no apple seeds?

"Did anyone see a pack of apple seeds? I thought that I dropped it.", I shrieked in a tenor voice.

"Apple seeds? What happened?" – Flamingo asked.

"I couldn't find my apple seeds."

"Check your backpack again", said the driver.

"I have checked so many times."

"Maybe you have forgotten it at home."

"Does, does Inferno sell apple seeds?", I knew this was a ridiculous question. But I had no other hopes.

But the driver just turned to me and frowned: "You know, I'm just a bus driver. I have never set even one foot into that mysterious land."

I nearly fell down.

"Do you want to get off?"

"Will you wait for me?"

"Sorry, I can't. It is too late now. We are only ten minutes away. Think about it carefully."

In desperation, I rummaged through my backpack. The apple seeds were still nowhere to be seen. They had disappeared without traces as if there were an invisible hand pickpocketing it. If I knew that pickpocket. But I couldn't think of anyone who wanted to pickpocket something as trifling as apple seeds. I wanted to grow a forest of apple trees. My mother once had an apple farm and it was burnt down by a guerrilla group coming from the other side of the City's border. Then they stabbed into his mother's skull with an axe, and her skull could be one of many thousands of skulls that were now exhibited in a local historical site, a skull like every skull of every human who had ever lived. I couldn't distinguish which was hers.

Since then, I knew that one day I would have to go to Inferno. There was no place for apple trees. The City was so huge but there wasn't enough space for even an apple tree.

Translated from the Vietnamese by the author