



Hello, I Must Be Going

SPARROW

The story of my life is the story of the Tao Te Ching. I first discovered this book, by Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, when I was twelve years old. At that time I was in the smartest class at P.S. 152 in Manhattan. In fact, I was one of the smartest youths in the smartest class. I commonly received grades of 98, 99, and 100. I was also president of the class, and captain of the monitor squad. I planned to become a doctor.

But then, in my grandmother's house on Fifth Street in Philadelphia, I found a copy of the Tao Te Ching. (My Uncle Jimmy had read it in college.) This was the Mentor edition, of R.B. Blackney's translation. The price was thirty-five cents.

I read:

On tiptoe your stance is unsteady;
Long strides make your progress unsure;
Show off and you get no attention;
Your boasting will mean you have failed;
Asserting yourself brings no credit;
Be proud and you never will lead.

Suddenly I changed my mind. I would not be a doctor, but a quiet, humble man — perhaps a street sweeper. I would become what we call in America “a failure.”

English-speaking people must read the Tao Te Ching in translation. The first thing a reader should know is: translation is impossible. This is a secret known primarily to translators.

In clothing design, no one translates a sari into a three-piece suit. No one says, “I am presenting this garment — a kimono — as if it were a sundress.” Why do we believe words may be translated, when clothing cannot? Because long ago writers tricked us into accepting that translations exist. Why did they trick us? Because writers are audacious and busy.

Now, I know what you're thinking. The writers you know sit in cafes all day long drinking coffee and staring at the waitresses. But it is the *other* writers who are audacious and busy. You do not meet them because they are constantly in their rooms, writing three-part essays, revising plays, and, in their spare time, “translating.” They translate books from whatever language their girlfriend knows. (Translation, being impossible, requires collaboration.)

In the introductions to their books, translators admit, in a circumspect way, that translation does not exist. “I have attempted to stay as close to the tone of the original as possible,” they remark. This is just what a hobbyist who has built a replica of the Eiffel Tower out of sugar cubes will say.

Let us recall, as we read the Tao Te Ching, that we are reading not a book but a replica of a book made from sugar cubes. In fact, the Tao Te Ching is not a book. It is (I assume) a scroll. Just printing it in book form — even in Chinese — is a bold and dangerous translation.

(end of excerpt)