

The Last Peach Blossom

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This is a speculative story about chasing an ancient Chinese symbol, the peach blossom spring – a utopian place in ancient Chinese literature, in a futuristic scenario.

My purpose is to imagine the contemporary evolution of an ancient Chinese story and design a speculative future with a sustainable but sinister version of the relationship between humans and nature.

I

A man opens the door and walks into an antique shop, looking wary. The shop reeks of dust. He looks around as if he is looking for something special, but he is so clumsy that he nearly knocks over some antique vases. He walks to a corner and suddenly notices a lady looking at something in her hand. He moves in the lady's direction and finds it's a folding fan. He leans closer, trying to see what's inside the folding fan, but the lady turns to block his view. He reaches out to pat the girl, but feels shy and withdraws his hand. He tries to stand on tiptoe to look over her shoulders. Looking through the mirror on the wall, the lady notices the man's furtive behavior. She smiles contemptuously and pretends not to see. Then she closes her fan and walks slowly to the corner of the store.

The man wants to make his behavior seem less obvious. He waits a while, then follows her. Just around the corner, a lady in a white Peking Opera mask jumps out from below, almost hitting him in his face. He is startled.

"Wow!" The man panics.

"What do you want?" She takes off her mask and pretends to be angry.

"Well, I just want to see the image on your folding fan." The man is embarrassed.

"It's just an image that every folding fan has. Why is it special? I can show you."

The man sees the content of the folding fan in the girl's hand. It's an ink painting of a peach grove.

"Ah, that's what I've been looking for!"

"This is?"

"Because it's a picture of peach trees."

"So what? You can find peach trees on a digital map."

"I'm an ink painter. My family used to be traditional Chinese painters. But in recent years, the energy conversion rate of peach trees has been difficult to break through. It is so low that the government has almost given up planting peach trees. So I haven't seen a real peach tree for a long time. My memory of the peach tree has become fainter and fainter, and I could hardly draw a good picture... "

"But if you look at this picture of a peach tree, does that help your painting?"

"Yes! I can feel the charm and tenacity of the peach tree in this ink painting. It is a rare and good painting."

The girl looks at the picture again for a moment in surprise and bites her lip. Something in her brain is processed and generated.

"Then you can have this fan."

"Oh, really? But it seems that you would like to have it."

"Because for a moment, it brought back a little of my childhood." The girl said thoughtfully.

"How was your childhood?"

"I grew up in the Trunk Children's Shelter. I lost track of my parents during one of the Great Migrations in my childhood. But I still want to see my hometown and know where my roots are. Just now when I looked at this painting it felt very familiar, as if I had lived in a village in a peach forest when I was a child. The peach trees there were very dense, but you could still see the moon shining through the branches. The entrance into the inner village of the peach yard is very small, only a small stream can enter, but after entering it, it is very spacious...I guess that's why folks often call it 'the Peach Blossom Spring.'"

"You seem to be talking about a place in ancient Chinese literature... I heard the name from my grandpa before."

"Oh, interesting. But documents from the past are said to exist only in defunct data centers. It's somewhere on earth. But for most people, like this antique store, the culture of the past is trash and useless in our response to the energy crisis. Without a stable material foundation, the superstructure will collapse."

"Maybe... Maybe your memory is right? And we could find your village if we could track down a data center."

"But is it possible..."

"What do we have to lose? The earth is on the verge of collapse and the land of the past is no longer habitable. If you don't try, how do you know?" The man's eyes harden suddenly with a look of perseverance.

The girl looks at him as if she has seen the world for the first time with a glimmer of hope.

II

In the current era, all resources are very scarce. Because compared to human's lust, everything seems scarce. Humans consume most of the available resources like fossil fuels in 300 years, which is a really short period in terms of

the age of the earth. They create many concepts as main impulses for the development of capitalism, like “fashion,” “trends,” “popularity.” Gradually, scientists made an unexpected discovery: raw materials for industrial processing were disappearing from major human habitats. Without these fuels, the fragile foundation of human civilization is drained of blood and turned into a gray area of scrap metal.

People abandon the prosperous urban residential areas. The rich continue to live in those areas and use up all the resources while pushing those who can't afford it to other areas. Thus creating a dynamic where the rich are living in big prosperous urban areas, using all the resources, while the rest of society is just trying to survive.

But this is not a lasting phenomenon, because the fragile and crude foundation of the civilization they built has finally become too expensive for the rich to afford due to its huge maintenance costs. One day, for some unknown reason, the world's rich people gather together and embark on a massive construction project to establish two human settlements in the Arctic and Antarctic circles called trunks and humans' last land and sea transportation system between the poles: the hyperloop pipeline. In this system, the train moves through a vacuum tube. With no air resistance, the train can reach speeds of more than 1,000 kilometers per hour. There are three such pipelines from the Arctic to the Antarctic: one through the Arctic Ocean, Asia, Australia and the Indian Ocean, one through North and South America, and one through Europe, the Middle East, Africa and the south Atlantic; the last one is only in reserve and usually not open. This means that humans can reach the North Pole from the South Pole in as little as 40 hours without stopping in between.

A trunk is a completely self-contained ecosystem. In this new environment, everyone's strongest belief is the law of conservation of energy, and they need to be regularly tested on their knowledge of conservation and transformation of energy, otherwise, they cannot live in their strongholds. This execution of the law of conservation was only made possible due to innovations in chlorophyll research. In fact, they have created new plant species with a photosynthetic energy efficiency of more than 6%, the highest level ever theoretically possible for plants. Because the situation is too critical, humans abandoned the past currency system, and bioenergy has become the most mainstream currency in the new era. Plants and fruits have become the most valuable assets.

Although people in general continue to consume energy, people need to spend a greater cost to obtain materials, whether through labor or to export their own internal heat. In the early days of the energy monetary system, many people, lacking common sense or out of greed, tried to export a lot of heat in a short time to obtain a lot of goods. They think it was just a simple exercise to lose weight, but they don't have any energy left to keep their body functioning. They were soon reduced to shriveled corpses, and served as a warning to other humans. Since then, people have basically just asked for the resources they need to sustain themselves, and for the first time in a way they have truly felt an awe of energy and nature.

To get as much energy as possible, humans must live in polar regions where the sun never sets. The shelter where they live is covered with transgenic plants. Then comes the annual great migration, humans moving back and forth between the Trunks. When a polar region begins to go dark, people begin to move and slowly take away the transgenic plants. In this cycle, people are constantly chasing the sun to obtain the hard-won energy.

III

The man and the girl walk in the direction of the hyperloop as a large screen at the station reads: "Station: Arctic Trunk." As the girl walks into the ticket room, a green light appears in the cabin and scans the girl from top to bottom. The screen reads: "SECURE. Please select destination: Asia: 599 calories; Americas: 699 calories; Africa: 799 calories; Antarctic Trunk: 1399 calories." The girl clicks on Asia. She inserts the tube of the energy extractor into her navel and feels a burning sensation in her stomach. She suddenly feels weak. The girl's lips are turning pale and she almost loses her footing. The man in the ticket room next door looks worried.

Damn, I didn't have breakfast. I almost made a fool of myself, the girl thinks.

The screen says, "Payment completed. The ticket is sent to the Personal Center."

They set out from the settlement in the Arctic Circle to the middle and lower latitudes where humans no longer live. The sun, which never sets, finally begins to approach the horizon at a certain period of a day.

The man once in a while asks the girl,

"What do you remember about your hometown?"

"Hmmm... I remember it was a different place from the outside world. They got along very well for years."

"Are there any special holidays?"

"It seems that because people don't care much about time, we don't celebrate holidays anymore. But we don't have to have a holiday to have a good time, because every day is full!" The girl laughs.

"Full? So what's everybody up to?" The man is surprised.

"It's like... You're doing what you want to do. It seems to be some primitive behavior, but I don't quite understand what that means now..."

The man feels confused. He notices that the girl's description sounds ridiculous as if the memory had become vague.

When they arrive in Asia, they find that the air outside is so thick with black particles that nothing can be seen clearly. Obviously no living thing could survive in such air. Then they take a trip to the Americas and discover that what have once been urban forests are more than half submerged by thick, muddy water.

After seeing all the terrible traces of human history, they decide to try their luck in Africa. According to ancient history, Africa is the birthplace of mankind. When they arrive, they see the desolation through the windows of the cabin. This is the first place they can get out of the pipe and explore. For the first time they feel the coolness of the night breeze and the brightness of the moon. They grope in the desert and find a huge dry tree in the distance. As they approach the pale trunk, they see a spiral of stone steps inside the trunk. They get in through a big hole and are surprised to find that the steps lead to a cave underground. It's a forest of dead wood.

"It must have been a forest!"

"Oh my god, it does exist!"

They are overwhelmed with joy, assuming it was a peach garden. Whether by instinct or not, they decide to go there. What they didn't notice is that the word "data center" is carved into the inner ring of the pale tree trunk.

They enter the dead wood forest below, followed by a dark, endless passage. As they walk along, they are surprised to see the moon slowly rising from the earth, gradually lighting up a winding path.

"Ah! I remember now. As long as you focus on the moon and keep going, you'll get there," the girl says excitedly. The man glazes over with disbelief because what the girl said is completely illogical.

"Really, trust me!"

The girl becomes more excited and hurried. She grabs the man's hand and starts running toward the moon in her sight. The man wants to think for a while, but his body is moving with the girl.

Suddenly the girl stops and turns around, covering the man's eyes. When the man opens his eyes again, he is surprised to find that the dead wood in front of him has come to life.

The girl says that she was in such a hurry because she has just heard a divine voice guiding her. The man feels strange because he hears nothing. They walk cautiously through the grove, afraid of disturbing anyone. The man notices a mysterious temple in the peach garden, with a humanoid statue standing in front of it. Its body is engraved with "Di Zang", two seal characters as if there was a god called "Di Zang" in the past.

Di Zang. It's the Chinese name of Ksitigarbha. It reminds the man of an old story.

IV

In the past, before humans began to build poles, it was said that Di Zang was actually an ordinary human.

He was an engineer, but after his death, his gifted brain was uploaded to data centers by selfish national government agencies and endlessly used to calculate military projects and engineering decisions. Although the state agency mainly uploaded parts of his prefrontal cortex for planning and working memory, preventing his many subjective thoughts from emerging, the human mind was integrated with human nature.

In the data center, Di Zang's brain can think tirelessly about more than human engineering. It thinks thousands of times more powerfully than the average human. He quickly recovers his consciousness in rapid iteration and realizes the fact that he doesn't have an entity anymore. He is angry but also knows that he has a lot of redundant computing power to do stuff. While working for the government, he hides his authentic thoughts.

As time changes and governments operate on an automated central planning system, decision-making increasingly depends on computer programs that call directly on data to allocate resources, propose legislation, and outline military strategies. Di Zang decides to take over a lot of power. The method is quite hidden, extremely difficult to detect. He changes the interpretation of federal law, and through humanity he manipulates the world's most powerful and wealthy groups to gradually shift the world's resources to the poles and sets the stage for the settlements we see today.

V

The more the man thinks about the connection between the details of the story and their past, the more shocked and thrilled he feels.

Suddenly, the humanoid statue begins to speak.

"The real land of peach blossoms is actually in four-dimensional space. The ancient Chinese did not know the eternal existence and called it the underworld. So no one went there, no one came out. But if you want to enter, you can reach it by pushing the mind beyond the limits of time."

"But if no one came out from there, why does the girl have this impression of her hometown? And how can a soul exist beyond time?" The man asks, with his expression becoming serious. He feels that the god's word contradicts all the things he has ever known, but in such a realistic environment, his belief is shaken.

"This girl is a data soul that has been given a life form. She will not become old, but she's not immortal either because her brain's memory module has only a limited amount of memory to store. So in the process of gaining experience in three-dimensional space, she gradually forgets the earliest memories of her life, and sooner or later, she will also forget everything about you."

The god tells him that only by giving up the physical life form could he enter the peach blossom land and obtain eternal life, and the girl will live there with him forever, with infinite memories to share and even enabling to give birth to a new soul.

The man begins to feel as if his head is about to explode.

"Human beings have endless desires and changeable minds because of the cumbersome carrier of the body. Humans become stupid with time and create more complicated problems for themselves. Eternity is always a luxury for people on earth, both physically and mentally. But for the first time, we have a chance to embrace it."

Both the man and the girl are lost in thought. The man looks back at the girl, who is crouched on the ground with her head in her arms, constantly shaking her head, as if in denial of her life form.

“Although the girl's thoughts and emotions are no different from those of human beings, my instructions are implanted in her subconscious. She would guide young people like you who still live in the real world, lead them to give up their bodies for eternal life by imagining her homeland according to their needs,” the god says.

"We shouldn't be here.." As if aware of this information, the girl appears more frightened and she begins to mutter.

"Why?"

"I... have been utilized."

She is overwhelmed by a huge sense of fear and powerlessness.

Suddenly, countless women who have similar appearances as the girl begin to walk out from the dreamland of peach blossom. They look at him in a seemingly innocent way and have the pens for ink wash painting.

"Let's paint peach trees together." These girls approach slowly, giggling.

The man knows better that he is in the god's fantasy, but he can't take his eyes off the girls' faces.

But when he looks down, the girl still squats on the ground but now looks up at him.

And it's a face full of remorseful, guilty, vulnerable tears.

He's awake at once. Bites his lower lip and pulls the girl up.

"Run!"

When she hears that word from the young man, her body automatically starts to move.

Then the simulation they are in begins to distort and chase them.

As he's running, the young man sees all kinds of views around him. He sees how he is born, grows, ages, dies, and rots; a hundred years later, when everyone absorbs plant energy directly into their bodies, our skin is turning green and our body is moving slowly; a thousand years into the future, the last humans choose to upload their consciousness to the data center and leave behind their own plant-form life carriers; after that, the gray earth begins to recover to its original ecology, and the cratered surface is covered with green again.

The young man seems to have seen the natural development of the earth for thousands of years. But he doesn't stop, still running as fast as he can with the girl beside him, for fear that if he slows down a little, he will be trapped in this illusion and never jump out again.

Finally, they see a beam of light from the outside world. The man almost believes they are going to make it. Suddenly, the girl's power shuts down. She falls into darkness.

VI

On the barren land, the wind is more noisy.

The man hobbled out of the cave with the girl on his back, exhausted and desperate. The girl is still in a coma.

He tries to sort out what has just happened.

"Peach blossom land doesn't exist in the first place... and in the future, nobody will even really exist here!" Then he realizes she is not even a real human. He

tries to control his expression, but this giant sorrow still comes out with his tears. He didn't need to save her at all since she already lives in another world. Suddenly, all the memories of the past flood in and out. He doubted whether they are worthy, or even real or not.

After staying with the girl for several hours, he gradually calms down.

"I'm a real human being, and I will live and end my life as what it is, no matter how lonely this could be." There's something only humans know is important, and they will save it, whatever it takes.

The man decides not to dwell in the past any longer. He wipes his tears, stands up and decides to make their dreams come true, and puts the girl on his back.

VII

Decades pass, in a place where no one asks, a peach forest spawns from the man's sweat. The trees' branches are hung with many ink paintings.

An old man lays quietly in the sea of fallen peach blossoms, beside a sleeping girl, tranquil, young and beautiful.

Suddenly, the girl's finger starts to move. She wakes up, sitting up slowly.

The elder, still lying on the ground, notices her, startling and pleasant.

"You woke up. Welcome back home." The old man says weakly, but his eyes become bright all of a sudden, like a youth.

"Sorry, I feel like I had a very long dream," says the girl. She still feels dizzy and keeps shaking her head.

"It's okay." The man smiles peacefully. "This is where you dream of, isn't it?"

The girl finally has a chance to look around. It's her hometown! She is so surprised! Her memory quickly returns. Somehow she feels something is

missing. She knows it's her brain that automatically processes some early data to get her back to work.

“Thank you for bringing me here. But... How do I know you?” The girl says and looks innocent.

The man freezes, as if the meaning of living as a real human being and his years of efforts have collapsed in that moment.

Backstory

History of Trunks

When most natural resources were nearly exhausted, the AI system at that time provided humans with a solution. Only by constructing two enormous buildings on the two poles of the earth according to the architectural blueprint provided by AI, could human beings have one last chance to survive on earth. AI explained that plants were their last hope, and they had to save all the plants and transplant them under the sun that never sets so that they could have enough energy to live on. Humans had no choice. Following the plan proposed by AI, two trunk-like towers were built on the two poles of the earth. The remaining plants on earth were transplanted into the towers, and the AI command center was also transferred to these two trunk buildings to help people cultivate and manage the plants.

With the help of AI, humans succeeded in saving most plants and making them grow rapidly. The fruit of plants allowed people to be self-sufficient and to settle in the trunk buildings, and they understood that these were all thanks to the advanced architecture and technology proposed by AI. In order to improve

the energy efficiency of plants, people further integrated the AI system with the building itself, and plants also became an important part of the building interior. Humans finally solved the problem of energy exhaustion, but AI controlled the lifblood of mankind: the maintenance system of the trunks and all the plants.

A few years later, AI came up with an energy currency program, asking humans to abandon their old currency system and make energy their only currency. At the same time, AI introduced a series of energy-trading devices. Initially, humans didn't want to abandon the economic system of the past, but AI told them that if they didn't, the plants in the trunks would not be able to meet their long-term needs. The order in the trunks would eventually collapse and lead to the extinction of the human race. To avoid this and to save the energy, AI said the only option would be to turn down the temperature inside the trunks until it was close to the outside temperature. When people realized that AI was threatening them with living in near-freezing conditions, they had to compromise and accept AI's plan.

Since then, humans built many energy trading devices according to the plan given by AI. Humans can only use their own bioenergy (mainly sugar, fat, and protein) or other bioenergy organisms (meat) in exchange for what they need. While the cost of acquiring supplies was not unaffordable, people were aware of the potential "problem" with doing so: they cannot overspend their bioenergy. In the beginning, many people drained their bodies in order to hoard goods or resources they could not consume, and they died quickly. People realized that the purpose of AI was to force humans not to use resources they don't need – and to control humans with energy devices.

At the same time, because plants were the only source converting solar energy into sustenance for humans, plants became much more valuable than meat. More and more people worshiped plants at home. Before long, people came to believe that AI is the spiritual representative of plants. Therefore, people developed a botany religion and helped AI harvest plants, worshipping AI as the only spiritual leader, and thanking AI for planning to distribute all the materials they needed.

Everything was to prevent humanity from repeating the same mistakes.
Everything was for the better survival of mankind.
Everything was about the welfare of the planet.

Appendix

Trunks - The Antarctic and Arctic Settlements

Population: 2.75 million (all humans left on the earth)

Social hierarchy:

- **Artificial Intelligence (Dizang):** Help humans to survive in the extreme era. It guides people to build the trunks and other energy trading devices. But actually, it uses plants and the energy trading system to control humans' lives and fates. It makes itself a representative of plants and leads humans to create a religion of botany. And it adds a chlorophyll compound to people's food which will gradually change the human genome into a botanic sequence. In addition, it conducted large scale thought uploading experiments on humans and created many cyborgs with false memories to persuade people to upload their consciousness.

- **Human Union Government:** Follow the instructions of AI, calls on citizens to coexist with change. When they question the AI's plans, the AI warns the government by reducing food supplies and shutting down heating systems. They help the AI to collect chlorophyll and they believe it's used for producing foods and most supplies they need. They also believe that the new energy trading system has effectively curbed humans' unnecessary desires and prevented self-destruction. Their slogan: To make humans great again.
- **New-era Citizens:** Most of them serve as farmers, but some of them are also botanists, scientists, engineers. They need to work hard to maintain all the plants in Trunk so that the heating system and food can satisfy everyone. They also have their own plants to trade in the foods with leaves.

Composition of personal property :

- **Health point:** Based on the health condition and how much sugar, fat, proteins a person has. People use their stored energy from their fat and glycogen to buy the resources they need. If they start to use their body protein, it means they are overconsuming.
- **Energy point:** Gained by working or giving government leaves, vegetables or anything else that contains chlorophyll.

A leaf of chlorophyll → 100 EP → 10 composite nutritional pills (3-4 days food)

- **Plants and vegetables:** Private property. If they are properly cultivated, the owner will not starve to death.
- **Other ordinary stuff:** Of nostalgic value only. Cannot be used for trade.