

Revenant

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‘The life-force of the valley never dies –
This is called the dark female.
The gateway of the dark female –
This is called the root of the world.’

(Dao de Jing, ch. 6)

A deep cloacal darkness settled on the City. On the hills, where the rich live, it deepened into unease and resignation. In the poor quarters, stretching out of sight, the brooding gloom doubled. Tiny lights twinkled, mocking the few stars visible. Then the rain began again, and they died.

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The Revenant was tired. But the room, a cellar-bar, was already filling up. A steady trickle of new arrivals descended through the trap door from the noisy public house above. He waited, while they looked at him curiously. What they saw was a man in early middle-age, serious, and weary. Then he began to speak, quietly but clearly.

‘I am here to tell you about something that happened to me. I seem to be the only one. I don’t know why. If anyone knows of another, I should be very glad to hear of it. But in any case, I died, for a time, and this is what I found in that place, before I was returned...’

As he continued, something almost palpable shifted in the room, and the silence thickened. Although everyone was (I suppose) hearing the same words, each person there felt he was speaking to them alone, uniquely, telling them a deep truth no one else could have known. Tears started, running down faces unchecked.

‘...I think you all already know this, actually. So please consider your lives carefully. Death is not the end, it seems, and what comes next depends a great deal on what you do now. Thank you.’

As he finished, a little man in a drab cloak, stony-faced, rose and slipped back up into the pub before anyone else.

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The Cosmocrat sighed. Staring out of the window high in the squat black castle, he shifted his bulk beneath its robes. ‘What shall we do with him, this so-called Revenant? He is starting to attract attention.’

‘There is a procedure, sir,’ Archon 5 replied. ‘He can be taken and tried for disturbing the people.’

‘Yes, but what of his claims? They are already known, and will spread fast.’

‘What does he say?’, said Archon 2.

‘That he has returned from the other side of death, and witnessed what happens there.’

‘We have a report, said Archon 3. One of our people sent this after hearing him speak to a crowd. He writes, “Some felt a revelation had been vouchsafed, although they couldn’t say what it consisted of. Others felt, on the contrary, that a deception had been practised, although they couldn’t say what it was. Those who wanted it to be true, even if they didn’t know how it was possible, were satisfied, but those who didn’t seized on its impossibility as paramount. Altogether, discord prevailed.”’

‘Then it seems to me,’ put in Archon 2 again, batting away a determined fly, ‘there are two possible courses of action. Either we convince him to speak for us, and to tailor his account accordingly, or we convict him of heresy. But what say you, brother 6? You are silent.’

Archon 6 answered slowly. ‘I would like to hear these claims. From the man himself, before the trial. How else,’ he added, looking around, ‘shall we judge if the Mysterium can use him or not? And whether he is truly a miscreant?’

‘I agree,’ said the Cosmocrat. ‘Tell the Assayer to find him and bring him here as soon as may be. Bind him, if necessary.’

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At the tribunal, the Revenant was brought out before the panel. The Assayer read out the indictment: 'You are said to be making claims about the survival of the soul after death, a matter which is the sole province of the Mysterium. You also falsely base your account on your own experience, which is impossible, since you are here now. As well as undermining the authority of the Mysterium, you could be charged with creating discontent among the people. What say you?'

'Good man, I can only say that what happened to me happened to me. I died and found myself nonetheless still living, in some way, still in a body that was indeed mine, in a land that was strange yet not altogether so. And I travelled in that land for three days before being, it seems, called back to this self, and body, and place. I met many of the dead, if so you could call them, and saw many things. And I only wish to share this knowledge with the people. They live under great fear, whether of hell, which seems likelier than heaven, or nothingness. I would lighten their burden. Good man...'

'Kindly stop calling me that.'

The Revenant replied, astonished, 'Why? Are you not a good man?' One or two of the panel suppressed a smile.

The Assayer continued. 'Tell us something of what you think you experienced.'

'I was conducted through a vast metropolis where the dead live. Not unlike this City, but greater.' Members of the panel shifted uneasily. 'They pursue their lives, as we do. In and as bodies! Though not, to be sure, exactly like ours.'

'What is the difference, then?'

'I had the impression that what we call 'body' is there harder to distinguish from thought and feeling and will. To engage in any of those is for the body to already be there, doing that. And conversely, what we call 'mind' is more embodied, albeit more sensitively and purely than we can imagine. And so my guide confirmed, when I asked him.'

'Tell us about this guide.'

'I can only say that he was blindingly beautiful. I couldn't tell if he was man or woman, and I didn't care. I asked, "Where do you live, that I might find you again?" He answered, "I live between life and death, and aught else you can name," and he smiled. "And I am not found. I find."

'We know not this one,' said the Cosmocrat in a deathly voice.

'Tell us more about their City,' asked one of the Archons.

'It has parts with less suffering and parts with more. Indeed, I think that what we call heaven and hell are only places where the dead live who are happier, and others less so. I believe that those who behaved well on Earth and created happiness tend to live better afterwards, but there may well be other considerations at work. Even accidents, or luck. My guide wouldn't say, but he didn't discourage that view.'

Silence.

'But good men, isn't what I say good news?'

The Assayer ignored this. 'You speak as one educated. Are you not a Docent, living and teaching in a Western district of this City?'

'I was.'

'So, you are no longer him?'

'I recognise him. How could I, if we did not share something? Isn't that enough?'

'Do you wish to resume your old life?'

'I cannot. Does the boy wish to become a babe again, or the man a boy? But they know themselves to have been such, once.'

'And what of your wife?'

At this, pain crossed the Revenant's face. 'It's not her fault, but I cannot go back to her either. I cannot live a lie. It wasn't one, but it would be now. Please tell her that.'

Then another Archon asked, 'What proof have we that this man died? Or rather, didn't?'

The Assayer called out, 'Where is the Physician?' And a small man, visibly perspiring, came forth. He was asked, 'Did you attend this man in his district two months ago?'

'I did.'

'Well then?'

'I was called out by the wife of this man whom we are calling the Revenant. He had been laid out. He was not breathing and there was no pulse. In the absence of any other signs, I surmised the cause of death to have been heart failure. I wrote out a certificate and left, and I – and here he paused, almost imperceptibly – I have not seen him since, until now.'

Then the Assayer dismissed the Physician and called for the Divinator. Another man came forth, visibly agitated. 'Well, have you read the signs? What say they about this man's testimony?'

'My lord, honoured sirs, if it please you...'

'Please get to the point.'

'The signs are unanimous. They insist he is telling the truth.'

Another silence. Then, 'You may go.' The Divinator fled.

Now the Cosmocrat spoke. 'The hope the people invest in you, Revenant, is that of the mother who has lost her son, or father his daughter, the lovers who have been parted forever, the friend left friendless and alone. You tell them that it is not the end, that they will be reunited. And we agree with that. But it will only happen in heaven or hell, which you have not even recognised. And no traveller such as yourself can return to tell us. We know from divine sources, and we alone, the *Mysterium Tremendum*, know the ways and means and laws of the life after death. You are a poor, deluded man, engaged in deluding others. In the meanwhile, we will consider whether to bring you to trial. Take him away.'

The Revenant hung his head. But he muttered, almost only mouthed, 'Still, I was there.'

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Back in their high room, the atmosphere was tense. Some, led by Archons 2 and 5, wanted a swift trial and damning verdict. 'We must act and stamp this out! Crowds are already gathering, asking where is the Revenant and why he has been taken. Such restlessness can lead to worse things. Our authority is at stake.'

But Archon 6 said, 'It may already be too late for that course. May I offer a different suggestion?' The Cosmocrat inclined his head slightly and the Archon continued, under the suspicious eyes of his colleagues, 'What we want to avoid is making this Revenant a martyr. The best way to do that is not imprison or execute him, but discredit him. Am I not right that the Nihilists have taken an interest in the matter? If so, he will find as little favour with them as with us. Someone who affirms life after death, instead of nothing? Heresy!'

'So,' asked the Cosmocrat, his eyes narrowing, 'you are suggesting we turn him over to our opponents to be, as you say, discredited?'

'Opponents, to be sure. But also, as we all know, partners.'

'You would do well to keep that thought secret, Archon. But I think, nonetheless, that you may be right.'

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One night a week later, after being released by the *Mysterium* and taking shelter above one of the public houses where he was welcome, along with the crowds he drew, the Revenant

found himself being conducted to a public meeting in a way which suggested he had little alternative. He found himself in a hall, facing another row of questioners.

‘Revenant, so-called, I am Dara of the Nihilists. *The Dara*. And you have been summoned to explain the absurd things they say you have said.’

So the Revenant, upon being asked, repeated the account he had given to the Mysterium. Then the questions started – mocking, with smiles that were not humorous but bitter. ‘What determines the kind of body you have after death?’ ‘Why have the living never seen or heard or felt these other kinds of bodies? Except for yourself, of course.’ ‘Do the differently alive die again? If so, what happens then?’

‘Good people, I don’t have all the answers. There are many things I didn’t think to ask when I could have, and I’m sorry for that.’

Finally, the Dara lashed out. ‘How can you insult our intelligence so? Isn’t the physical body, and the physical world, the only reality we know? How can you even suggest that anything survives its death? I think you have come to bring back superstition, delude the gullible masses and do the Mysterium’s work. How stupid you must think us!’

‘Good man, why would I want to do that? The Mysterium have already rejected me. And why do you hate me so? If I am merely wrong, then so be it.’

‘You obviously don’t understand. Death is the enemy! It must be defeated, destroyed, so that we can live on forever as glorious, indestructible gods who never have to die. And you, so-called Revenant, are making that task harder, confusing the gullible into thinking death is *not* the end, that there is life on the other side of it. That makes you the enemy too.’

By the meeting’s end, most of those present, talking amongst themselves, gave the Revenant many dark and doubtful looks. None came to speak with him, and he left alone.

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Two more weeks passed, during which the Revenant continued to speak where invited. But increasingly he found himself shunned and disinvited. Then he was invited to another meeting, this time in a small room, facing three men. Their spokesman, it seemed, was a tall, thin man, carefully casually dressed, with a fixed smile and his hair drawn back in a tight ponytail. ‘Brother! How are you?’

‘Well enough, thank you.’

‘I am the Connector.’ He reached out and shook the Revenant’s hand. ‘Let me come straight to the point. We have heard of your predicament. You’ve been disowned by the Mysterium and humiliated by the Nihilists. It seems even the public has started to turn against you. Fickle! But there is a third option.’

The Revenant felt on his guard. He even began to doubt that this *was* a good man, although it had been nice to be addressed as brother. ‘I am not worried about that. If no one wants to listen then I won’t speak. But what are you offering?’

The Connector drew his chair up closer. The Revenant could feel the suppressed eagerness in his own body. ‘These memories of yours, these post-mortem experiences. You said we already know them, so tell us how to access them. There must be a method! Do you have any idea how many people would want to know? We can sell it for you, and make you a very rich man.’

The Revenant felt a wave of nausea. ‘Good man’ – he forced himself to say – ‘there is no method. I have no idea how it happened. I didn’t know it would, and I couldn’t make it happen again.’

‘But maybe there is a way to slip across that border while we’re still here.’

‘Maybe there is, but in that case every person must find their own way. And when they do, they won’t be following a method. They will just find themselves doing it.’

The Connector leaned back, studying the Revenant. ‘Ah, I see,’ he said. ‘A shrewd bargainer! Alright, we will double what we were going to offer you.’ His colleagues nodded assent.

‘No, my good man, I am not dissembling. I speak the truth. And I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I think this meeting is over.’

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As the room emptied, a woman approached. He felt her coming before he saw her: a wave of warmth and vitality. Dark-haired and dark-eyed, no longer young but not yet aged, her eyes narrowed as she turned them on him. He almost stepped back. ‘May we talk? But not here.’

They left together, and he followed her through narrow streets, dark and drenched, until he was completely lost. Finally they arrived at a door. ‘Don’t worry, you can stay here tonight. And you can trust me. I am a good woman,’ she added with a twist of a smile.

‘But who are you?’

‘You may call me the Dark Female. Am I not?’

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Afterwards, of that night, he remembered breast and cheek, with his limbs indistinguishable from hers, but chiefly trying to take hold of this slippery sea-being who eluded him with ease, laughing, until he thought he would go mad with desire. Suddenly, with infinite kindness, she allowed herself to be caught and entered, and as their bodies moved together the intensity mounted beyond bearing. ‘Not again!’ was his last thought-bubble.

But when he woke, in the same room, what first came to him was a dream – if dream it was, being more real than what his present senses could show him – of the purest, deepest darkness he had ever seen, in which were swimming, as in a sea, stars uncountable. The sky – if sky it was, being below as much as above him – was throbbing with them.

She was sitting next to him, with a hot drink. She seemed to know. ‘Your truth,’ she said, ‘has been that after you die, you live again. But before you can live or die, or live again, you must first be born.’ She looked him in the eyes. ‘Even for you, Revenant, the story is not finally about death. It is about life.’

Later, he looked at her with a question in his face. She shrugged. ‘I wanted to show you that, and *it* wanted me to as well. So no, I didn’t know for sure what would happen. And I don’t think it will again. ‘But,’ she smiled, ‘there are other things we might do.’ She turned away, but the smile remained.

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One night not long after, they left the City. I had spoken with the Revenant shortly before. There were rumours that they were making for a community on the coast, away South. I have tried to find out more, but failed. It seems they have passed out of this story, or it out of them.

Nonetheless, I, the Physician, set down here all that I have heard and seen, and where there were gaps, I have done my best to imagine them faithfully. It may be the only account! Maybe only I have escaped to tell it. If so, I beg you to listen, believe me, and to pass it on. I swear to its truth, and such knowledge is surely precious beyond any worldly wealth or honour. Or so I hope, having now little of either.

Did anything change in the City? Well, I sometimes think something has slightly shifted. A little less respect for the various authorities, perhaps; a little more openness to other ways

of thinking and living. As for the Revenant's account, I still do not look forward to death. But now I am curious.

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