

On the Parting Where Three Roads Meet by Samuel Hung 洪啓勝

It is a valley with a small river across the center. Continuing waves of hills stand on both sides of the valley. The green meadows, bowing their body on and off to dance with the song of breeze, spread over miles from a line of hills to another line of hills. On the meadows the wood fence rails like pieces of mosaic, reflecting green light under the glaring sun.

Now a little orange flash appears on one end of a long straight road along the river. It is a small car. Tent, sleeping bags, and other travel commodities crowd its top and trunk. The noisy cough of the engine and the faded paint both suppose it is not strange if this car will suddenly break up. In the small car are two people. One is a pretty woman with long black hair. Her eyes are gray and flashing, very corresponding with her delicate face. She is now driving the car and humming a canorous, unknown song. Sitting beside the woman is a young man with short brown hair. He is actually beyond 20, but his baby face makes him looks younger than he is. He is now dozing by the window with his arm supporting his head.

After the car passes through a bridge, the woman suddenly looses the accelerator and let the car coast slowly until it totally stops. "What's wrong? Are we running out of gas?" the man, just awake, asks the woman. "Unfortunately, we aren't, but we do have a problem. Can you find a parting where three roads meet on the map?" the woman replies in a relaxed voice. "Oh, Ye...let me see...No, I can't." the man checks the map and says. It is nearly the end of the valley, and there is no guidepost at all about the three roads. Each road is as new as if it just has been paved. Their ends all disappear under the horizon.

"So I said many times that a map painted according to other's words was not reliable at all. What shall we do now -- Hey! Boss! Where do you go?" Regardless of the man's saying, the woman switches off the engine and leaves the car. She searches her jacket pockets and finds two coins. The young man hastens to leave the car and asks, "Are you going to decide by throwing the two coins? We still have no idea where these roads lead to." "I know." the woman just simply replies, as if not hearing what the man says. "So what do you...Hey? Look! Someone is coming. A farmer! He must know something about these roads." The man immediately runs to the farmer. However, the woman still stands there, and throws her coins to the sky. The two coins roll five or six

times in the sky and then fall on the ground. The woman takes a look on the coins and picks them up with a satisfied smile.

“Excuse me, sir. Do you know which way leads to Asgard?” the young man points to the parting and says to the farmer. The old farmer, who is about 70 years old, shows his body from his truck and says, “Yes, traveler, I know, I know how to get to Asgard. In fact, you can reach Asgard by all the three ways, no matter which way you choose.” “What? Sir, I beg your pardon?” the man has a worried look on his face. “It is just what I said, traveler. These three roads all begin in the same place, and all end in the same place—Asgard.” The young man still looks worried. Before he wants to ask more details, someone calls him from his back. It’s the pretty woman. After she and the old farmer greet with each other politely, the young man quickly retells the farmer’s words to her. The woman nods to show she understands this matter, and then politely asks the farmer if he can explain the reasons behind these roads, since the young man is very curious of them. The old farmer considers for a little while, and takes out his pipe and tobacco. He smokes the tobacco and says, “Well, I will tell you.”

In Asgard, there are always debates among three groups. One group is often called “Academy,” which many artists, scholars, and young educated people attend. They often congregate to discuss politics and social issues about Asgard. The other group is called “Big Hand,” composed of some honorable big men. The dignity of their class makes their words very influential in many affairs. And they think that tradition and custom is very important. Many farmers and workers are their supporters. Another group includes merchant and businessman. Many of them are new rich, especially Vandergelder, who is the wealthiest and most ambitious of these rich men. He is supported very much by many bourgeois and his employees, and he also successfully plays as an arbiter between the new rich often. That’s why people often call this group “Vander.” These three groups often have conflicts in many ways. For example, when it was going to build a statue in memory of a fireman who sacrificed his life to save an honorable family, the Academy and the Vander had disagreement on the design and the budget for the statue. And the Big Hand was the same, thinking the other two groups are childish and vulgar. Therefore, the building of the statue was delayed for a long time.

The cause of these roads is similar. It used to be one road leading from here to Asgard. The road was so rough and tortuous that hardly anyone used it.

However, the road became important since the communication between Asgard and west cities was more and more frequent. It was necessary for it to be refined. And the problem happened again. The Academy made an agreement that it was unnecessary to refine the original road; conversely, they should build a new road. This new road would pass through the lush forest, the blooming prairie, and the beautiful lake. It would bring the most impressive memory to those who go this way. It was not a big deal that it detoured a little. But the Vander didn't think like this. The scenic view was not important at all. They preferred a wide, straight, and convenient way, so they can transport their commodity fast. Even though many bridges and tunnels had to be built for the kind of road, for the Vander, it was worth the trouble. The Big Hand, of course, didn't keep silent. They insisted the old road should be retained and be repaired. It was no use to build new roads because the old one was enough for using. In addition, in spite of the fact that the old road was not prettier than the Academy's and faster than the Vander's, it still had some good views and could be smooth after reconstruction.

These three groups kept their quarrels; even the leader of Asgard couldn't stop them. Until one day, several students belonging to the Academy announced they would build the road by themselves. And they really started to do it. When Vandergelder heard the news, he also decided to build his way without waiting. The members of Big Hand, then, agreed with each other that if they didn't follow, they would lose their honor. So all of the groups started to build their promised roads. And they all got their supporters' full offering of help so the process went on swimmingly.

"The result was what you see now, three roads leading to the same place." the old farmer finishes his telling and exhales the smoke of tobacco. After thanking the farmer, the young man turns to talk with the woman. "By the way, it is not as bad as I think in the beginning. People can choose their own way for their needs. It's not a trouble." "Not a trouble? Do you really think so?" the woman asks the young man. The young man wants to say something, but the woman doesn't give him any chance to speak. She looks at the farmer and says, "There is no guidepost at all, isn't there, sir?" The old farmer smiles and says to the young man. "This lady is right, kid. The quarrel is not yet over." "I am an adult, not a kid, sir." the young man, without facing the farmer, just mutters in a small voice.

They say goodbye to the old farmer and go back to the car. When they enter the car, the young man can't help but ask, "Boss, why the old one says the quarrel is not yet over?" The woman doesn't answer his question. She just starts the car and says in a relaxed voice, as if she is speaking to herself, "I guess when we arrive Asgard, there must be people who not only welcome us but also ask us from which way we come." The man goes blank for a few seconds and suddenly shouts. "Oh! I understand...No! No! It's not good! Boss! If it is true, what shall we do? The problem is becoming more difficult now!" The woman, looked as though nothing had happened, replies, still in a relaxed voice, "I never think it's a difficult problem, Paul." "How? ...Ah! I know. The coins!" the man takes a deep sigh. "My goodness! I can't believe you really do it." "Maybe I will decide by the coins, or by my interest." the woman says, and this time she turns her gaze towards the man. "Don't you think we should...!" the man suddenly swallows his words, because the woman's face is now very close to him, and her hand is on his shoulder. She gives him a smile and says, "You know, Paul, women don't like too loquacious men."

The car becomes silent for a while. But not a long time it starts to move, and the canorous unknown song is hummed again.