

Rise 274

Chapter 274: In the Stinking Exam Cell, I Have a Mask

After the ink had dried, Zhu Ping'an collected the examination paper and carefully placed it into the exam paper bag, hanging it on the wall to the side.

By now, the sky had turned dark. The night was as thick as ink, so dark it felt like you could dip a brush into it. Along with the falling night came a howling northern wind. The wind was strong, and the soldiers supervising outside were shivering from the cold.

Of course, along with the howling wind came the stench from the neighboring latrines, and those suffering the most from it were the examinees in the "stinking stalls."

From afar came the sound of someone vomiting. In the silence of the deep night, it was exceptionally clear. He was probably just as unlucky as Zhu Ping'an himself.

So what if he was in the stinking stall? Just make a mask, that's all.

Zhu Ping'an tightened the rabbit fur coat around him, pulled his travel bag from the kang bed, and took out a cotton pillowcase. It was made by his mother, Chen, using leftover cotton fabric from sewing clothes for him.

He took out the pillowcase and, with a small knife, cut two oval-shaped pieces of cotton cloth based on the size of his face. Then he layered them together, cut four long strips, and made four small holes in the cloth. He threaded the strips through the holes and tied them up.

Hmm, a simple double-layer mask was now complete.

Zhu Ping'an put on the mask. Hmm, not bad. He could hardly smell the stench anymore.

It was late at night, the perfect time to sleep. But before sleeping, he looked over the second Four Books essay topic. Thinking while falling asleep was ideal.

The second essay topic was relatively simple: "Only when the cold season comes do we know that pine and cypress are the last to wither."

This was from The Analects of Confucius, Chapter 28 of the "Zihan" section. It was a well-known and often-quoted saying. After reading the topic, Zhu Ping'an also put the test question into the exam bag and hung it on the wall. Then he tidied up his small exam booth, blew out the candle, and fell into a quiet sleep while reflecting on the topic.

Actually, this topic wasn't difficult at all. It meant that only when winter comes do we realize that pines and cypresses are the last to shed their leaves — essentially, praising their unyielding and noble character. Zhu Xi explained this with two sentences: "In times of peace, the petty man may appear no different from the gentleman, but in times of crisis, the gentleman's true character becomes evident."

"A scholar reveals his integrity when in adversity; loyal ministers are recognized in chaotic times. Those who wish to learn must have virtue as their foundation."

So this was essentially a “metaphor to express moral aspiration” essay — describing the pine and cypress’s persistence and character from multiple angles, then expressing that one’s own moral outlook was similarly lofty and noble.

Very soon, Zhu Ping’an had already drafted the structure for his Eight-Legged Essay in his mind and quietly fell asleep.

At dawn, all was silent. The faint morning light slowly spilled across the examination hall from afar, gently awakening the sleeping examinees.

Actually, Zhu Ping’an had already woken up and washed before the first light of dawn.

Not for any other reason — simply because this was the coldest time of the day. Morning frost still covered the outside, and because of the cold, the stench from the neighboring latrines was faint. Also, most examinees were still asleep and had not yet used the toilets.

So at this time, the smell in the stinking stall was the weakest of the whole day.

He had only eaten once yesterday. Zhu Ping’an now felt extremely hungry. His stomach had already growled several times.

“Therefore, when Heaven is about to bestow a great responsibility on someone, it first tests his will, tires his muscles and bones, starves his body, and impoverishes him. It frustrates him so as to strengthen his resolve and develop what he could not do before.”

Wearing his mask, Zhu Ping’an softly recited this line from Mencius. Then he took out the pre-cut meat chunks from his bundle — cut for inspection by the guard soldiers. He skewered a piece on an iron rod and grilled it over the charcoal fire. After it was heated, he lifted a corner of his mask, put the meat into his mouth, and quickly pulled the mask back on.

And so, he chewed with difficulty.

As for cooking noodles with meat soup like yesterday — absolutely out of the question today. Yesterday was the first day, and he had entered among the earliest batch of examinees. The toilets next door had not yet been used, and there was no smell, so he could cook a hot meal. But today, that would be impossible.

Trying that again would just make him vomit.

So Zhu Ping’an just roasted the dried meat slightly, put it into his mouth, and chewed with the mask on. Heat, bite, swallow — quickly and in large amounts.

The proctor soldier outside was nearly dumbfounded. He had just returned after a shift change during the night, only to find that the examinee in his assigned booth had created some strange get-up — a rag mask covering his face — and was eating heartily so early in the morning without pause.

During the shift break last night, the soldier had already heard that a candidate in one of the other stinking stalls had vomited to the point of unconsciousness. Especially around sunset, when many people used the toilets at the same time — the poor kid passed out from the stench. The chief examiner (in ancient times also called the “Zongcai,” or president of the examiners) had ordered that the examinee be sent to the Mingjing Pavilion for treatment. Of course, his exam was considered void.

But the examinee in this stall wasn't only not vomiting or passing out — he was full of energy.

So no matter what others thought, this supervising soldier had to admit: I respect this examinee.

In just a short while, Zhu Ping'an had already stuffed nearly a whole jin (half a kilo) of meat into his stomach. He was no longer hungry, but in extraordinary times, one had to be completely full.

A candidate who had gotten up early couldn't bear the pressure in his stomach. Throwing on a coat, he left his booth to relieve himself.

Accompanied by a supervisor, as he walked toward the latrine, he felt incredibly lucky that he hadn't been assigned to a stinking stall. He thought of all the examinees who had to use the toilet like him and felt a little schadenfreude. Heh, those guys in the stinking stalls must be suffering terribly.

That thought brought him a sense of happiness.

Indeed, happiness comes from comparison.

As he passed the stinking stall where he had just been feeling smug, a scene unfolded before him that completely shattered his worldview.

The examinee he had imagined to be vomiting and half-dead in the stinking stall was at that very moment holding a skewer of sizzling roasted meat, eating with great relish.

For some reason, the sight made the passing examinee gag uncontrollably.

Uh, did he come here just to throw up in front of me?

Zhu Ping'an looked out at the sound, then silently shook his head, tossed the skewer of meat into the charcoal basin, letting it burn to ash, and began tidying up his exam booth.

By now, the sky was gradually brightening.

Zhu Ping'an, still wearing his mask, finished organizing everything in his booth, washed his hands, set up the inkstone, brush, and paper once more, and resumed his journey in the imperial examination — leaping the dragon gate.

By the time that gagging examinee returned from the latrine, Zhu Ping'an was already transcribing the essay he had drafted in his head the night before. His brush flowed like a dragon and snake, fluent and unhesitating — done in a single stretch.

In the stinking stall, yet still brimming with inspiration! The latrine-returning candidate felt absolutely blindsided by Zhu Ping'an's brilliance.