

The Emissary, by Ken Nickels

The world will not end in an inferno or a cinder. Teeth will not be bared by man nor beast. There will not be a biological disaster that extinguished many of the world's poor. Not that these things have not occurred. They all happened in time. The whole of earth's history demands that they must be so. No zombies, no second coming, no tearing asunder. There will be no pain or even the slightest discomfort. It won't hurt a bit. When the world ends it will come as a whisper in a dream. As a child leaves its mother's arms only to be welcomed into the arms of another.

Xiao Bing was born in the dark network of tunnels under Cambodia where he lived there for the first fifteen years of his life. He and his extended family survived the worst of the second Vietnam War by sheer tenacity and ingenuity. Survival necessarily meant specialization. There were chemists, botanists, logistics experts, fighters, mushroom farmers and dreamers. Xiu Bing played the violin. And he knew how to get things. And he had a way of getting people to do things for him, get things for him. To think his way. He wasn't good with words, but he didn't need them. He used his mind, which had grown stronger and stronger from eating the strange mushrooms that had poisoned many of the others. Gasoline, Agent Orange and other toxic byproducts of war soaked the ground and dripped into the tunnels. For a long time he thought he must be strange, but soon he became accustomed to the power as if it was a natural extension of himself, like an extra eye, especially sharp.

Young Xiao Bing discovered a violin among piles of unused debris in an old neglected part of the tunnel, a hundred markers away from the family. There were round things in the heap. Square things too. And dusty machines and tools amidst paintings and wooden chairs and tables and flags from many countries. Things no one needed anymore. And glorious costumes of red and gold, now dim and inert in the dust of this tunnel. He fancied himself wearing such finery.

He picked up the violin and examined it in his nimble hands, turning it this way and that. He puzzled over the bow, but only briefly. For it fit his hand perfectly and easily found its way across the strings, stroking and making music. He would steal off by himself many times to play this violin but no one came to look for him. He thought they must be afraid of him because when you were near him it was as if you had no power of your own. The truth was they were planning things that did not include him. So he made his break out of the tunnel and into the light.

Even through the yellow haze the sun was bright enough to hurt his eyes. Opened just a crack, he stumbled through the rubble, wondering if he should return to the dark safety of the tunnels. Then suddenly

he felt something in his pocket. A pair of sunglasses. He only now thought of it, and then it happened. He smiled and put them on, then trudged ahead with new confidence.

He came across a man dressed in a black suit of rubber like the tarps used in the tunnels, and a helmet with wires attached to it. When he removed his helmet Xiou Bing saw the scarred face and the one eye peering out. The man looked with mouth open at Xiou Bing dressed in royal robes as if he were some kind of young hallucination. He tried to speak but could not manage a thought. He fell to his knees and put his head in his hands and wept like a child. Xiou Bing couldn't bare to see the man in such despair, he'd seen so much of it in the tunnels, so he laid his hand on his shoulder until the soldier quieted himself and straightened up. It's OK, said Xiou Bing. it's all over now. And together found their way out of the smoke and debris and into safety. It turned out that that safety was found by train into the city of Berlin.

He learned that the soldier's name was Ray. Ray, just a young man himself, carried all of the horror and sorrow in the war in his head. Xiou Bing felt it. It energized him. He knew that Ray would be a useful part of his new plan.

On the train Xiou Bing and Ray had time to think. Doubt is over now, they thought and everything is understood.

Ray spoke first. I'm feeling a little better, Xiou Bing.

I thought you would.

Will you teach me the violin?

Xiou Bing nodded.

Except that my hands are shaky and I have just the one eye.

That won't be a problem, he said, taking hold of Ray's hands.

Ray asked him how old he was.

Xiou Bing said, I don't know. But I've been thinking.

About what?

About many things. The war. The future. This violin. I think we could best serve the world with music, don't you think? We could travel all over the world and people would come to see us and it would be wonderful.

You said we. You said We could serve the world.

Well, yes. You and I. And others too. Many, many others.

Then he let go of Ray's hands and stood up, pretending he was playing his fiddle.

Do like I do, he said. And Ray sawed his arm back and forth and moved his fingers up and down the neck of his pretend fiddle in concert with Xiou Bing.

Your hands are not shaking anymore, Ray.

Ray held them out in front of him, steady as a rock. Holy shit! he said.

When we get to Berlin we'll get you a real one.

AND THAT WAS HOW THINGS WENT FOR THEM.

First in Berlin, where they picked up Gunther, who drove a taxi and had many stories to tell about all the people he had met. Xious Bing said, you shall play the viola. And then on to Paris, where they played in the streets where the sound gave a beautiful echo. Then on to Moscow, a dangerous journey. But it was worth the risk when they met Miravina, a woman who played the cello beautifully.

Xiou Bing was becoming the container, a powerful magnet for other musicians. When they could not come to him they formed their own bands under his guidance, which was telekinetic, make no mistake about that. And this power somehow spread amongst these people too, such that music could be shared in precise ways just by projecting your thoughts. And while at first they seemed powerless to resist, now they fed off of it only to be able to pass it on to others. And now the whole of humanity seemed on the precipice of something never before achieved on earth.

Which brings us now to New York City where Xiou Bing and his troupe are getting ready for their world premiere at Central Park, a well publicized event. He and his band were ready to play the anthem that they created as a necessary gift to the world. To say that the concert was televised was not quite true. It was. But it didn't need to be because for the last few months people found themselves drawn to any sort of musical instrument, with which they participated in real time with the band's performance. Perhaps they didn't know it, but they were.

Now people tried to rush the stage to play. One by one someone asked Xiou Bing for his violin and then Gunther for his viola and then Miravina's cello, and carried on without a break. Knowing that their job was complete the band happily walked off stage and made their way back to the hotel.

Meanwhile concerts all over the world began spontaneously, all playing the same thing at exactly the same time. People cheered in the streets in London as King Andrew rode through in a carriage. Even the horses marched in time.

COULD ALL THIS REALLY HAPPEN?

What if the band tried to ditch the crowd on its way to the hotel? And ducked into a building in Rockefeller Center. And tried to find a shortcut, taking the escalator down and down, into a strange place where all the doors led to dark tunnels. And they all followed Xiou Bing as he led the way – because, of course, he knew tunnels very well. But they ran on in the dim light until they were confused and exhausted.

Then Xiou Bing pointed and said, That one! It opened and they walked through it and up a long flight of stairs, and finally back into the warm New York evening once again. Except it wasn't New York. It was deadly silent but for a small breeze. No crowds, no sirens, no celebrations, nothing. They walked on a dirt path flanked by walls so high that they couldn't see the tops of them. And whenever they turned around to see where they had come from, there was nothing there.

Ahead they saw a huge structure. A building, it was vast and dark, with three windows, each big enough to fly a plane through. And behind the windows was total, absolute black. An emptiness beyond description. They all froze, straining to hear the sound that came from within. It was the only sound. After a moment Xiou Bing walked a little closer to it, then turned around to see his band mates looking frightened.

Don't! cautioned Gunther. Don't do it. But Xiou Bing only smiled and said, I'm going in. They watched him go, slowly, purposefully, up to the building that dwarfed him. He turned around once more and giggled. I'm going in, he said. He perched himself up on the ledge, and waited for a moment. Then he pushed himself off into the void.

The others waited there for what must have been a very long time, with only the small breeze and the strange humming sound coming from the dark building. Miravina saw the beginnings of light rising in the distance. They walked toward it.

New York was gone. But they saw sights both familiar and foreign now. A field of green, with trees undulating in a breeze where the land gently fell away to reveal a vast valley of different colors. Ray on remarked how beautiful it all was, but Miravina looked puzzled.

What's wrong? Ray said.

Look there, in the clearing. That one tree.

Yes, I see it. What about it?

See the shadow to the left of it?

I see it.

There is another one just like it to the right. Two shadows.

Two sources of light?

Look up. Up there. And there too.

Two suns!

Two suns!