

Bom & Yong

“Those who seek knowledge, collect something every day. Those who seek the Way, let go of something every day. They let go and let go, until reaching no action. When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.”

“Buddha?”

“Lao Tzu,” Bom replies, turning over in his bed. “It’s common knowledge that the older the source, the wiser the wisdom, and the *Dao De Jing* was written at least sometime before Jesus, or something, which makes it a particularly enlightened text. Otherwise, why else would anyone continue to read it after all these millennia? For me, the *Dao De Jing* is more reliable and more informative than any self-help book that’s come out in the past century. Ergo, I have decided it is time for me to let go of superficial attachments to knowledge, seek the ineffable motions of the universe, and contemplate things of unimaginable wonder. *Ergo*—I better skip school today,” he concludes sagely.

A pointed huff of hot air parts the hair at the back of his neck. However, Bom ignores the dragon at his backside and valiantly attempts to reenter the dreamland that he’d been stolen from.

“And what about your parents?” murmurs Yong as footsteps begin to shuffle outside his door. On cue, Bom’s mother enters the room, tutting under her breath as she picks up several toy dinosaurs off the floor. She kisses him on the forehead and leaves with a simple, “*Get up,*” in Korean.

He violently thrashes in bed and gets up to brush his teeth.

1. Math

“This block by itself is one block, but if we add more, we can make a row of ten blocks. What about if we make *ten* rows of *ten* blocks, how many total blocks do we get?”

Ms. Kaspbrak starts to stack the rows of blocks on top of one another, looking longingly across the room for a volunteer.

At the back of the room, Bom is thinking about the number of chocolate chips in his oatmeal this morning and recalling a feeling of righteous disappointment. In his eight years on this earth, Bom has already spent half of his life waking up before the sun to spend the rest of his day indoors, learning about how someone decided these symbols mean one thing while those symbols mean another and occasionally trying to move the pencil on his desk with his mind. For this, he thinks he deserves more than seven chocolate chips.

“Bom, what do you think?”

The thing about Ms. Kaspbrak is that she is a genuinely kind person and has your best interests at heart. This makes it difficult for Bom to resent her for pronouncing his name like an explosive device. He clears his throat.

“I’d like to ask a few clarifying questions, if I may. Firstly, how can we be sure that those are indeed ten blocks—is the abstract concept of ten a fact of the universe, or a fictitious avenue of sense making that we’ve created for ourselves? What is ten, and where is it? Sure, there are ten blocks in front of me, but those are the blocks. When I think of the number ten, where does it go?”

As a second grader, Bom has learned a few things in his time, including exactly what techniques to use on which teachers to distract them from the fact that he doesn’t, in fact, know the answer. Up until this point, Bom has had no reason to count above 60, and he’s all about practical applications of math-based problem solving. The trick with Ms. Kaspbrak is to ask her enough “clarifying questions” to make her pop two aspirin and move on to the next activity.

“Using our culturally shared understanding of counting, can you tell me how many blocks I have here right now?” Ms. Kaspbrak amends carefully.

Bom squints and begins to count each block one by one under his breath.

“How about using the times tables we learned last class?”

“What are times tables,” Bom asks, turning to face Yong.

With that starts independent practice time. Independent practice time is a period of “intellectual exploration” where each student can get up and hop between different stations around the

classroom—whiteboard problem solving, block building, using an abacus, or playing math games on their school-issued chromebook.

Sitting on the floor at the block building station, Bom is crafting a rather inspired portrait of a dinosaur out of math blocks. Next to him lies Yong, a deep red, white-bellied dragon of indeterminate age. He claims he's as old as time, but Bom thinks he just prefers the intrigue of the sentiment.

“Really, though, what is *ten*, and who made it up? Is it a fact that there are ten blocks in this row? What if I made a new system of counting that stops at seven, and this is a new number called *seventhree*?” Bom whispers out of the corner of his mouth, arranging little block people to scream for help in the jaws of his dinosaur.

“What makes you so down on made up things? I saw you playing Battleship with your oatmeal this morning,” Yong points out.

Bom sighs. “I don't mean to seem down on imagination—I suppose, I'm just feeling a sense of disillusionment. Sometimes, it feels as though the symbols we're being taught are so abstract that they take us further away from understanding life than before we learned the stupid things. Maybe instead of being shown representations of life inside a classroom, we should be going out there experiencing the real thing—the true range of human emotions! The quest for capital-T Truth!”

He tilts his head back and cups his hands around his mouth.

“Can anyone tell me why I should be doing this? Any of it! Does any of this get me any closer to the essential question of what the meaning of life is?”

Behind him sneaks up his classmate Maya, an aloof girl who he's come to respect as a trusted affiliate for trading Pokémon cards. She picks up Yong with one hand and swoops him through the air.

“Doesn't Yong have anything to say about the meaning of life?” she asks, flopping him around.

“Don't—Stop it!” he exclaims, snatching him out of the air and placing him safely behind his back. Unfazed, Yong merely stretches out his legs and folds back into the sitting position he was just in. Maya shrugs and looks back down to the dancing numbers on her chromebook. To her left sits Corbin Klein. All you need to know about him is that he wipes his mouth with his shirt sleeve and cheats at foursquare.

“Yeah, don’t you know that’s Bomb’s *precious* dragon? He can’t even go to gym class without it,” Corbin sniggers, elbowing Maya repeatedly.

Suddenly, Yong looms high above his head, casting a deep shadow before him and emitting a low, rumbling sound. Corbin doesn’t seem to see him, but he does wet his pants.

2. Social Studies

Bam, pop quiz.

Last time he had a pop quiz, Bom discreetly tried to whisper the questions to Yong under his desk, but he was eventually caught by Ms. Kaspbrak and had to write “*I will not distract others during tests*” on a chalkboard 20 times.

Luckily, that was math. This is much more in his wheelhouse as he’s been known to be something of a political junkie amongst his teaching staff. He flips over his paper with bravado.

The word bank at the top reads [*timeline, vote, community, citizen, laws*], and the questions are as follows:

1. _____ are rules to help keep people safe and help them get along.

Well, sure, that’s one way to look at laws. And if he says laws do nothing but protect the interests of the bourgeoisie and brainwash people into thinking they lack the ability to self-govern, he gets a parent-teacher conference about the kind of reading material that’s appropriate for an eight-year-old.

2. A _____ shows the order in which things happen.

That’s tricky because it assumes time as a strict progression of cause to effect when in reality the order in which things happen is not linear. But, he supposes the answer is timeline.

3. To make a choice about something, you can _____.

Vote?! The option you’re giving me here is vote? It’s a nice sentiment, but American democracy is more along the lines of, “Spend hours of your day carefully researching and sending in a mail ballot, and maybe we’ll give you human rights in 12 years. That is, if the people who actually matter think that as well.”

4. A place where people live, work, learn and play is called a _____.

This sounds like a cult to me.

5. A person who belongs to a community is called a _____.

A cultist.

“You went with the cultist, huh?” says Yong, hovering over his shoulder.

“I know what they want me to put, and I don’t like it.”

“That’s school for you.”

“Well, I don’t like it.” Bom replies.

“Do you really want to have another parent-teacher conference?”

Bom sighs and starts to erase his answers.

3. Recess

Collapsed over a bed of snow, the cold slowly seeping into his snowpants, Bom recalls a day last month when parents were invited to come in and speak about their jobs. Cheerily, they each began, “Well, basically what I do is...” and explained an exchange of goods and services, that people would get sick, sued, a new house, a new bank account, and they would come to them. Once the presentations were over, all eyes turned on the students.

“What do *you* want to be when you grow up?”

That day, Bom had walked home in silence, wordlessly pulling his older brother’s skateboard out of the garage and rolling it onto the front driveway.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Yong asked.

“Talk about what—how I lied to those teachers? They weren’t giving me much of a choice,” Bom replied, wobbling on the inert skateboard beneath his feet.

Yong snorted a puff of hot air out of his nostrils. “They weren’t, were they?”

“I mean, I could be a basketball player if I wanted to,” he offered.

“Sure.”

“And it’s not that I don’t want to.”

“Right.”

“It wasn’t a lie necessarily.”

“Right.”

Bom switched from balancing on the skateboard to idly moving it back and forth with one foot.

“It’s just the way they were anticipating an answer from me as if I owed it to them. As if it were offensive that I didn’t want to be anything! Maybe I simply do not dream of labor, ever think of that?”

“Well, what is it you dream of? These people only know how to deal with other second-graders. They’re just unprepared for your particular level of patriarchal resistance—that typically develops a little later in life.” Yong stretched his wings and found a sunny spot next to Bom who had given up and sat next to his skateboard.

“Yesterday, I dreamt that I was stuck in a moment like a ship in a bottle, riding on your back and soaring through the clouds forever and ever.”

“Wouldn’t that moment get lonely? Aren’t you curious to see what happens next?”

“I’d have you.”

“You would. What about your parents?”

“They dream of my labor.”

“Your friends?”

“If I talk to my friends, then I can’t talk to you.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Well, they can’t talk to you. And I think it’s impolite to be disengaged while having a conversation with someone.”

“So,” Yong exhaled. “No career aspirations.”

“Move not unless you see an advantage,” Bom replied sagely.

“Confucius?”

“Sun Tzu.”

“What about the other ancients? Aristotle considered it a virtue to desire honor and be ‘great-souled.’ I think he’d want you to make something of your life.”

“You’re a dragon from ancient China, shouldn’t you be on my side?”

“When you’ve been around for as long as I have, you learn to diversify your reading material.”

“What, so Aristotle wants me to have some meaningless day job? I’d rather spend my time finding the truth. He was a philosopher—I’ll just do what he did.”

“So you want to be a philosopher.”

“No, that’s not—you tricked me!”

“Why are you so resistant to wanting a job?”

“Why are you so insistent on me wanting a job! You’re just as bad as those teachers—why does everyone want to employ me so urgently? I’m eight-years-old, for God’s sake. My life’s just begun! My life’s just begun, and if you think you can fit me into a neat little box in the bureaucracy then you’re wrong, you’re wrong!”

Yong huffed and watched the heat evaporate the tears on Bom’s face.

“I was just curious,” Yong said gently. “I don’t want you to be alone when you get older.”

“Why would I be alone?”

“If we don’t try to not be alone, often we end up alone.”

The bell rings, and students obediently start to line up by the door. Bom dusts the snow off of his pants and straightens his hat.

“What do *you* want to be when you grow up?”

Bom, being eight-years-old, has received this question many times.

Truthfully, if he could save time in a bottle, if he could make moments last forever, Bom would save the smell of frozen grass and the way the snow feels beneath him in this moment, the way Yong curls in corkscrews above him and the brightness of the day. He would be bottled up, too, and read all the comics that ever existed under a never setting sun, listening to icicles fall and stay frozen and the dragon above breathe fire as the moment stretches on.

Is there a job for every dream? Is there something out there that could make his dream come true? He thinks not, but he's been told he can be a bit of a smartass, so maybe he's wrong. Maybe.

When people ask him what he wants to be when he grows up, they really mean what job he wants to have. But the thing is, Bom has simply never dreamt of entering the workforce. He dreams of growing wings and breathing fire.

4. Music

At the far side of the stage, Mrs. Pecker motions the line of students forward onto the tiered platforms, the shortest at the front and the tallest in the back. Instead of having their normal music period, Bom and his class are rehearsing for the annual Christmas Concert tonight. It will be his first time wearing a suit.

Front and center, Bom tucks Yong under one armpit and holds his music sheet out in front of him. He practices the song under his breath.

"All is bright. *Bright*. All is *brrright*." He has trouble with the R's, and Mrs. Pecker is always on him about his pronunciation.

All the students now in place, Mrs. Pecker steps back with a pained expression on her face.

"Paul, can you take a step to the right? I can't see Holly." He hears complaining behind him and continues enunciating "Silent Night" under his breath.

Mrs. Pecker sighs. "Bom, aren't you a little old to be bringing Yong to school?"

"Well, I've tried leaving him at home, Mrs. Pecker, but he gets bored really easily."

"And what do you plan to do when you're older? Take him to work with you?" she asks, outstretching her hand and making a giving motion. Bom makes a face and reluctantly places him in her hand. She nods and crouches by the edge of the stage, gently tossing Yong onto a seat in the front row.

"Okay! Let's hear 'Santa Claus Is Coming To Town'? 1, 2, 3..."

That night, the kids all return to school in suits with green ties and dresses with red bows and gather in their homeroom for a pep talk.

“Now, I know how hard you all have worked preparing for this concert, and I want you to know that I am proud of each and every one of you. All of your parents and grandparents and brothers and sisters are going to be in the audience tonight, so don’t forget to smile and have fun!”

Bom suddenly feels a little dizzy. *All of my family and friends? All of my friends’ family and friends?* What if he messes up? What if he forgets the lyrics? What if you can’t pronounce his R’s?

He holds onto Yong a little bit tighter.

“Bom? Are you alright, honey? You look a little pale.”

“I just need to sit down,” he says, backing up into a chair. Ms. Kaspbrak kneels in front of him.

“Are you nervous?” He nods. Her gaze falls on the stuffed animal in his lap. “How about we make a compromise?”

As the applause starts, the children begin to walk onstage. Bom pulls at his collar, feeling very hot and clammy all of the sudden. The lights shine bright in his eyes, drowning everything out except Mrs. Pecker introducing the first song before him.

“Don’t clam up now,” Yong says, noticing the way his breath picks up.

“Not now, Yong.”

“What even are R’s, and who made them up?”

“Hey, that’s my thing.”

“Why do any of this! Who will remember this performance in 5 years?”

Bom can’t help himself—he smiles as the piano starts to play.