



## Track III

fiction

Deva Eveland

After they called my number I had to stand in front of the Plexiglas window for nine minutes. I'd scored a 68 on my civil service exam, which I figured meant a good pension and my own desk, but probably not any position of importance. That was okay, because it'd also mean less stress. In that nine minutes, I saw everything there was to see in that back office. I took inventory of all the cleaning products on the janitor's cart. I looked at the calendar on the wall and wondered why they selected a photo of bacon and eggs to represent September. I watched a guy fish around inside a broken copy machine with a ruler. Would I be doing that? Would I be answering phones? Photographing bacon and eggs? None of this speculation gave me any insight into the job I did get—Track 3 Earth God Monk. *Responsibilities include shrine maintenance, collection of tithes, and completion of liturgical rites. This position requires austere solitude.*

I looked up in panic, but another applicant had already pushed past me. I went over to the next window, but the woman wouldn't look away from her computer.

"I'm an atheist," I said, pressing the assignment up against the Plexiglas for her to see. "I can't be a monk, it says clearly on my personnel sheet I'm an atheist."

"You E37?" she asked, eyes still glued to her screen. Before I could respond, a voice behind me said, "I'm

E37." And thus I became a man of the cloth.

The shrine was out near Ring Road 14, which was still under construction at the time. Stacks of girders and pipes littered the area, and it was fenced off (whether to protect the building materials or the shrine I couldn't say). In the middle of all this stood an idol in the ancient style, a primordial figure hewn of rough basalt clutching a stave. Long ears, bulging eyes, heavy teeth almost like fangs. The whitish layer of concrete dust that had settled on the dark volcanic stone threw the features into high relief, making the face even more hideous. I found the outgoing monk hunched over a plastic wrapped stack of steel lattice, slicing fruit for an offering. The amulets on his wrist clacked as he worked the knife. I looked him dead in the eyes and told him I was an atheist. He didn't seem to care. He said he was leaving the civil service to begin a new career as the general manager of a Sugarlettuce®.

"What's a Sugarlettuce®?" I asked.

"Imagine a leaf of Romaine as sweet as this apple," he said, holding up a crisp wedge. "Or sprouts that taste like cotton candy." Now it was he who was looking me dead in the eyes.

"Um, okay."

"Well it's true. Sugarlettuce® has

broken the paradigm of what it means to eat salad.”

“It’s a miracle,” I said. I meant it sarcastically, but he clapped me on the shoulder and laughed, saying, “And I thought you were an atheist.”

He gave me his business card and said his salads would be suitable for festival day offerings. “You can’t present the Earth God with just any old thing on a festival day,” he warned me. “The food must be special then.”

The only way I could survive, mentally, was to tell myself that Track 3 Earth God Monk was a city job, just like any other. When the mid-year review came, I’d have an official audience, and I could present the supervisor with my atheism paperwork. In the meantime I wore the robes and amulets as a uniform, nothing more. I wiped concrete dust from the statue like a custodian, counted coins left in the offering dish like a parking meter attendant, and hollered out prayers through the racket of construction like a traffic cop shouting amidst the honking cars of a busy intersection. The most challenging aspect of the position was the *austere solitude*. I spent most of my time alone in the shack beside the shrine, no television, no magazines, nothing. The farming village that used to worship the idol had been relocated to a new cluster of residential housing complexes way out where they were planning to build Ring Road 15. This meant the only worshippers were the nearby construction workers building the Ring Road 14 Stack Interchange. They’d come on their lunch break, helmets in hand, and leave coins and cigarettes at the idol’s feet. Sometimes I’d pray over them, reading from a hidebound book. I couldn’t pronounce all of the words and I didn’t know the rhythm of the chant, but none of them complained. Once, a sooty peasant with welding goggles around his neck asked me if the Earth Owner had granted permission for the construction project. I said yes.

“Why would He allow an overpass built on His sacred land?”

“Because the ring road will bring new worshippers,” I lied.

“But how will He be able to look upon His sisters at night?” he asked, motioning at the looming pylons that blocked out the sky. I had to think for a minute.

“Each electric light that edges the highway acts as a shrine to an individual star. So long as their light is visible, the earth is not cut off from the sky.”

He left looking a little confused, but still respectful of my priestly authority. The lucky fool would go home to his family and eat a warm bowl of stew. Not me. Though I was his superior in both the civic and spiritual hierarchies, I couldn’t leave. I’d spend the evening bouncing pebbles off the pylons and watching headlights in the distance, wondering about the people driving their cars.

Once they completed the stack interchange, I became even lonelier. There were no more workers to visit the shrine at lunch, and I missed their coarse deference. Despite the tangle of roads spidering overtop, the only one leading to the shrine itself was a restricted access route for maintenance vehicles. Motorists knew about the idol though, because they’d throw offerings out of their car windows, especially on holy days. The loose cigarettes, change, and other gifts that came tumbling down landed all over the place. Sometimes it was difficult to determine if items were really intended as offerings or not, such as in the case of sticks of gum or stocking caps. For my own sanity I determined that the Earth God would no longer accept open packages of food (even though the construction workers used to leave paper cups of Rockin’ Raspberry Punch® at the idol’s feet. I guess they were too poor to offer wine).

My only visitor in this period was the courier who delivered supplies Wednesday mornings. Every time he'd take a cigarette from the pile of offerings without so much as even asking my permission. In fact, he never replied at all without prompting, and even then his conversation consisted of grunts that rose and fell suggestively, but never required him to open his lips. Sometimes I gave him letters to mail to my family, and I'd notice them still tucked in his bag the next week. In my desperation for human contact, I even sent Sugarlettuce® orders with the courier in preparation for holy days, hoping that the former monk might send some personal note of encouragement with the food. He never did.

Without anyone to talk to, I'd walk in circles, preparing for my mid-year review. Sometimes I'd stop in front of the shrine and direct my inner dialogue at the vacant-eyed idol. He would play the supervisor.

*Earth God: You seem to be doing an adequate job right here. I can see the entire shrine is kept quite clean considering all the litter from the circle stack interchange.*

*Monk: Despite my personal objections, I do approach the job, any job, professionally. Frankly, I'd like to be doing more than just an adequate job, but I am after all an atheist, which is why I feel I'd be a better asset to the city somewhere else.*

*Earth God: One cannot merely declare themselves an atheist with a snap of the fingers. Were you registered for at least a year prior to taking the civil service exam?*

*Monk: I have been registered as an atheist for about seven years now.*

*Earth God: Hmmm . . . (shuffles papers). I can see there was some sort of mix-up in Human Resources.*

When my mid-year review was only a week away, I still had no word of information about it, so I tried asking the courier.

"Mid-year reviews are coming up," I said.

"Mmm," he grunted. To my irritation, the courier plucked yet another cigarette out of the offering dish.

"Will a supervisor be coming out to the site, or do I need to go downtown?" I hoped desperately for the latter, but all he did was shrug as he lit up.

"So it's next week right, I mean that would be the twenty-seventh?"

He checked his smart phone and muttered, "Mmm-hmm."

I spent the whole week wondering whether his grunt affirmed that my review was on the twenty-seventh or only that Wednesday fell on the twenty-seventh. Now I really went mad with loneliness, and my attempts to practice for the review would collapse under a deluge of old memories.

*Earth God: Are you happy here?*

*Monk: Frankly, I'm not.*

*Earth God: Maybe you're just the unhappy type.*

*Monk: That's not true . . . for example, when the carnival would come. We'd all crowd to one side of the bus to watch them setting up the rides. There was always that tune, a carousal or something . . .*

*Earth God: And the smell of burning leaves?*

*Monk: Yes, smoky and rich. It's funny that the two go together. They must have been burning leaves nearby, and always at the time the bus drove past.*

All that week I lived on old dreams, arguments, resentments, and loves. Little interactions I hadn't remembered in years sloshed around my skull fresh and urgent.

That week the courier arrived with a yellow cardstock envelope marked “Pre-Mid Year Review Self-Evaluation.” Inside it was a single page and a tiny pencil. I tried to fill out most of the ovals *almost always*, with *always* in “I am properly dressed and groomed,” and “I arrive promptly.” Not wanting to appear pompous, I only gave myself a *sometimes* in “I get along well with my co-workers.” As I rapped the pencil nub against my wrist amulets, trying to come up with a performance goal to write in the blank at the bottom, the courier wandered over to rifle through the offering dish.

“When is my review?” I asked.

“Mmm.”

He secured the cigarette on the shelf of his lower lip and felt around in the lining of his jacket, producing the smart phone. The courier pushed a button and handed it to me.

“Hello?” I said.

“Ah, you must be our famous atheist monk,” a high voice answered. It had been so long since I’d used a phone, let alone carried on a conversation, that I was stunned by someone answering.

“Are you still there?” the voice asked. I couldn’t even tell if it was a man or a woman speaking.

“Yes, that’s right. I’m an atheist.”

“Good, good. How can I help you?”

“Well, I need to schedule my mid-year review.”

The voice laughed. “Done! How would you describe the three most important responsibilities of your current position as you see them?”

“On the — is this the review? On the phone? Now?”

“Yes, I’m sorry I can’t come in person. We’re swamped with performance reviews and the shrine is simply too out of the way. So again, the three most important responsibilities of your current position as you see them.”

It was the disembodied, androgynous voice that caught me off guard; I just couldn’t picture a face to go along with it. With the courier off urinating against a pylon, there was only the Earth God’s visage to anchor me. The words tumbled easily from His lips. Soon I lost the thread of the conversation. I talked more and more to hide my confusion, and the thoughts that had been bottled up inside me tumbled out of my mouth: Ambitions, fears, loves, memories so old I hadn’t remembered them until that moment. I even went so far as to admit my fantasies of stealing construction equipment to bulldoze the whole shrine. The voice chuckled. The idol’s countenance also seemed to take on a bemused aspect, forgiving like a father. Even when the courier snatched the phone back and drove off we didn’t stop talking. Together we laughed, sang, and prayed long into the night.



**Deva Eveland** resides in Beijing, China, where he writes, studies Mandarin, and wrangles a one year old. He works for money as little as possible. Eveland holds an MFA in studio art from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.