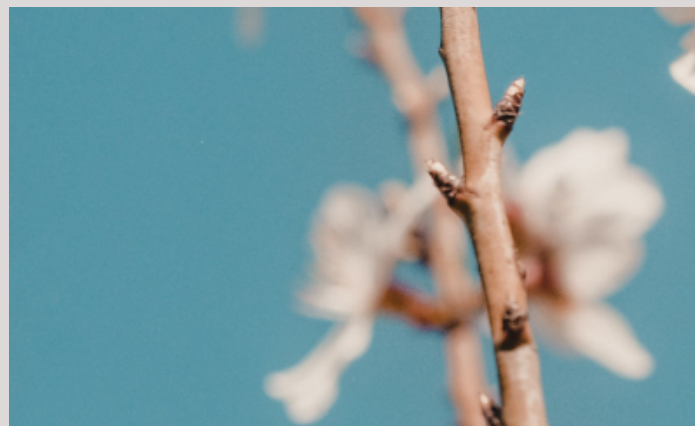


# 04

## Fiction



Girls' Diaries .....Chloe GONG

I looked up at the words written on the wall of the bookstore:"I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me" (Woolf 28).

Lost Boy.....Shelia BAO

"Anyway, he's taking Bob home now. 'Bob, let's go home.' "

A Romantic Film .....Jerry GUO

"But things gotta move on—just as the speeding car left pedestrians behind."



Light in the Dark.....Katherine DONG

"Everyone is valuable, and so am I. Diana, you were right."

The Scale .....Lexie XIN

"It felt like walking on a knife's edge, wallowing in vanity and  
fearing that one day the lie would be discovered."

Adrian.....Lexie XIN

"I was trapped in a cage, put in a boat, and forever left the sweet home I had  
dug myself, the flower I loved, the place I thought I would never leave"



# Girls' Diaries

Chloe GONG

## Chapter 1. Dormant Buds

March 5, 2000

Fine

Dear Diary,

It's Tina. I still come to the restaurant to do jobs in long sleeves, long trousers and a high collar sweater. After so many years, there have been curious neighbors asking why I wear such thick clothes in the hot early summer. But, eventually, they stopped asking because they knew I dressed like this to cover up the bruises. The new bruise is cyan, and the old one is tan. New blows and kicks mixed up the old bruises, which are all colorful just like a palette. I didn't know how my cousin could do it ~ that he could hit me in the morning and cuddle me to bed with a lascivious smile in the afternoon. I'm disgusted and feel like I ate a fly. Even though I have been married to him for so many years, I still don't want to admit that he is my husband. I really want to pretend that memory never happened, as if I could pull it out of time easily. That memory is a corpse, which I abandoned on the way, as I buried it by the side of the road with my own hands. Unfortunately, it is a haunting devil. When I wake up from nightmares in the night, when I touch the scars on my body in the shower, and when I am forced to bear the devil's courtship, the memory comes flooding back to my mind.

It was my freshman year in the university, and it was also the first year my family immigrated to New York from India. I was overjoyed to think that I could fulfill my dream of being a writer here. However, reality shattered the dream. When I came to my older cousin's house as a guest, my body was torn along with my dream; both were broken together by him. I was riven, destroyed, torn apart then reorganized, thrown into a high skyscraper, and then hurled off a cliff brutally. Soon after, I found myself pregnant. My parents thought I was a disgrace to the family. Like thousands of Indian girls, I dropped out of school, married my cousin at my parents' arrangement, and started running a small home restaurant. Real despair means believing that "things can never get better." I am the rancid soup, the stale fructose, the apple that begins to rot inside but keeps a bright appearance, and the unstrung piano covered by dust that no one cares about anymore. Every time after sex, I just felt as if I have come out of the toilet with the faint smell of feces. I smell and feel that there is a smell around me, but that doesn't mean that I, per se, am smelly. I was trapped in a cocoon of my own making.



Both my cousin and I like to eat apples, but he never keeps any for me, because our family life is not wealthy. Sometimes when I see him eating an apple, I suddenly wished that he would choke to death on it. I was taken aback by my own thoughts. The apple, forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, is the beginning of all desires and original sin. Dangerous thoughts are like seeds. Once they are planted in the heart, they will grow bigger and bigger. They are also like eating crumbly cookies, the more you try to catch crumbs, the more they will get all over your body. But my daughter, Cynthia's always pulls me back to reality immediately. She was so small and lovely, as soft as marshmallows. Every time she calls me mom, I feel I melt because of her.

The restaurant I work in is near a junior middle school and a senior middle school, which share the same campus. I love watching the crowds of girls come and go. Especially one of those girls who is from Northern Ireland, who looks like a senior middle school student. When she laughs, her eyes seem to be talking. When the sunlight is on her, her eyes are like a shimmering lake. I often stand at the table and stare at the back of those girls going to school. I stand next the table, and beyond the table is the hometown I have never met. I have lost it, even before possessing it. Whats inside the table is a web of reality, and my cowardice, shame, and hesitation turn into threads of web wrapped around me. The brighter the sun is, the darker the shadow is.

But I haven't seen that Northern Irish girl for several days. Until this morning, when she came, it seemed that her eyes were empty and her soul was out of her body. Those girls

were not with her; she was the only one who looked lonely. When I handed her coffee in the past, she always smiled sweetly at me and said thank you, but today she didn't respond at all. She just sat at the table with hot coffee in her hand for ten minutes. It was miserable for me to see her like this, so I sneaked an apple from my cousin and stuffed it in her schoolbag. She didn't even notice what I did. After sitting for a while, she left with her schoolbag. I put away her untouched coffee, hoping that the apple could bring her a little bit of comfort. The act of Adam and Eve, picking apples, was not originally a sin, but, in truth, the first blessing.

## Chapter 2. Blossom Growth

March 5, 2000

Fine

Dear Diary,

It's Riley. I don't know how things got this way. What happened recently was so sudden, leaving me at a loss. Everything was as usual during that day. We ate, chatted and joked together. But at night, a sudden text message changed everything. My best friend, maybe just a girl I thought was my best friend, abruptly sent me a message, "can you stop seducing Lily's boyfriend?" And then, the mobile phone was flooded with overwhelming abuse and invective one after another, "Whore", "Slut", "You often joke with boys. Can't you live without a man?", "Why are you always wearing revealing clothes and make-up? Are you a prostitute?" It took me a while to realize what had happened. Lily is our friend, and her boyfriend sometimes makes fun of me. I just do not understand why people treat women so unkindly with filtered glasses, when men and women are in the same situation. When I walked into the campus, there were even strangers pointing at me and calling me a slut. My desk was overturned; my seat was covered with glue; I was locked in the school toilet by anonymous people.

I begged them not to act like this anymore, or I would have no way to live. "Really?" they said contemptuously, "Then go to hell!" At that moment, I knew that my pain could not be understood by others. For several days, I didn't dare to go to school while I escaped from reality at home. I only told my parents that I was not feeling well. But insulting messages shot into my mobile phone like bullets. People who know or do not know me abuse me on my personal homepage. It seemed like they were all fully familiar with me. I hid under the covers of bedclothes and looked at those terrible words, as if a swarm of dense bugs were gnawing at my heart. I hugged myself tightly to keep from shaking too much.

With my eyes open until dawn, I unconsciously picked up my schoolbag and walked on my way to school. I passed by the restaurant and ordered a cup of hot coffee as usual. I sat pale and cold at the table; my blood freezing in my veins. The little cup of hot coffee seemed to be the only heat



source in my life. I didn't even realize when I was leaving the restaurant, and, by the time I realized it, I was already on the roof of the school.

From the view of the rooftop, people were so small; clusters of people passing by downstairs, but no one cared about me while they all hated me. All of a sudden, feelings of grief came pouring out of me and I had the impulse to jump. This was the only tragedy of my life, but it was mighty enough to make me lose control. God cut off my sense of reason with pain. I tossed my schoolbag and rushed straight to the edge of the roof. Then something rolled out of my schoolbag and caught my attention. It was an apple, not very big, but pink and very tempting. I was confused and transfixed, because I knew clearly that it was not my apple. A gust of cold wind blew, I got a shiver, then I remembered: it was the Indian proprietress of that small restaurant. Every morning when I went there for a cup of coffee, the beautiful lady always looked at me in a friendly way with her full of well-meant but envious eyes. I squatted down to pick up the apple, and found on it a smiling face painted by a marker pen. I couldn't help it anymore, tears gushed out like the sea water breaking the dykes. It turned out that there were still people in the world who cared about me. After crying for a while, I dried my tears, packed up my schoolbag again, and went downstairs.

As I passed through the school, I was attracted by the Texas accent in a classroom. I saw a little girl with Texas accent arguing with a group of boys. I was shocked by that brave little girl. I broke the apple open and gave her half of it. "Thank you." She looked at me quizzically, as if she didn't understand why I behaved like that. But I knew that I was thanking her for her brave resistance. She also suffered unfair bullying, but she bravely resisted all this, instead of bearing it in silence. It was she who convinced me that I could do it the same without being defeated by bullying. "Yeah, this is a good Northern Irish girl who cannot be beaten easily." I thought to myself. More importantly, there are still people who care about me in the world.



### Chapter 3. Leafed Out

March 5, 2000

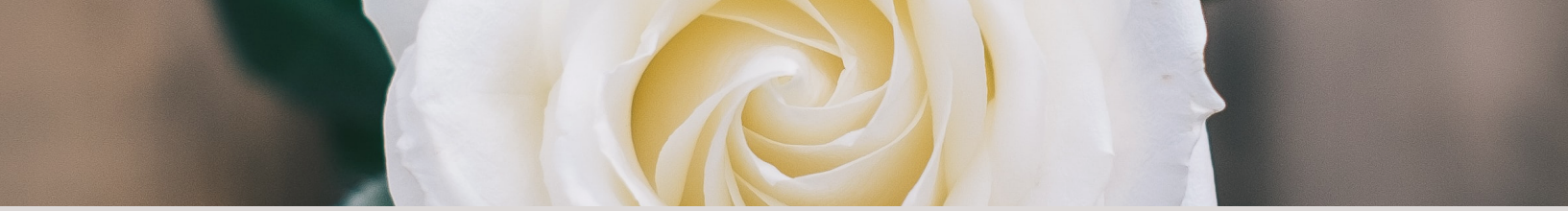
Fine

Dear Diary,

It is Nicky. I scolded those obnoxious boys at school today. It was during my period. I got blood on my dress and dropped my tampon when I stood up from my seat. A nasty boy made a funny noise when he saw it, and then other boys began to imitate him.

I was so angry that I picked up the scissors and scratched his arm, "Menstruation is the normal operation of the female reproductive system, which is experienced by 50% human beings, and there is nothing be ashamed of. This is not something you can laugh at. Please show respect to women!" I stood there proudly like a soldier. Those detestable boys walked away disgracefully. I walked out of the classroom and a girl came up to me. She handed a half apple to me, "Thank you, you are a brave girl." I was a little confused, but then I realized why she thanked me. I knew her face because there were lots of posts calling her a slut on the school forum. But I didn't think so. I knew what had happened. Once I passed through high school campus, I saw a girl packed a condom into that Northern Ireland girl's backpack. That gang of girls also spread rumors that she had sex with many boys and seduced men everywhere. Everyone began to isolate the poor girl. It raised a babel of hot argument, but I was sure that someone could tell that the girl was being bullied. In fact, it was obvious that the boys liked by the gang of girls always talk to the Northern Irish girl. She suffered all this only because she was young, beautiful, lovely and bright. Jealousy makes people ugly and causes them to bully. Bullying really may ruin a girl's life. I know that those who have been bullied will experience countless nights of frustration and grievance. Some of them are lucky enough to survive, while others are trapped in a word of self-doubt and emotional insecurity; some can be unscathed, not because they are unharmed, but just because they are strong and tough enough. That poor girl turned and left too fast, otherwise I really would want to tell her that she didn't need to bear those abuses silently. Even if we are just a dim star, we can't just let the dust cover our light.

As I nibbled on the apple on my way home, I passed a restaurant and heard a noise coming from the alley next to it. I walked over and saw some boys surrounding an Indian girl and throwing rocks at her. "Hey! Leave her alone! Otherwise, I'll call the police." I shouted and threw the apple core at them. The boys run away in panic and scattered like birds. I went over and helped the little girl stand up. "Are you ok?" The little girl shook her head slightly. I asked her, "why put up with this? Why not resist?" "Dad said a girl should be as gentle as my mom," she said softly with her head down. "Look at my eyes and listen to me." I squatted down, both hands



holding her shoulders, and looked into her eyes and said, “Girls can be as gentle as petals and as sweet as jam, but girls can also be as tough as steel and as brave as fire. Flowers and steel, jam and fire, these are not in conflict.” She nodded vaguely.

## Chapter 4. Apples Mature

September 1, 2003

Sunny

Dear Diary,

It is Cynthia. I would never forget the day, March 5, that changed mom’s and my life. I was surrounded by those little boys again that day, but there was an older girl who scared the boys away with an apple core. For the first time, I realized that a delicious apple could also hit people, like dad’s belt, as a weapon. She also said something I didn’t quite understand. I picked up the apple core and brought it home. Mother saw it and asked me why I took an apple core home. I told mom what had happened and what the older girl said. Mom was silent for a long time after listening, and then she told me that if a person has power in one’s heart, then they are brave and strong enough to use anything even an apple core as a weapon to protect oneself.

That day, mom sat in the living room for the whole night. While half-asleep, I heard she mentioned the words “sell off jewelry”, “lawyer” and “divorce” on the phone. Soon after, mom took me away. Actually, I was glad mom took me out of here. She thought she hid it well, but I knew it all. I’ve seen dad’s hands tear her hair, dad’s belt whip on her body, and dad’s shoes kick her abdomen. Mom finally broke out of the cocoon made herself, just like the story she had told me about a caterpillar who, through effort, broke her cocoon and turned into a butterfly. In fact, she always has a choice.

After leaving my father, mom ran a store selling flowers and books. I knew she loved literature very much. Those wonderful bedtime stories were her fantastic idea. Today was my first day of school; mom cut a beautiful calliopsis and pinned it on my lapel; she said that it was a symbol of courage and strength. I looked up at the words, a quote by Virginia Wolfe, written on the wall of the bookstore: “I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me. I need not flatter any man; he has nothing to give me.” Then I walked out and watered the flowerpot beside the door in passing. It was a pretty flowerpot mom bought, and she planted the apple core I picked up in it. She said that maybe it would grow into beauteous apples, maybe not, but it doesn’t matter, because the kernel has planted the fruit of hope and bloomed flowers of rebirth in our hearts.





## Lost Boy

*Shelia BAO*

Bob is dead. No matter how Kyle talks, begs, or yells at him. He is dead.

Kyle sees a stream of blood pouring relentlessly from Bob's gut to the ground. Kyle tries to stuff the mass of viscera back in several times, but to no avail. Bob becomes so limp—like a doll that can't lie down, he slides silently down the wall.

The familiar sound of gunfire and hissing tracers in the distance encroaches with the flickering sky, which wraps around the uncharted space where Kyle crouched. In June, early summer, the low-flying dragonflies relentlessly deliver the news of an impending rainstorm. Kyle feels a little chilly in the humid and sultry summer air. Perhaps this is because he has been soaking in the seawater for too long before.

Life is tortuous, Kyle thinks. What he

wants he cannot afford. Who he wants to keep with him cannot stay. The feeling of being out of place inevitably lingers with him. He sees himself as the unknown and derelict house where they're hiding out. Once it was lively, but now the debris of steels and concrete is all over the place. It smells sickeningly damp and stale. All around are ruins. Only the dilapidated walls stand as lonely sentinels.

He lies beside the window and gazes at his reflection in the broken glass. Cheap red hair dye mixed with sweat and seawater is running down his cheeks. His eyes, which once pretended to be mature, are now haggard and helpless. His self-reflection makes no difference—he is still alone.

He was 13 years old, three years ago, when he lost both parents—only a kid. It was the time of life when young boys show off, but

Artillery, laser fire, and the restless roar of battle quickly shattered his fragile life and also his little heroic dreams. He was forced into a new life.

The clouds in the distance are approaching like vigilantes. The whole abandoned house floods with the smell of rust and dampness, just like, the day he and Bob had met. The haze of that day lingers in his every nightmare.

Before being pushed into the alley by his father, Kyle was nearly run through by the steel falling from the building that the monster's tail had swept down. Dodging a bullet, Kyle was intact. However, his parents disappeared as the side of the broken building collapsed. The monster was still wandering around aimlessly, destroying, like a cat casually raising its paw to sweep away a water glass on the table. The world was filled with the sound of gunfire, roaring, and chaotic wailing. Then the sky began to rain. Moist vapor mixed with the heavy smell of blood. Kyle crouched down and held his head, hoping to be washed into the sewers with the rain and the blood. At the most awful moment of his 13-year-old life, he met a search party, and saw a man with a concerned face, Bob. Then they brought him back to the human base.

At that time, Bob still had a Mohawk and had the energy to play the role of Kyle's caretaker. Though the contrast in their capacities made Kyle feel funny, he knew that he really needed Bob then. For a long time, about a month after he

was saved, he refused to eat, always locked the door, and repeatedly rebuffed people's good intentions. Bob was just as persistent in his efforts to help as Kyle was taciturn. Bob never seemed put off by the other's cold response. The meal was placed in front of Kyle's door every day, and the doorway left open for him until the late night. Gradually, Kyle felt a little embarrassed about constantly refusing the kindness of an elder. Then he became Bob's little sidekick and followed him around every day, listening to his tales of the past. He frequently heard the story about the medal that Bob loved so much. Bob was the most admired mech combatant, who once wore a mech to fight with the monsters and won the first victory of mankind. He had defeated a fifty-meter monster in a thirty-meter mech. Kyle had pressed him many times about why Bob had left the battlefield. At first, Bob was reluctant to mention it, but under Kyle's endless pestering, Bob said he was too old to fight anymore.

Is it that hard to pilot a machine and fight with that monster? Bob looks like he's only in his twenties. Kyle wondered if it was really that difficult to defeat the seemingly invulnerable behemoth, as Bob had done, so he participated in the combatant selection exercises to seek an answer. Meanwhile, Bob shaved his Mohawk into a crew cut, and rejoined the battlefield as Kyle's partner and caretaker. They then fought together for three years.

"If I hadn't stood there, mom and dad wouldn't have died. If only I hadn't participated in the selection exercises, if I hadn't presumed that one blow is enough to defeat the monster, if I could react a little faster when the control pod was breached by the enemy's rays and turned to shield Bob quicker, or if I had spotted the wound on Bob's body much earlier." These "ifs" crowd into Kyle's mind. Unfortunately, there had been no "if."

Looking at the approaching, tremendous, and dark cumulonimbus clouds, Kyle feels as though his throat is being gripped by low pressure, as he arduously gulps the air. The pain is so intense that he is close to tears.

He is waiting for death here. Those sweeper robots are everywhere outside. Bob had taught Kyle the sweepers are mechanical crawlers of the enemy. They would automatically explode whenever they detect a living thing. There is no way to contact the base, as he can't assemble the wireless connection apparatus. He had not been trained in most of the boring mechanical assembly class. Even if he had the components, he doesn't believe that he can construct it, not to mention sending a signal to the base.

A few lightning bolts explode in the distance, illuminating the entire sky. Then they fade away, and the sky returns to gloom. In the darkness, only the badge on Bob's uniform reflects

a faintly metallic sheen.

Kyle sighs, "If you didn't let me take your badge back to your mom, I'd really sit here and wait to die. But don't expect too much from me. Maybe we'll meet each other again very soon, Bob."

A gale is building, and a rainstorm is coming. Will the hot and humid air mass leave after the rain, wonders Kyle.

He takes out the parts of the wireless system in the faint light that comes from outside the window and begins to study.

It doesn't seem to be a fleeting thunderstorm. The steady downpour continues for an unknown amount of time, and there is no telling when it will stop.

He traces the picture of a wireless connection system in his mind. He feels like a five-year-old child who has no instruction but is asked to build Hogwarts with random pieces of Lego. Kyle clumsily puts the parts together. Failing in his first attempt, he notes that several pieces seem useless to him. He pulls a wry face over the object in his hands. Kyle turns back and wants to share it with Bob, but his friend looks like he is falling into a sound sleep. Kyle thinks it's better not to bother him, and he pulls up the



corners of his own mouth into a grimace.

Kyle stares at the piece of shit after a dozen more tries and realizes he can't do it! Can't do it at all! How could it be so hard to assemble a black, tiny little box?! How did Bob do it? How could he use a few pieces of steel and circuit boards to make those peculiar gadgets?! He can't help waking Bob up to ask him to tell him where to put those last annoying screws.

Once again, he tears down all the parts and spreads them out on the floor, staring at them. The time that Bob taught him how to put together a Rubik's cube comes to his mind. Every time he found there was no way to twist the last block of the same color over, Kyle inevitably chose to give up, took that square off, and replaced it with a square of the necessary color. Bob discovered what he'd done and gave him a hard time. He scolded Kyle for giving up halfway and being so cunning. Kyle had lashed out, thinking Bob was making too big fuss of it. Look at yourself now, Kyle thinks, with a hot feeling at the rim of his eyes. He has to admit that he is jealous of his younger self.

Kyle stands up and walks to the window. He reaches out and takes a handful of rainwater to wash his face and clean the hair dye solidified on the cheeks. Coming back to the nerve-wracking attempt to assemble the communication system, Kyle bites his lip and continues to pore over the schematic.

Kyle doesn't know how long he has been at this task, he hears birds chirping outside the window and the fading sound of artillery fire. He looks up and finds it is almost dawn. Examining the instrument, he lets out a long breath. He stares at the faint sunlight and presses the signal transmission button. If he gets back to base, he'll definitely be less lazy and take the assembly course. Assembly is not that difficult, Kyle thinks. Anyway, he's taking Bob home now: "Bob, let's go home."





## A Romantic Film

*Jerry GUO*

A black Mercedes was rushing through the streets of Chicago at the speed of ninety kilometers per hour. The FBI was chasing him, but, by the time they found out where John was, he would be sitting on his private plane sipping the finest champagne. Deals have been done and bribes have been paid. No evidence, and no flaws. He is always that thorough.

John was sitting at the back of the car in a dark luxurious suit that was perfectly tailor to his build. His left hand was brushing his watch chain. Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore* was playing on the stereo as John looked out of the window. It was a gloomy afternoon in the late fall, and there weren't many people outside. The streets faded away in different shades of gray with only the decoration of a few dead leaves. Everything was blurred and becoming unrecognizable.

The driver, who wore a casquette plate, glanced at his boss from the rearview mirror. As a driver, he had seen a lot of people of John's kind. John wasn't like any of those mafiosos or gangsters that he used to work for though John certainly fell into that category. No, the driver would never attribute any aura of illegality to someone like John if he hadn't served him for twenty years. John was someone who was quiet, decent, alone, imperceptibly fragile, and blue, a fact which only appeared at extremely rare moments when he looked out the window. He never saw John smile.

"Turn left, then right to avoid running into red lights, then turn right again," John murmured at every crossroad as if he was manipulating the car with his mind. John knew this city like the back of his hand. Nothing,



nothing could go wrong, he thought. After another twenty minutes, his life here, a life of precision and decisiveness, would become distant memories, and he would be gone, free and forgotten, just as planned.

John laid back a little on the luxurious leather seat and put his left hand down. He looked out of the window again but saw only his own reflection this time. He had aged, certainly. His hair had turned completely gray, the dark blue eyes had sunk deep into the sockets out of tiredness, and wrinkles had grown on his face like cracks on a beautiful Greek sculpture. Seeing his reflection in the window, John was a little surprised. He realized that he hadn't taken a close look at himself for a very long time. I'm old, he said to himself. He could still remember how he used to be when he was younger. A happy fella, poor but loved, and living for a different purpose. Suddenly, he took a dislike to the idea of being away and

forgotten. But things always had to move on—just as the speeding car left pedestrians behind. John felt a little empty. He refocused his eyes and the blurred streets reappeared in the window.

As the car was about to turn right, it slowed down a little and the scene outside became clearer. He caught a glimpse of a girl. It was a slim feminine figure, about seven-feet tall, in her 20s, just about to cross the street, wearing a red coat.

But all it takes was just a glimpse for things to go wrong, for her or for him—the unexpected. This is the unavoidable coincidence in those similar old romantic stories.

John's pupils widened as adrenaline pumped into his body and his heart beat faster than ever. His eyes fixed on that figure. He turned his head and body as the car was



regaining its speed. "Stop the car!" he instinctively shouted. The driver was completely shocked, for he had never seen his boss so hysterical. He slammed his foot hard on the brake.

The girl in the red coat stopped as she heard a harsh ear-piercing screech of the breaks. She turned around and saw a black Mercedes losing control and rolling over to the opposite side of the road, then being hit hard by a truck.

She was horrified, but somehow decided to run up to the shattered car. As she approached, she saw an old man covered in ash and blood trying to climb out of the wreckage towards her, with his hand shaking and outstretched. She was scared and stopped. She looked at him and he looked at her. She didn't know him.

Of course, it's not her, John knew. Blood was running into his eyes and mouth, and he felt that this was the end. He let his hands fall and let the redness fill his sight. The car was on fire. He watched the girl running away, turning her head back from time to time. Somehow her face became recognizable through the blurry flames. He smiled and felt no more emptiness. On that bleak, late fall day, L'elisir d'amore was still playing, cutting in and out.





## Light in the Dark

*Katherine DONG*

It was three o'clock in the morning, but Evan couldn't sleep. He curled himself up and looked at the picture at the head of the bed – a beautiful girl with a smile. She had been the light of his life, but his light had gone out.

The figure in the photo was Evan's girlfriend, Diana. Her life ended forever last Christmas Eve. That day, his sarcastic boss had fired Evan in a year-end layoff for one simple reason, "You're useless." When Evan disappointedly returned to their rental, he found Diana had committed suicide. From his vantage, Diana had been an optimistic girl who loved to laugh. But actually, she was already a depression patient. Evan, who worked overtime every day, didn't pay attention to Diana's deteriorating condition at all. Therefore, he lost his Diana forever.

Due to the double blows of losing his job and his girlfriend, Evan lost his confidence and became disgusted with his uselessness. To atone for his negligence, Evan decided to post some heartwarming videos on YouTube to console others who were facing the same situation as Diana. But it backfired – no one wanted to watch his videos.

It was already Christmas Eve. Evan got out of bed having had no sleep. He started to play Diana's favorite music. At that moment there was a quarrel at the door opposite his own. It must be Max, his former colleague and a real alcoholic, who was just coming home. His wife

always judgmentally thought that he did nothing except drink, but Max, who was henpecked, dared not answer back. Therefore, Max often poured his anger out on Evan. Because in Max's mind, Evan—a person without a family and career—was a really useless person. The noise stopped with the slamming door. The next moment, Max kicked down Evan's door. "Your music is too loud. It bothers me!" Max shouted, "Hey! You'd better give up your videos. I'm sure no one will see them because you're useless, or you wouldn't have been fired and your girlfriend wouldn't have killed herself trying to get rid of you!"

Evan had been used to Max exploding at him for no reasons, but Max's words was a constant blow to Evan's confidence. He didn't know when they might kill him. After Max left, Evan lay down on the floor. "I'm probably useless," he thought. He held up pictures of Diana, and her voice came to Evan's mind again. "You are really good, dear. You have to believe that everyone is valuable! You make me happy when I'm with you." That's what his favorite girlfriend always said to him. Every time he was hit hard, she was just like the sun: there to warm him. Only at this time, he really didn't have the confidence to heal anyone. Evan put his arms to his eyes in disappointment. He had only one idea now ~ to keep the memories alive.

So, in the dark room with the curtains

closed, Evan sat in front of his computer, and made a video of everyday scenes of himself and Diana. This time, he simply wanted to introduce to the netizens on the other side of the screen to the light girl who had healed him.

The next morning, when he opened YouTube, he was surprised to find that the video he posted yesterday had thousands of thumb-ups and was featured on the main list. As Diana used to be very funny, she and Evan would play jokes on each other, which had a great comic effect in the videos. Viewers commented that Evan's videos had brought them a little joy and hoped he continued to post them. Evan was skeptical but still tried to update the stories about himself and Diana. Evan always thought he was unworthy of bringing joy to others, but the response to the video were more and more positive. People were interested in Evan's content and sent lengthy messages to Evan's email after hearing the story behind the videos, to encourage him to speak directly to his audience. Evan was very touched, more because people liked his Diana. Even though she was gone, she could still make them happy.

Christmas was over. Evan went to the psychiatric clinic after the holiday. His sleep quality was bad due to the emotional trauma's wrought by Max. While waiting at the door for a





consultation, a boy who was also waiting quickly recognized Evan and said he was a fan of his videos, so Evan chatted with him.

"I often wondered if I had any value because I couldn't do anything right, and I even lost her forever because of my carelessness," Evan said to the boy before he entered the consulting room.

"Now that you've found it: your value is bringing happiness to me when I fight against depression!" said the boy, smiling.

The words reminded Evan that his

original goal was to bring joy to people struggling in a similar situation to Diana's. Now he seemed to have achieved it and found his own value.

"Everyone is valuable, and so am I. Diana, you were right." Evan was writing in his diary on a bench in the yard. The sun was shining on him. He suddenly felt as if he had matured a little, even though he was nearly thirty. Evan would continue updating his videos because he discovered they were a little bit of sunshine that he could give to others. He was ready to start a new life.

# The Scale

*Lexie XIN*

She was being viciously attacked by insults to her appearance just because the video shows her face, so Messenger took the phone from Neena, who was shaking with tears. "Poor girl, it seems that people do not like you," he said.

Neena tried to control her emotions, but those harsh words were like stinging needles in her heart that kept her in pain. "How dare you!" they were screaming, laughing, sharing the video as a joke to the class, "She records her paintings with her unattractive face! This ugly duck wants to become a swan!"

"Here's a solution," said Messenger. He displayed a scale shimmering and suspended in the palm of his hand. He continued, "This scale can exchange anything of equal value. It changes not only what you look like now, but it also changes the past. People's impressions of your appearance, your photos, and your videos, will change accordingly. Everything will be reconstructed. Do you want to change?"

"I do not know if it is the right thing to do, but right now I want to try another kind of life," Neena felt like she was cheating, but she did not want to refuse. "I want a life with a beautiful face."

She was changed, and what a huge change it was! Neena's eyes became large and bright. She had rosy lips and a moonlike face overnight.

The very next day, when Neena stepped into the classroom, she felt different. She overheard, as a boy asked confusedly, "She is ravishing. Why didn't we notice her before?" When she sat down, an unfamiliar girl came to comfort her, "Neena, I have watched that video. You are good at drawing! There are untruthful comments and people who are unwilling to acknowledge the excellence of others. Don't be sad about it."

Messenger was right, Neena thought. Was this the magic power of having a good-looking face? Like a thief who sneaked into the upper circles, Neena greedily enjoyed all that did not belong to her. It felt like walking on a knife's edge, wallowing in vanity and fearing that one day the lie would be discovered.

"Neena, let me tell you the bad news. One of our secret places is going to be developed." This is Neena's best friend, Kaia, coming to chat with her after class, fanning herself with an exercise book.

"Which one?"

"The park where your father used to take you to paint." When Kaia smiles, her eyes curved and there are two shallow dimples on her cheeks. "Fortunately, I have taken pictures and you have rendered all that nice scenery. The beauty of that place never fades." Neena knows the place Kaia is talking about. The nameless white flower, the



stray cat, and the little butterfly suddenly come to her mind.

“By the way, have you stopped drawing recently?” Kaia asks. “Is it because our artist has been taking part in various activities?”

“Yes, I am very busy recently.” Neena stumbles over her words and keeps her eyes wide open. She does not know how to reply, although the answer seems obvious to her.

Then Kaia takes out a small box and opens it: “Look Neena! I have got a present for you.”

There is a whole set of brushes.

“You are talented, Neena.” Kaia explains, “Happy birthday.”

After exchanging her appearance with the scale, Neena receives far more gifts than ever before, but only this one is special. It is the one she longed for before, the one she threw away by making the exchange: talent for beauty. A hollow place in her heart makes her want to weep. She makes an excuse and hides in the small bathroom cubicle as she did before. How could she explain to Kaia that she no longer dares to pick up a pen to draw, nor the inspiration to find beauty or create beauty?

It reminds Neena of her first paint brush.

Her father, who aspires to art but is unappreciated and eventually surrenders to life’s banality, gave her this on her eighth birthday. On that day, she threw away all her worries, stopped thinking about grades and homework and explored the secrets of beauty. Her father took her to a lovely garden, which lately had become the secret place, where Neena and Kaia went together. This man colored the sunflowers on the canvas with his little daughter’s hand and said: “To discover, appreciate, and record beauty with your brush. This ability is a gift, Neena. You need to cherish it.”

By exchanging the beauty of her paintings for a fine and delicate face, Neena thought she could gain confidence by escaping from her weaknesses, but was it worth it?

I need to use that scale, Neena says to herself, I want to find my imperfect self again. She asks Messenger and makes a second exchange.

The scale emits a faint white light, as Messenger watches one end of the scale growing heavier and heavier, then he sighs, “Humans are such complex creatures.”





## Adrian

*Lexie XIN*

Another escape from a leopard! I, Adrian, deserved to be called one of the smartest pangolins. I am covered in as many as one thousand scales, which protect me from these sharp-toothed predators, like this helpless leopard who could do nothing to me and left in despair. Confronted with a tricky problem like me, many times even the king of the forest was at a loss to know what to do. When threatened, I would curl up into a ball and use my scales to cut the enemy's mouth, and the enemy always ended up being severely injured.

It's not a striking thing that, as a young pangolin, I have already attained the acme of perfection in protecting myself, since I have a brilliant teacher. My mother is an excellent scaly anteater and she taught me all these things when I was a cub. "Adrian, the Creator is equal to every creature," she said, "Although we walk slowly and can not run away, our scales could will protect us well." When I was six months old, I didn't have to live behind my mother's tail anymore. I can now make my own little hole and feed myself. That's fantastic. However, speaking of which, I haven't seen mom for a long time.

I like to listen to Baron at the brook when the sun sets in the west. He is well-informed, well-

traveled, and is a pangolin with wide experience. He told me that the flowers by the creek were about to bloom, that ripe fruits would fall from the trees, and that there were fresh termite holes in the area. In the last conversation, Baron talked about the leopard, about the world beyond the forest, and about humans. He said the last thing he wanted to talk about was those weird animals that walk on two legs, the humans. He admitted the sad truth that we have no ability to escape from humans, and it's not just us. Even the king of the jungle is powerless when facing these animals. He sounded like a pessimist, and the stories he told concerning humans were filled with fear. I guessed maybe it was because he had gone through a traumatic experience and had a narrow escape from that two-footed species. However, he carried good news sometimes, which was worth spreading. "Adrian," he called to me triumphantly, "o ur day has come. Humans, those big, tall beasts, had have chief who has had announced that we should not be caught and killed anymore." His small, black-beetle-like eyes gleamed with excitement. That was good news, I thought. I began to imagine myself strolling along the riverside and admiring the scenery without fearing a human coming out of nowhere. It was a wonderful day that ought to be celebrated with a feast.

Once in a while, I met my good friend Colin, and we would listen to Baron's nagging stories, and then we found a termite hole to enjoy a good meal together. Pangolins generally live a lonely life, but it is very pleasant to meet one or two of our compatriots. It is not at all easy for us to run into each other. Thus, sometimes, we make a verbal contract to meet at a later time. Colin is really a punctual pangolin, so that I always need to leave early to avoid being late. After all, pangolins are slow-walkers. One day, though, I have waited for him all night under the third tree by the brook. I waited until I completely missed supper time, until the breeze began to blow on the trees, until the moon left a hazy reflection in the water, and then I knew that he failed to keep our appointment. Then, in that moment, I suddenly realized, just like the day my mom left without saying goodbye, no matter how long I waited for him, he would not come back.

A nightmare sensation came upon me. Something has changed, something but what remained uncertain. I was afraid to ask Baron if the good news he had told me was true. Although the worst was yet to come, I became afraid of seeing empty holes and strange footprints. I became afraid of hearing unfamiliar sounds. I'm a nocturnal animal, but I started to fall into an unspeakable panic when the darkness arrived. I seldom went outside and no longer dared to go across the brook to greet that

flowers. However, as human footprints appeared in my neighborhood with increasing frequency, I foresaw my inescapable fate. I walked so slowly, though I tried to be quick. However, I could not escape from the grasping human hands. While my scales can protect me even from the bite of the beasts with the sharpest teeth, they are of no use against humans. I tried to curl myself into a ball as tightly as I can could, but it was in vain, since it made it easier for them to throw me into the sack. There, I met several other trembling pangolins—was Colin captured in the same way that day?

That was a seemingly endless journey of suffering. I was trapped in a cage, put in a boat, and left forever the sweet home I had dug myself, the flowers I loved, the place I thought I would never leave. Perhaps I was one of the tens of millions of insignificant victims— of these tens of millions of pangolins that who were poached and trafficked on the black market. The things in those bulging bags looked familiar. Are those the scales from my best friend Colin? Something I might never figure out is why humans want our scales? They are already the most powerful animal in the forest, and they don't need these things to protect themselves.

Life is tough. I felt like I hadn't seen a beautiful sunset behind the western hills for centuries. Maybe I would never gain an



opportunity to enjoy sunsets anymore. As a pangolin who had just begun the journey to explore this cruel but beautiful world, my wishes were very simple. I wondered if humans were able to know what was in my mind, they must not understand and because they laughed at me bitterly and without remorse. If I had a choice to live again, I would get as far away from humans—the pangolins' biggest threat—as possible. If I had a choice, I would want to ask them, why they had done this. Baron once told me it was necessary to keep believing in miracles. However, it is not true that pangolins are one of the safest animals in nature. It was not true that the regulation that humans had created a ban on the international commercial trade that was effective. I had given up all hope. What I had believed all the time was completely turned upside down. The painful wailing of other pangolins was like a pair of invisible hands tightly squeezing my heart. Our cage was covered with a gray cloth, and I wondered if the next time the cloth was lifted, it

would be my turn. Fortunately, I was one of the lucky pangolins. When I was released from that damned cage, a crowd of people stood around me, happily clapping their hands, while others pointed at me with what a box-like machine. I did not know what to do at first, after all, pangolins are slow walkers, and our struggles are no more than a joke to mankind. I didn't want to try to escape again. I was put on a white table and examined by strange things. Then I was sent to a comfortable place and had a good meal. I was saved by the group of people. With their help, I gradually recovered and was sent back to my hometown specially. I never imagined that I could come back again, now I am also the pangolin with a traumatic experience.

My hope is that I will not be the only pangolin left in this forest.

