

Fiction

§ Dream Bar
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§ My Little Brother's Ghost
§ Veluriya Dream
§ The Wind Brought a Reverie
§ Christmas Special

In “Dream Bar,” due to an alcohol-induced dream, “He” realizes that escape from reality can’t be truly free and pursues the dream of becoming a human rights lawyer after waking. In “Buddha Never Speaks,” the protagonist goes to Bangkok, explores Buddhism, and finally connects with his grandma’s beliefs in a dream. “My Little Brother’s Ghost,” written from the perspective of a young girl, who confronts her family’s gender bias, complex emotions, and the miscarriage of a brother, all of which become a psychological shadow she can’t erase. “The Apocalypse of Puella” tells the story of Puella helping Clamor who is bullied in the orphanage to regain his confidence. In “Veluriya Dream,” a man is involved with the “Veluriya Dream” project, ultimately sacrificing himself to save his family from the dream cycle. In “The Wind Brought a Reverie,” the protagonist goes through an experimental program in which one can relive memories after losing his grandma, leading him to eventually accept the death in the family. In “Christmas Special,” the protagonist feels bored and lonely in life, she takes pills and remembers past Christmas experiences. The seven short stories explore the connection between lucid dreams and personal growth, self-awareness, trauma, and escapism through different storylines. Lucid dreams are always used as a means of exploring the inner world, and helping the protagonists make changes in reality.

Dream Bar

Siyan Chen

Part I

It's 3 am in LA, the enervating early autumn breeze sends snores of the homeless people to He, but He doesn't feel sleepy at all. The night is so dark that He cannot even see He's own fingers clearly. All the street lights are out, and He is only relying on the purple big neon light on He's left reading "Dream Bar" to go home.

"A drink is what we sold, A dream is what you got", He can't remember how many times He had passed this special bar, but by the time He can recite the advertisement on it perfectly well, still, He never stepped into the bar once. He had made an oath to stay away from alcohol in He's whole life. The bar is outside the Chinatown and He is two yards from home. But today is different, He stops at the front door of the bar, facing it with He's heart racing. He had made a lot of oath in He's life, not to stay up late, not to put work before life, but right now He is standing in front of a bar in the midnight worrying about He's client may give He another call, plus today is the third day He cannot sleep because of work, so He thinks, whatever, a cup of alcohol wouldn't kill He, and He is really in need of sleeps and dreams.

3 years ago He came to LA to chase He's dream of becoming a lawyer of human rights. How ironic, He thinks, that He is working for a Chinese boss currently to get other Chinese people here to immigrate and chase their dreams while He already gave up on He's own under financial pressures. Everything is just not going the way He wants.

He sighs and enters the bar. What projects into He's eyes is purely pitch black, and in front of He appears a large black locker with purple spray paint that says, "Welcome to Dream Bar. Before you enter, please make sure you put on your mask and hooded gown." He moves forward and a drawer immediately opens, with a well-folded gown and a delicate mask inside, both in black color. He puts them on and He starts to hear music coming into He's ears on He's right. There is a mysterious path which He didn't notice at first. Following it, a technicolored space with loud music and a crowd of people wearing all black dancing inside unfolds to He.

"Yo, what's up? Your first time here?" A lump of black approaches He.

"Hi. Yes, umm, I, I don't normally drink. I guess today I'm abnormal...Haha!" He says and pinches He-self, "What am I even talking about? I shouldn't talk to anyone. I'm so weird. I don't even sound like

myself. It's gotta be sleep deprivation... Or it could be anything else... Just go! You're spoiling the atmosphere..." He thinks.

"Hahahaha, You're so funny! No one is normal here, that's why we come to the Dream Bar! For we can dream to be normal...Hahaha! Anyways, call me She! It's my family name!"

"Pleasure to meet you! Mis...ter (cough, cough), sorry."

"Oh please don't worry about genders, just call me by my family name. We don't use titles here, there's no 'he' or 'she', just 'me' in this bar. If you look at yourself you can't tell your own gender either. We're all the same. Come with me. Let me buy you a drink."

"Thanks! And you can call me He!", He shouts as She drags He through the crowd towards the Main Bar.

"I'll give you a taster drink first, it stimulates your taste bud, so you can experience a stronger feeling of the Dream Drink. You're welcome." She says with a naughty look and pours some transparent liquid in a goblet decorated with clouds and stars. He drinks it and asks, "There's no bartender here? And we serve ourselves?"

"We know ourselves better than the bartenders. In Dream Bar each drink has a color. You drink, you change color, and you have a nice dream. Easy. You'll know how to do it once I show you. Don't worry. You can start by telling me about yourself and your dreams."

"Excuse me?" He gets startled by He's own voice and the sudden intensive impatient sense. "I just want to sleep. If by dreams you mean life goals, I've had enough of them. They cause insomnia... They're virus that invades your immune system that make you believe they are good...And before you realize, you are already controlled by them and automatically you stop caring about yourself... All you care is work, and you allow them to hurt you. No, I don't want another dream."

"Good, purple color, as always." "Are you listening to me?" He sighs, "Why am I saying all these things anyways, I'm delusional. You're just a stranger. Loneliness is the top sales of secrets. I... dreamed of becoming a human rights lawyer a long time ago, when I was a prosperous university student. At that time, my whole world was made up of dreams. Soon after I began my career, I recognized how frivolous people are when they pronounced the word 'dream.' It turned out the world is actually made up of numbers, and dream, is something that can be changed overnight. So I switched to another industry, shamelessly earning a living by boosting those unrealistic fantasies to others. Wooo, rich. Despise me as you want, since I despise myself a million times more than anyone else. Everyday is so painful. I feel like I am only a walking dead." He pauses, as He's voice trembles. "What on earth did you give me...I shouldn't have said that."

"Ok. I would say red...dededede, oh it's here, courage...Sorry, I forgot to mention the taster

drink has a side effect of having people say whatever's on their minds."

“Oh no, I should go. Before I tell you something worse.”

“Hey, relax. This bar has magic. We’ve already gone this far. Why don’t you take this chance and let me help you. You look so demure, so pure, but I know inside your heart there’s a beast wanting to come out. I have an observant eye for people. Just tell me a little bit more, I can make you a perfect drink. Trust me, I’ve seen way too many people in this bar, and I can take care of you. How’s your romantic life?”

He seethes with loathing of She's condescension and reluctantly answers, "I have a partner, but I'm single. It's not friends with benefits, not situationship. It's complicated. I don't like this person, and I don't like sex. But I force myself to have sex, which is weird, because I'm the one who ask for it. I must be a masochist. Umm, I developed some theories about my behavior: probably it's because somehow I feel like I should do it to satisfy my partners, even if they are not asking, so I'm being an ideally considerate partner. Or is it possible my gender affiliation suggests that the society expects me to provide a sexual value? I know I shouldn't care but I do. Or most likely, I'm obsessed with hurting myself. I think my body doesn't deserve to be happy when my mind is traumatized." He buries He's head in He's own arms. He hears that She pours something into the goblet again, but He is too embarrassed to watch. These are the facts that He always knows deep inside, however, it still shocks He to hear He-self saying them out loud in public. "I'm as vulnerable as my dream." He whispers. He has never thought of describing He-self using that word.



“I’m surprised at how well you know about yourself and your dreams. Believe it or not, it’s a gift. Most people came here asking for a dream while they don’t have the slightest idea of who they are and what they are looking for. Alright, drink this, I promise you will feel better afterwards.”

He says “No, thank you, but I rather not” in silence. A spasmodic abandonment grabs He and He cannot utter a faintest word as if He’s brain had been incapacitated. “No matter how I try, I will always end up doing the things I refused.” He believes that He is doomed for the same kinds of sequences that have been rehearsed too many times outside the bar. As usual, He does as She says, choosing to forget He was once able to exert free wills.

Part II

The first ray of morning sun stings He's eyes. The painful groans and screams of birds rises and falls. He opens He's eyes in He's shabby apartment. He's partner has already gone for work, leaving a pajama lying next to He. This, He thinks, is completely a nightmare.

He cannot remember how He got back here yesterday, but He can vividly remember He's dream. In He's dream He is a successful human-right lawyer, He has an assistant to look after He, and He never worries about money considering He has way too much to spend. He is married to the one who He have had a crush on for 6 years. For a moment, He goes into a trance, wondering if there is a one-in-a-billion chance that the lucid dream is real.

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Thousands of messages floods into He's phone. He cannot afford to waste one second. At the end of the day it is He who brings home the bacon.

He struggles to get up, and stumbles towards the mirror. Posters of Marilyn Monroe and Eminem on both sides of the mirror remind He of He's daily routine—checking He's newly bleached hair. “No bad.” He thinks, “There is only a tint of yellow under the top light. In natural light, it's hard to find out... But I do need a more effective ‘bye bye yellow shampoo’ and ‘color fixing conditioner.’ My hair is not storing the purple they provide.” Mechanically He squeezes out a pump of purple toothpaste and begins to brush He's teeth.

Somehow He figures He looks more rattled in the mirror than usual, so He chooses to turn He's head towards the balcony on He's right, letting the never-gonna-change scenery outside narcotize He's nerve, escaping into a daydream state of mind.

When He turns back to the mirror, Some purple toothpaste foam has flowed down He's

chin from the corner of He's mouth. He stares at the foam curiously, and at the thought of the purple color may as well influence the skin color, He frantically fumbles a washing tissue and wipes the foam away. He takes out a bottle of sunscreen that is supposed to make He's skin look tanned and healthier and smears it on He's face, finally, He flashes a satisfied smile.

The products He uses all follow a same formula: purple plus yellow equals white.

Purple is the underpainting of He's American dream.

All day long, He is absent-minded and preoccupied, always thinking about getting off work early to go to the Dream Bar.

Part III

It rains in the afternoon, the dark clouds overhead threatens a huge storm.

He scutters towards the Dream Bar. It is now the only shelter He can reply on. As He gets into the bar, She's already waiting at the entrance. Seeing He, She's face alights with delight, "Glorious! You're here. I have a feeling that you will come tonight. It must be our fate to meet each other. Tell me, how was your dream last night?"

"The best I've ever had. Thank you!" He chuckles.

"Told you! Now you know how to mix the drinks, why don't you try and make one for yourself? Let me introduce the price, the standard drinks are all 200 dollars a bottle. A bottle only contains one color. And if you want an upgrade, you can choose those 800 dollar bottles, which are not only stronger, but also can let you experience a week in your dream, while in reality, only a night has passed, don't worry. Also I want to as well promote the monthly dream, they are on sale. You can use 4000 dollars to purchase all colors of monthly dream, in this way you get to dream for a whole month, and in reality still it's one night. In addition the bar will provide you with the best bottles that enables you to reach ultimate freedom."

"Ah... Is there something cheaper?" He says in an awkward tone. He had completely forgot She had paid for He yesterday.

"No. Nice dreams are always expensive. You have to be prepared to pay some price for your dream. This is just how the world works."

"Umm, what did I have yesterday? Can I just have another glass of it?"

"Usually people get tired of the same stimulation very quickly, so normally you wouldn't be as satisfied as yesterday with only one drink. You need at least two. Oh, come on, let's have some fun! You only live once! If I were you I will definitely bet on everything to experience the euphoria of that monthly drink. Like, how many days are you actually living as yourself? With that drink, you have freedom. And when you own freedom, you own eternity."

"You're absolutely right... Jesus, you enlightened me!" He looked at She. The colorful lights behind She seem to shine with the radiance of God. He falls back into fantasies about the beautiful dreams that were about to come, and the more He thinks about them, the more He feels that life without these dreams at this moment is unbearable, as if ten thousand ants are crawling on He at the same time. "But I didn't take enough cash with me." He says, calming down a little bit.

"Haha, it's ok. You can always mortgage some of your health since you have so much. And you can redeem your health when you have money. But I have to inform you if your health appreciates in the future, you may need to pay more to redeem it."

"Deal." He says without hesitation, thinking the deal has no difference than a free booze.

A contract shows up, and He signs the name without even looking.

A set of bottles appear on the bar counter, each of them seductively shines heavenly color. He eagerly opens every bottle and mixes all of them together and drinks. The liquid, so soft, light, and smooth, tastes rainbow-like sweet. Time slows down. She is saying something inside He's brain. He doesn't understand. Floats, floats, He flies to a vacuum that wraps He with juicy joy. Except, He can hear the incessant howling of wolves in the distance.

"Free! I am finally free!" He somersaults in the air, looking around in search for a mirror. He wants to know what He looks like, what He is wearing and what kind of house He's now living in. But there is only nothing. Looking down He sees He's not wearing anything, and through the vague memories of He's reality body shape, He knows He didn't change a whit.

"So this is the ultimate freedom you guaranteed?" He says in a hoarse voice.

"No. You can't fraud me." A fierce fire of anger ignites in He's heart. "Let me out!" He shouts.

"Hey, shhhhh... What's going on?" She's voice drifts over. He feels like She is touching He's skin, but from another world.

"You're inherently and always free." The gentle voice continues as if pleading, "In your dream there will be no rules, you will be the one who make them. Order something, dear master."

Another rainbow slides into He's stomach, and He's body gets hot.

"You shameless loser. Screw you!" He bursts out and in the chaos He pushes something down.

"Please, no! I will do whatever you ask!" The voice cries. He can vaguely sense a thing kneeling in front of He.

For the first time in He's life, He has an audience. The vacuum, after so many years of



listening in silence, eventually responses.

That night He experiences as a deity. The volcanoes within He erupt repeatedly, and the frequency of earthquakes is under He's control. The sea rises and falls endlessly. And the wails of the people He enslaved sound like a beautiful symphony. There is nothing He cannot do.

Immortality waves to He. The wolf howling in He's dream grows louder and louder. That night He knows even a deity has its weaknesses. After elation only infinite emptiness and numbness remain. He wastes; He kills; He transgresses the rules He had established He-self; He exhausts all the words in the world. Mount Everest weighs massively on He; Lake Baykal chocks He; The holy water of the Pacific has dried up. There is nothing He can do.

He closes He's eyes and decides He shall exist no more. He wakes up.

Part IV

He wakes up, feeling dizzy, in a dark room which He doesn't recognize, naked. He sits up, seeing She is also naked, sleeping next to He.

"You ain't supposed to wake up so early." Someone sitting in the dark grunts, exhaling a puff of smoke. The only right foot that could be seen clearly under the dim light of the candles on the table is covered with insect like sores, some of which has already ruptured and left blood. He sees the figure in the darkness constantly moving, scratching something with hands.

He understands. He instantly looks at the half-opened door.

The dark shadow titters, "You can go if you want, but don't be surprised if someday you come back. Everyone does. Once you stepped into the Dream Bar you will never leave. We are all martyrs to desires that don't belong to us."

The dark shadow coughs, and stones for a while. In a heavy breath, it starts talking again, "Tell me, honestly, were you happy in those dreams?"

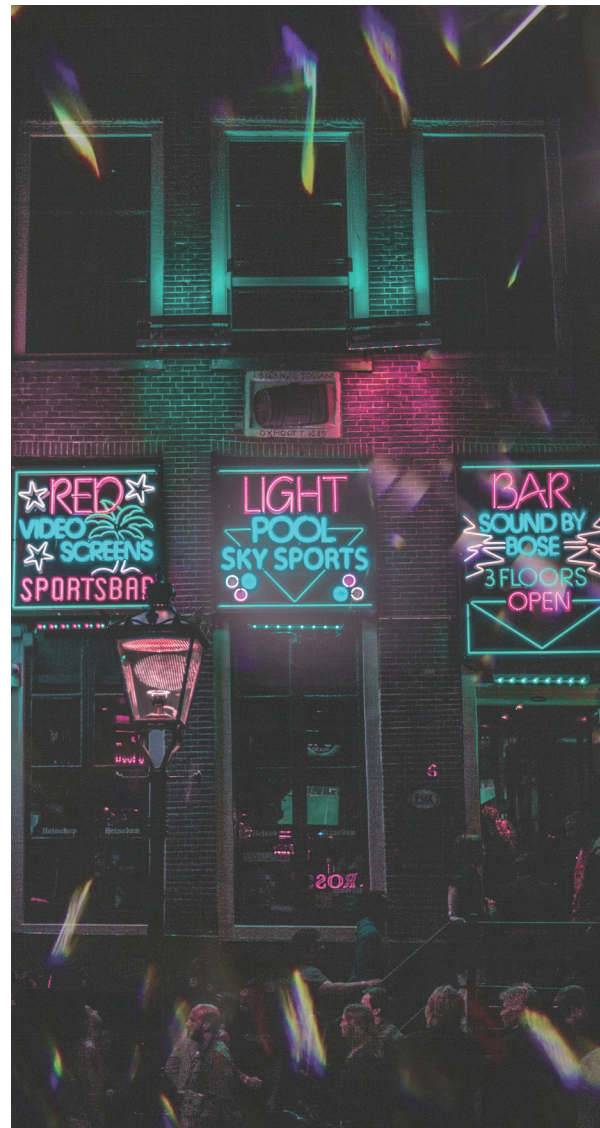
"I was, but..."

"But, it passes." The dark shadow laughs insanely.

"We came to the world, lucid and spotless. Poor us, before we could see the divinity of our original color, we were told that it was... inferior... so we stigmatized it resolutely. We had the chance to just be ourselves and experience the true rapture of being alive but we're so afraid of



strange eyes and loneliness that we rather suppress our natural color, make it our daily routine, pollute it with other color that never belonged to us, and feel the pain! Pain! Of losing ourselves, of being shy about ourselves because we can no longer show people what we are anymore. We are mixtures of all colors. We are no one. We are everyone. And it made us lonely in return. How rich! We focused so much on putting all the colors on ourselves that we didn't feed a whit of our soul, and by now it became empty and wretched. We tried to erase the darkness, and make it colorful, so we can't sleep at night.



Look what we've done! Is there an end? And what's worse, even though we are already burdened with colors, we still go on taking other people's colors and dirty them up...Oh! Listen to what the bawling spirits have to say in the dark! Listen to what our hearts have to tell us! Look at those people standing in the darkness shining in their own way, blossom in their own way! I've seen the brightest color in my life, it thrives quietly, irrigated with an enormous effort that people may never lay their eyes on... No regrets... Time to die..."

The dark shadow falls straight down, and moves never more.

He swallows a mouthful of saliva and secretly sneaks out of bed. The music outside the room is loud and lively, with lights of different colors shining. A crowd of drunken people gathers in flocks, complaining.

He closes He's eyes, avoids the lights, listens to the wining of the crowd, and He runs.

Something inside He's heart guides He all the way out of the bar.



Part V

"Babe, you awake?" The voice of He's partner rings.

He opens He's eyes. A white pigeon is standing by the windowsill looking at He curiously.

"Babe, what happened... What time... What day is it today..."

"Last Tuesday, you came home at 4 a.m., completely undressed. And you were rambling about nonsense...Poor baby, you're sick. I took you to the doctors and they said you must be overworking lately. It causes detachment... I think that's what they call it. You just had a really lucid dream in reality."

"No, it cannot be a dream. I have to go back to the bar and find She, there are so many innocent people trapped in there!"

"Babe, I checked... There was never a Dream Bar outside Chinatown, not even in LA..."

He is stunned, and looks silently at the dusty copy of the Human Rights Law book by the bedside. It's time to reopen it again.



Buddha Never Speaks

Yutong Chen

*“Buddha has never spoken a single word,
nor have you heard.”*

When the flowing scriptures of the Pali Tipitaka, chanted by the saffron-robed monks, softly brush against my folded hands like the pervasive sandalwood scent, I am reminded of these words my grandmother taught me when I was a child.

The gold foil on the Erawan Buddha is carved into layers of fine light by the slanting sunlight while the people sitting beside me—those with white hair, blonde hair, and curly hair—are all enraptured by the mysterious incantations emanating from the ancient wisdom. Beneath the benevolent gaze of the Buddha, we are silently blooming like fresh flowers adorning the temple's sacred altar.

It is a normal day, at five o'clock in June's afternoon, in Bangkok's Wat Pho. The breeze gently rolls up the corners of the monks' red robes, and the cat slumbers peacefully in the shade of the trees. Among the tourists of different colors, you can see a young Asian girl, accompanied by a white man in his middle age, wandering aimlessly in the mini-sized temple maze.

"Why you white guys are so obsessed with visiting Asian countries?" I ask Stephan, a man from Germany whom I came across yesterday at the night market. "Probably they want to free themselves from the endless cold and dark in Europe." He answers, smiling, and presses the Sony's shutter to capture the silhouette of a bird on the treetop. A white woman comes to me and politely asks me where she can burn incense and pray for blessings; I point a direction to her and strive to distinguish her English accent from British.

In the Wat Pho temple, the symphony of

gurgling water harmonizes with the crisp sound of coins dropping into the golden bowl. Every step we take falls in the dappled shadows cast by the bodhi trees—all of them grow densely under the tropical sunshine and sacred devotion. Sometimes, I believe these tropical dwellers have a more intimate relationship with the flora and fauna around them, embracing the eternal dance of seasonal transitions and rotations with a sense of profound reverence. These people live in the childhood of humans—when gods and nature are said to control human destiny. "So why not try being a vegetarian?" This time yesterday, Stephan asked me like this when we were sitting in a vegan restaurant held by a Filipino woman. The German professor in front of me, whom I had just met, pointed to the menu and said it was good that this restaurant used a specially made vegan cheese. Stephan said he taught political science at college and came to Thailand to attend an academic conference with several days off. Feeling bored about his lecturing, I noticed this tiny vegan restaurant was filled with white backpackers—they held their iPhones, proudly raised their sun-bronzed necks, and talked with the waiter in standard English with each word articulated clearly while their worn backpacks were telling how many places they have been to.

The restaurant's name, "Saravana Bhavan," was hanging on the wall. The word "Saravana" means a field of reeds in Sanskrit. Stephan began to talk about his experience getting involved in a Buddhist meditation course, but the only thing I cared about was the vegan food here was surprisingly

expensive. I didn't know from what time these white guys began to act more Asian. I didn't know from what time these white guys began to act more Asian than us Asians. It was hard for me to connect these people with the colonizers who had made the land of Asia bloody and broken. An ambivalent feeling would arise when you juxtapose George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" with the English signs that could be seen everywhere on Southeast Asian land. In front of me now, a Christian was boasting his knowledge about Buddhism. History is like a ghost; it keeps haunting us and coming back to us again and again, especially in the tropics, where high temperatures blur the boundaries of time and greenery grows year after year. Sometimes, the shadow of the white male holding a Southeast Asian girl may overlap with those white soldiers from military forces in the past. Groups of foreigners came to this land with different yet similar desires. The waiter brought over a huge roasted broccoli.

As the evening descends, the entire temple is bathing in the warm and humid purple afterglow. In front of the Buddha, I make a wish. I remember my grandma saying that the Buddha does not speak, but he blesses everyone. Dots of lights illuminate the temple. Stephan says he will meet me at the Bangkok Floating Market tomorrow. Stephan's camera with a huge lens, glows black and mysteriously. I hate political science because I think this subject may always face the risk of oversimplifying and ignoring specific people in history.

That night, when I return to the youth hostel, I have a strange dream. I dream of my grandmother, mother, and the glowing relic. Then

I sink into the mud, feeling hot and sticky.

Next, Stephan appears. I then make a specimen of Stephan's photo and hang it on the wall. I am startled awake, walking to the window, and could only see the shops selling marijuana glowing green on the street.

The sunshine in the tropics differs from the sunshine in the temperate zone. The latter one's sunshine always hangs aloft in the sky, overlooking the earth coldly, keeping an objective distance from you, being cut by the deciduous broad-leaved forest, and falling gently onto your palms. However, the tropical sunshine is sticky and intimate to you. Most of the time, it melts into the air full of water vapor and can gently press against you, kiss your cheeks and arms, and follow you wherever you go.

It is in such sunshine that our boat flows with the water at the Damnoen Saduak floating market. The small waterways are all filled with these narrow wooden vessels. The colorful wooden houses vigorously line up the riverbanks. Here, People's skin color is healthily tanned by the sun, and their fingers point to the fruits on the boat, such as mango, mangosteen, and guava. Stephan focuses his camera on the floating houses growing together with water and grass on the riverbank. He says he is working on the topic of Vietnam's Environmental governance and justice, so he has to come to Southeast Asia frequently. I always wonder how many Southeast Asian scholars are engaged in the field of international politics and sociology studies and how that ratio compares to European and American scholars on the



global stage. I then shudder at the idea that other people would have the right to dissect. Our body and cut it into pieces to examine our past, present, and future while we ourselves do not quite understand every part of our body.

Passing by the floating houses on the river, we are also passing by these people's whole lives as they are born, grow up, and die here, eventually being buried deep in the river. Rivers in the tropics are also different from those in the temperate zone. When we are on a mechanical sightseeing boat on the Seine River to look up the Eiffel Tower, humanity controls the river through technology while the river crawls at human feet. However, in the tropics, people make their homes upon the water, traversing the capillaries of the river's depths. The rivers breed human beings while the people embrace the river into their own vibrant vitality, and they both draw nutrients from each other to thrive in this endless summer.

After visiting the floating market, Stephan and I arrive at the Grand Palace. Another afternoon in Bangkok. The white temples, adorned with green and blue bricks, glisten like mirrors in the sun. Stephan asks me if I believe in reincarnation. Walking in the forests of Ceylon-style golden relics, the tourists' figures become blurred under the scorching sun. I remember the day Stephan and I first met. He asked me why I came to Thailand alone. I said that my grandmother had passed away last year. She was a devout Buddhist believer, but unfortunately, I didn't have time to understand her beliefs and everything else when she was alive. I told Stephan with regret. Last winter, in the hospital filled with the smell of disinfectant and always flashing digital numbers, my grandmother, though incredibly weak, still held up her frail body

every day to recite Buddhist sutras in the huge ward, regardless of other patients. The deep rhythmic sound gradually reverberated throughout the entire ward, resonating heavily in everyone's hearts. But I couldn't understand even a word of her at that time. Walking through an open green grassland, the Mekong River, carrying the golden clouds in its waves, stretches out in front of us.

Sometimes, the gilded spaces betwixt the clouds instill within us a belief of reincarnation; sometimes, the ethereal halos cast by the translucent droplets upon the leaves ignite the idea of reincarnation. However, in Buddhism, it is not easy to reincarnate as a human being, as you may have to be an animal for the samsara. Getting close to the river, the wind rowing over from the river comes to embrace you. The sky hangs low at the horizon while the pink sunset is pouring over the Mekong River.

Mekong River. This is the Mekong River, the river in Marguerite Duras' *The Lover*; the river that has witnessed countless histories. It is just flowing serenely in front of me. Time is blurred as the summer light casts shining thin scales on the river. Duras uses her emotions and sensitivity to crush time and space into pieces, piecing together the scars of the colony. This is the tropics in Duras' writing, which is full of vitality but at the same time exudes the smell of decay. Today's Southeast Asia, with its mixed races, the popularization of English, and the booming marijuana shops, always makes me feel that the ghost of colonization is still haunting us at some point. The Buddha overlooks sentient beings from a high place but says nothing. History is too

complicated and sometimes too heavy. We are just passers-by fleeting in the scale of history. A ferry full of tourists passed in front of me. It starts to drizzle. Time falls like rain.

Stephan gives me a Buddhist amulet with a monk engraved on it. He thanks me for my company and says if we have "yuan (缘)," we will meet again. Leaning my head against the damp ship wall, I feel the hot humidity seep into my rain-soaked hair. The Indian tourists sitting in front of me are chatting loudly. Among them, there is a lady with a beautiful red dot on her forehead. Maybe people shouldn't be obsessed with the idea of reincarnation, and sometimes we shouldn't be too obsessed with the scars left by history. Grandma's Atman might be observing me from certain plants or even in the very air itself. History and memory are also cunningly hidden in fragmented language and the murmur of rivers, slipping into your dreams when you don't expect it.

"To feel more rather than talk more." My grandma pointed at my head and said.

"Buddha has never spoken a single word, nor have you heard."

The sun finally peeks out again.





My Little Brother's

Ghost

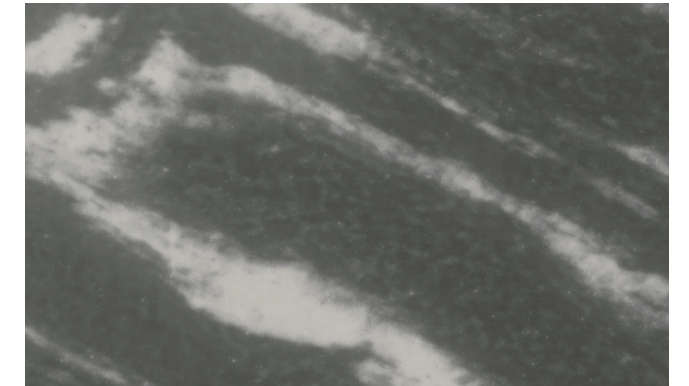
Adele Hu

I had a little brother; he died many years before. No, he died before he was born. I was three or four. When I heard from my dad that my mom would spend some time outside of our home, I was confused. In my three or four-year-old brain, I remembered the last time Mom left me, which was perhaps one year ago when I was two or three. She was going somewhere very far with my dad and left me at home with Granny. I don't remember if I cried very hard every day and night. I wasn't so sure if my granny loved me or not—perhaps, she hated me. She hated me for some reason, I guessed, but I seemed to forget why she did so. In fact, the only thing that I remembered was my parents showed me a

videotape. In the video, Mom was feeding a kangaroo on a huge farmland. The top of the left or right-hand side of the video, showed the date of recording: 2007/3/20. Many years later, Mom said she thought her mother-in-law mistreated me when she was away during that time because I always looked very weak when she was back. I thought Granny was nice, at least not bad. Dad said Granny was disappointed and said, “Uh, a girl, again!” when I was born. Dad repeated this joke every year at least one time during a big family meal as if his joke was really funny until I realized it wasn’t.



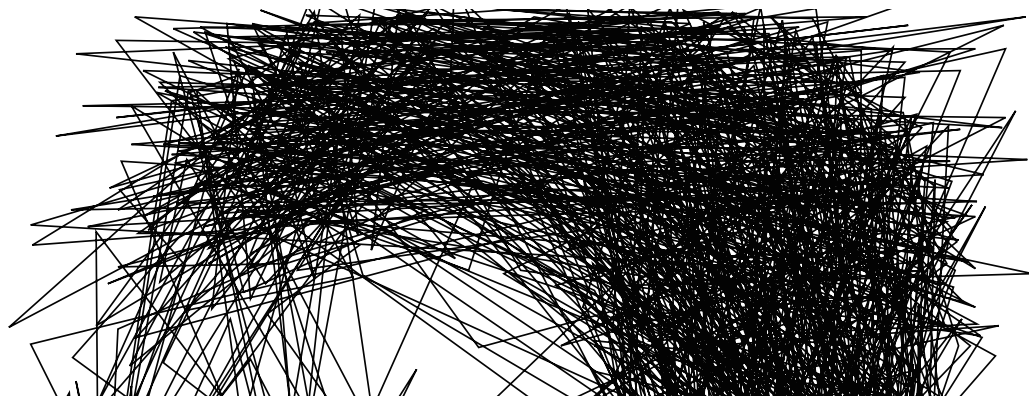
I asked Dad, when would Mom come back? He said, maybe a few weeks. I asked, Dad, would Mom come back with a kangaroo videotape? Dad shook his head and said nothing. Then where was she? No reply. Dad left me home with Granny. I asked Granny, she smiled and said I would have a little brother when Mom was back. I was confused because I already had an elder sister who was always at her school. She is ten years older than me. I thought she tried to drown me in the swimming pool when I was two. After this, I got serious pneumonia which almost got me killed. Besides, I rarely saw her. There were only two rooms in my home, so Granny and I lived in my sister’s room. Wouldn’t our house be too crowded if there was one more person needed to live in? I was a little bit mad about it.



Days after, Dad came back, Granny left, and then Grandad came. Granny sometimes taught me to call Grandad, “Stinky Grandad.” I knew they didn’t live together anymore since many years ago. I learned the word “divorce” a year later when I was ready for elementary school then I realized Granny and Grandad had “divorced” and remarried when my sister was born. I thought Grandad loved me

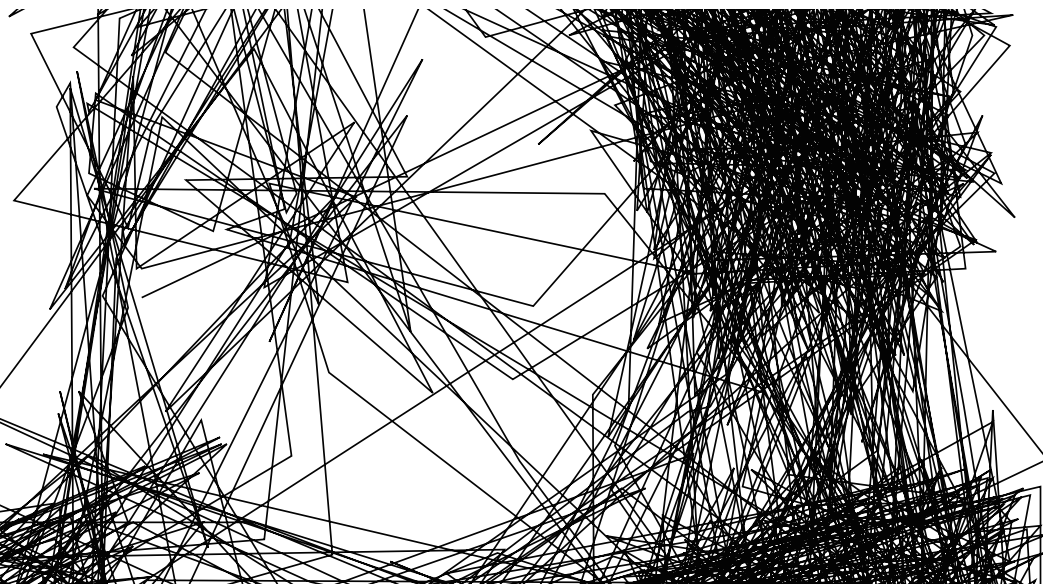


more than Granny did, at least he never mentioned whether he was disappointed or not when I was born. He came in and said, Mom was sick, we needed to go to the hospital. Dad said, the hospital didn’t allow kids to go in, you should keep absolutely quiet, or the nurses would find you and drive you away. I took some flowers made of paper for Mom before I went. In the ward, Grandad said to Mom, it could have been a boy. I hugged Mom and gave her my fake flowers. I dared not say anything. I saw Mom’s tears falling, which I had never seen before and would see frequently in the future. About two years later, I learned a word called “abortion,” and then I realized something.



During a swimming class in my second year of elementary school, I stared at the swimming pool and found myself the one who possibly killed my little brother. I loved to sit on Mom's knees at any time before the last time I sat on them. I disliked Mom's belly when it became larger and larger one day after she came back from the place where she shot the kangaroo video. Her bulging belly severely affected my experience sitting on her knees. I sat down heavily on her knees one day, on purpose. Mom cried, and I also cried. I knew that no one would blame a preschool-age child. Adults always say that children know nothing while they seem to already have forgotten everything when they were children. So I wasn't blamed. Days after, Mom was taken to the hospital.

But recently, I realized that he is still alive, in some way, like a ghost. Mom was carrying the baby when she was calling my sister, who was married a year ago but had no plan to have a child. My parents were dissatisfied with my sister's husband, they thought he was not aggressive, about his career, money, or offspring. Dad treated him as how Dad treats my sister, that was, usually ignoring her and forcing her to talk about the things that my sister would never want to talk about when it comes to taking responsibility as a father. He said, "A child is a MUST; two children will be the BEST; three children will be too much." But if there are three children, Mom and Dad will also be glad about them. Mom said to my sister and her husband, "Your salaries are too low. you two must have children, so you can be aggressive." I thought, what a fantastic logic! When Mom was talking to my sister, the baby in her arms was laughing. It was naked. It was a boy. I could see his phallus.



In these years, I was trying to prove to others and myself that I was a rich girl owning all the love and possessions from my parents. I tried to persuade myself that

I was the kid dipped in happiness. I tried to affirm that the male embryo was no longer a regret to the elders in my family and that my birth was fortunate to them.

But when I found that my family counted on my sister can have a good marriage with a wealthy, reputable man, or at least have a baby boy before her 30 years old, I understood that I wasn't their real child. I knew that ten years later, Mom and Dad would say the same words again to me, if they could still remember things. Because their only child is their son, an invisible son. Finally, I found myself the one to bring their son back. But no one would admit this.

I tried to end the curse. I attempted to drown the baby, my little brother, in the bath water. I wanted to kill him, just like what I did when I was three. He cried, and Mom came and accused me. I saw him smiling at me, and to some extent, I thought he was laughing at me. Suddenly, I heard him say, "Dear sister, I'll be with you, forever."

"And ever."

I woke up, and I knew it wasn't just a dream.



Veluriya Dream

Leo Niu

I Falling Stars

Snow covered the severed limbs, splattered blood, and lifeless faces left in the wake of artillery fire. Amidst the collapsed ruins and distant cries of battle, a group of people struggled to move forward, some even crawling. Among them was a man as ordinary as any other, accompanied by his wife and a child.

Dragging heavy footsteps, burdened by weighty luggage and severe sleep deprivation, the man felt as if shackled by invisible chains. The long journey and perilous path had left him with only a thin coat, having given his worn-out padded jacket to his wife and child. His feet were swollen and frostbitten, numb, while scratches on his arms had scabbed over. Yet, the sight before him managed to squeeze a withered smile from his bloodshot eyes.

The sky in the east began to brighten, and then everyone halted. On the distant horizon,

the rising sun leapt out with the chirping of birds. It first illuminated a corner of a magnificent wall, then gilded the entire wall with golden edges.

They stood before the gates of the capital city.

In the opposite direction, the sky remained an iron blue. The man recalled his plot of land and small house. On the frontier of a small country, a piece of land was all he owned. Known for his diligence, his labor from dawn till dusk was enough to sustain his life. Every Saturday, he would exchange necessities with traders on the border. Sometimes, when he had extra, he would trade for vases or rare books, making him one of the few intellectuals in the frontier town. A few years ago, he married. His wife, also from a humble background, shared a deep bond with him, and they had a son.

One Saturday, he and his wife went to the market as usual, only to find the border traders gone. The bustling corridor was now lined with empty stalls, replaced by

soldiers appearing in the market. Confused, he still remembered the sunrise that day, rising quietly. Apart from the chirping of birds, there was no sound. He and his wife seemed to plunge into a dense forest, unable to find direction in the vast fields.

He also remembered the western sky under the sunrise that day, not just because of its iron blue color, but because he saw a mass of dark figures—soldiers dressed differently from his own country. As the dark figures approached, the man, though still unclear about the situation, was not foolish. He grabbed his wife and ran. The onslaught, like a torrent, wleft them little time to prepare. They could only pack the most essential belongings, but the bigger question was, where to flee?

All he knew was that the books said to keep walking toward the rising sun, and he would reach this magnificent capital city. The benevolent king promised them that in times of war, all citizens—regardless of status—had the right to seek refuge in the capital. Now, after hundreds of miles

of journeying, they saw its silhouette—somewhat blurred in the dawn, like an old painting eroded by time. The gaps in the city walls spoke of the artillery fire that had also ravaged this place.

Colorful tents made of rags and thin wooden sticks covered the open space before the city gates. He saw a line of people distributing soup, emerging from the gates, immediately surrounded by the hungry crowd. Guards tried to control the chaos, but to no avail. Amidst the crowd, the man grabbed a few bowls and buckets, instructing his wife and child to wait farther away. He ran forward, merging with the throng.

The noisy crowd surrounded him. He smelled the aroma of food mixed with the stench of others, struggling to move toward the direction of the crowd. Soon, he noticed the noise paused. Taking this opportunity to approach the soup buckets, he and everyone else were captivated by the sight in the sky. Were they falling stars in daylight? No, clearly not. These “stars” streaking across the sky were ablaze, emitting a sound like neighing warhorses. Only then did people realize they were catapult projectiles.

As the first stone hit the ground, the crowd screamed and surged toward the city. He was swept along, pushed toward the city. He shouted his family’s names, trying to move against the crowd, but the fear-driven masses released all survival instincts toward one goal: the city. The fireballs from the sky drew closer to the city, devouring people in the distance. The gates closed, yet

the catapulting continued.

The path before the city gate was filled with refugees and wounded soldiers, some wrapped in white cloth, others covered in wounds, receiving. The man struggled through the human walls, loudly calling his wife and child’s names. He couldn’t believe they had reached the edge of success, the city gates—how could they fail here?

The sound of catapulting gradually ceased until the crowd quieted. The man received no expected response. Overwhelming fatigue, terror, and grief surged like a tide, causing dizziness and weakness. The ground became the sky as the man collapsed.



II

The First Seven Days

Awakening with a cold sweat, the man gasped for air. Before him was a familiar roof, and...

His pupils contracted instantly.

Overwhelmed him, tears streaming down his face. Ignoring his wife’s puzzled expression, he held her without letting go. Everything before him was so familiar. Undoubtedly, this was his home.

“My dear, I don’t know what you dreamed about, but don’t be afraid. No matter how terrifying, nothing in dreams will come true.” his wife said, gently patting his back.

The falling stars and crimson sky invaded his mind again... Was that just a dream? He wondered, but it seemed too real. In the living room, breakfast was ready, and his child was already at the table, playing around. He lifted the calendar on the wall.

August 9th

The man paused. The man, who was in the midst of winter just a moment ago, felt his mind filled with the sound of cicadas, the heat of midsummer, then...

Until his wife shook his shoulder, bringing him back to reality. Sitting at the table, he looked at the breakfast, including herbal soup his wife specially prepared for him whenever he had nightmares. He noticed the trinkets he had collected still on the windowsill, though something seemed missing. What was it? He couldn’t

remember. It must not be important, he thought.

Returning to the table, he looked at the breakfast, then at his wife, who waited for him to start. In their eyes lay an ocean, yet he felt a strange sadness, soon abandoning the pursuit of its source. That small nightmare was soon forgotten, replaced by the routine of life. Working from sunrise to sunset, repeating until the seventh day.

With the rising sun, the man woke up. By the window, he saw the sun behind fiery clouds, offering a golden tribute to the land. After a simple breakfast, he picked up his tools and prepared to leave when he saw a small figure sitting at the door.

“Dad, the clouds are beautiful this morning.”

The man smiled, about to ask why his son was up so early, when his mind started buzzing. The golden sun still hid behind clouds. More precisely, its position hadn’t changed in half an hour. Instinctively, he looked at the clock’s hands, which indeed had stopped.

“Dad, look at the sky, falling stars!”

His son’s words interrupted his thoughts. How could there be falling stars during the day? But there it was, the dazzling white lights growing closer, turning into fireballs with a hissing sound. He saw the sun leap from the clouds, illuminating a distant wall; the clock’s hands spun wildly, as if broken.

The fireballs approached, the sun quickly rose to the sky, reaching noon. As the first fireball hit the ground, the man instinctively hugged his child, but it was futile. Hundreds of fireballs roared, soon engulfing everything in flames. The man felt a painful twist in his mind, as if falling into a sea of consciousness, memories surfacing and slipping away, like a puppet on invisible strings...

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III Then, On the Eighth Day...

Awakening with a cold sweat, the man found himself back on the first day.

"Am I still dreaming..." he murmured. The birds outside and his wife's gentle call made him think the previous experiences were just a nightmare. However, seeing the date on the calendar, his heart sank. All details were identical to that day—he knew this was more than a simple dream. He realized he seemed trapped in a strange loop, each time returning to this day after the "falling stars" claimed his family.

In the second cycle of seven days, he tried to change fate. He paid attention to everything, searching for any clues. He told his wife and child not to leave, trying to protect them from the impending disaster.

However, when the "falling stars" arrived again, he found his efforts futile. No matter how hard he tried, his family was always swallowed by the merciless fireballs on the seventh day.

As the loop repeated, he faced a brutal truth: this was an endless nightmare. With each cycle, his mental state deteriorated. He began to doubt his memories, even his sanity, becoming irritable and angry. He tried communicating with others, hoping to find clues in their words. He asked townspeople for information about the "falling stars", but responses were always vague, as if everyone was trapped in the same dream.

After countless cycles, the man reached the brink of collapse. When he found himself back on the morning of August 9th, he grabbed nearby objects to smash the vase by the window. But just before hitting the

vase, his hand stopped.

Beside the vase, an unusual ornament caught his eye—a half purple glass flower, its transparent hue reflecting a mysterious glow, though the other half was missing. The smooth cut seemed to suggest the glass flower was always half, but it couldn't fool the man's intuition. The blurred memory clearly told him he had never seen it in previous cycles.

He picked up the half purple glass flower to examine it, but his mind felt like it was hit with a heavy blow, memories flooding in like a dam burst. His upper body stiffened toward the sun, kneeling as if receiving a divine revelation. He recalled attending a lecture during a farming lull, where a man in a white coat, clearly from high society, spoke in the town square. As he listened, he remembered the lecture was about something called the “Temiar Senoi technique”—a method of controlling dreams through lucid dreaming. He didn't know why this term suddenly appeared in his mind, as if the man was the embodiment of Temiar Senoi. Nonetheless, before leaving, the man in the white coat gave each attendee a small purple glass flower.

“Purple flowers are ominous here; we don't need them!” Most people refused the small gift, but the man accepted it, remembering the mysterious smile on the white coat's face.

“Call me Mor, sir. Thank you for understanding. I hope this brings you luck and that you'll never truly need it.” The man in the white coat shook hands with him, smiling as he left.

“Hmph, a charlatan, but at least it can be exchanged for money,” the man thought,

placing the glass flower on the windowsill and forgetting about it...

The man snapped back to reality, finding his worried wife shaking his shoulder. She thought he was possessed, tearfully calling his name, urging him to discard the “ominous thing”. The man reassured her, holding the half purple glass flower, insisting on leaving the house alone.

Following his memory, he went to the square, searching the grass. Soon, he found the other half of the purple light—a half glass flower. He picked up the half flower petal, trying to piece it with the one in his hand. As he did, the crack vanished. His heart pounded, tightly holding the complete purple glass flower, as if it were the key to the dream's mystery. A voice behind him made him turn abruptly. The man in the white coat stood there, smiling at him.

“Greetings, sir.”



IV To Be, Or Not to Be

“Mor...” the man murmured, as memory fragments quickly pieced together a complete picture. He recalled the lecture, Mor's mysterious smile, and the origin of the glass flower in his hand.

“Yes, I am Mor.” The man in the white coat nodded, approaching him. “Wise sir, I believe you've realized where you are.”

“This is a dream... a looping dream,” the man's voice trembled, filled with confusion and a glimmer of hope. “Can you help me? Save my family.”

Mor let out a slight chuckle, reaching out to touch the glass flower in the man's hand. Instantly, the surroundings shattered like a broken mirror, dissolving into an endless void, leaving only the two of them floating in the blankness.

“Welcome to the ‘Veluriya Dream’ project.” Mor smiled slightly, the man now holding a card with “X Research Institute, Researcher Mor” printed on it. “Originally, this project was to help people experience wishes unattainable in reality through lucid dreaming. But in post-war times, the technology was used to heal mental trauma, yet an error occurred in your dream, leading to this endless cycle of tragedy.”

“So, my family...”

“I'm sorry, but they no longer exist in reality,” Mor's voice seemed devoid

of emotion, “but in this dream, you still have two choices. Either terminate the dream immediately and return to reality, ensuring the dream doesn’t cause a severe physical demise, or continue trying to find a glimmer of hope in the repeating tragedy, leading your family out of the loop—” Mor paused, observing the man’s reaction, then continued,

“But I must warn you, repeated dream cycles might alter your mental state, eventually blurring the line between dream and reality. Especially since each cycle ends in ‘death,’ meaning you might truly die in what you believe is a dream or fall into a permanent coma, becoming a vegetable. Even if you succeed in saving your family in the dream, they won’t return in reality.”

The man closed his eyes, remembering the smiles lost in the “falling stars,” his wife’s tenderness, and his child’s laughter. He knew, even if only in a dream, he couldn’t give up.

“I choose to continue.” The man opened his eyes, clenching his fist. “In reality, I lost my homeland, my wealth, and most importantly, my family. But at least here, I have a chance to reclaim them—even if they’re not real.”

Mor’s serious expression softened slightly, contemplating before speaking slowly, “Very well. Since this is your choice, I have no reason to interfere. You remember this flower in your hand,

right? It’s what I mentioned, hoping you’d never truly need it.”

“I remember... I just remembered.”

“In fact, it’s a specially crafted token, designed to store specific memories,” Mor explained. “Now, sir, it’s allowed you to recall the clues you need. Take this glass flower and face the brilliance of Morpheus.”

As he spoke, the glass flower in the man’s hand began to emit a purple glow, and a message entered his mind:

The brilliance of Morpheus shines on every inch of the dreamland,

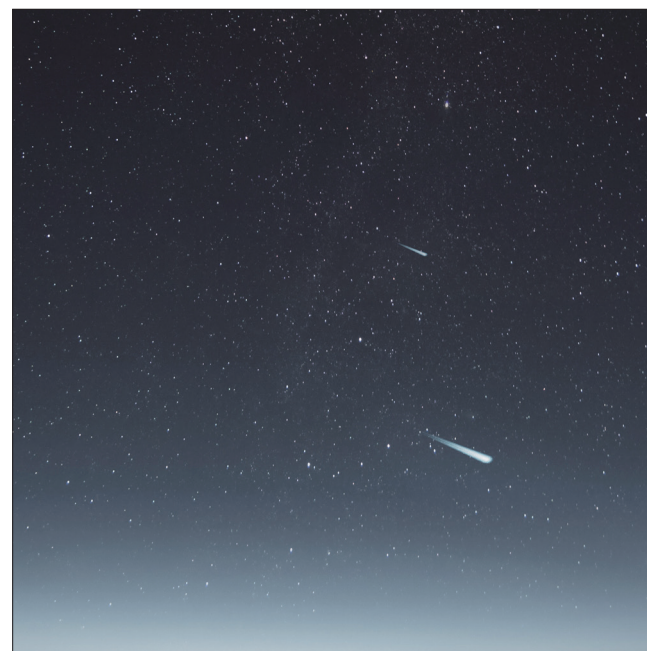
but even so,

there are always masked fools unwilling to face the dream.

For these fools,

our god offers wise forgiveness.

When the man regained his senses, the pure white had vanished, and Mor was nowhere to be found.



V The First Try

The seventh day arrived as expected. The man stayed up all night, waking everyone at dawn.

“We’re going to a safe place.” he told his child, trying to conceal the tremor in his voice. “It’s an adventure; the cellar is the entrance to another world.”

The child, excited, asked, “Really, Dad? Are we really going to another world?”

He forced a smile. “Yes, my dear, this will be a special adventure.”

“If you’re just talking nonsense, we’re going back to bed.” his wife said, displeased.

“Please trust me, it’s for ‘salvation.’” he whispered, nearly despairing. “Dear, I can only tell you we’ll be in danger unless you do as I say...”

She looked at him, a mix of confusion and concern in her eyes. “Dear, you’ve been... different these days, like you’re under a spell. You... must be going through something, but I... I still choose to believe you.” She answered softly, holding his hand gently. “Whatever this ‘dream’ means, I’ll walk through it with you.”

When she instinctively uttered “dream”, both she and the man were momentarily stunned. “Why did I call it a ‘dream...’” She murmured.

“There’s no time, follow me.” The eastern sky was already whitening; the man knew the destined moment was near.

The “falling stars” arrived as expected,

the violent tremors loosening the cellar’s bricks. The man shielded his family with his broad body, anxiously waiting for it to end.

Soon, the tremors ceased. He opened the cellar door—his wife and child were merely stunned by the sudden disaster, much to his relief.

He knew he had deciphered the cryptic message. “Fools” unwilling to face the dream were granted “forgiveness” by the god. He just needed to “trick” the dream into thinking they had died according to the script, and the dream would spare them. He carried his wife and child back home, and indeed, no second wave of “falling stars” came.

Soon, his son struggled to open his eyes, looking at the man and saying,

“Dad... Where am I... What time is it now...”

“Dear, you’re home.” the man said excitedly, glancing at the wall clock. Instantly, his pupils trembled.

He approached the clock, its fully wound hands now motionless.

“This... This is...”

“Dad, look at the sky, ‘falling stars...’”

Fear and anger spread in his heart. “That white coat motherfucker...! You lied to me!” Yet shouting was futile. What awaited him was the accelerated passage of time and the fireballs consuming his last hope.

VI To End the Loop of Endless Lucid Dreams

When the next cycle began, the man held the glass flower, finding Mor standing in the square with his back to him.

“You bastard! How dare you toy with my trust and emotions, using my family’s lives as stakes?!” the man demanded loudly.

“Sir, I didn’t deceive you. The brilliance of the dream equally envelops everything,” Mor replied calmly. “You just haven’t found the right method.”

“The right method? Do you mean solving your damn riddle?”

“Exactly, sir. But the answer must be found by the dream’s owner—you. As dream observers, my colleagues and I can only observe externally through our technology, accumulating experience after each cycle, translating suitable brainwaves into textual hints, because I don’t know the answer either.” Mor paused, “But sir, this time the hint seems more concise, or rather, direct.”

With that, the glass flower in the man’s hand glowed again, and a message entered his mind:

“The fool is guilty; only through sacrifice can redemption be achieved.”

...

On the seventh day, as the “falling stars” descended once more, the man had made up his mind. Before the “falling stars” arrived, he convinced his family to hide in the cellar,

ensuring they would at least survive the first wave.

Dragging his wife and child out of the cellar, he found himself inexplicably injured. Blood gushed from his mouth, spilling beside his wife, making it appear as if she was gravely injured. Suddenly, he understood Mor’s cryptic message: “Only through sacrifice can redemption be achieved.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the man decisively cut open his own abdomen, blood pouring out to create the illusion that his family had met a tragic end. He knew this was the only way to deceive the dream’s rules.

Soon, the time for the second “falling stars” arrived, but nothing happened. The man laughed towards the sky, his laughter mixed with relief and sorrow. However, as he lost too much blood, his consciousness began to blur, and he eventually passed out.

When he awoke, his wife and child surrounded him, their faces filled with tears and joy. He felt himself being lifted onto a bed, the warmth bringing him comfort.

In a state between dream and reality, he seemed to enter another dream. He saw the open city gate, and beside it, an unnamed grave. Gradually, his family appeared beside him. Hand in hand, they entered the gate with tears in their eyes.

VII Final Chapter

By the city wall, the rumble of artillery still echoed nearby. The capital city’s most resilient shield, using its aging body, was protecting the kingdom’s last dignity.

On the streets filled with war refugees, a man lay on a makeshift bed. Wrapped in white cloth, he had just been declared dead, to be taken to the unnamed grave by the city wall. In his hand, people found a tightly held exquisite glass flower ornament and a note. The glass had a deep crack but still emitted a faint glow, contrasting with the man’s slightly upturned lips, as if forever asleep in a happy dream.

On the small note were neatly written lines:

*The glass object, I once thought, was a token
of lucid dreaming therapy, a messenger of
healing the soul,*

*but for you, it became a haven beyond this
world, a glimmer of light at the end,*

*you are a brave one—in both dream and
reality,*

*I am honored to witness your conclusion, to
witness the deeper meaning of the dream.*

Yours sincerely,

Mor

Afterword:

1. The title “Veluriya” is derived from the Sanskrit “वैदूर्य”, meaning artful glass products or lapis lazuli (a gemstone). It symbolizes clarity and purity, which is why I used it as the name for the device in the man’s hand that records memories.

2. The “Temiar Senoi technique” mentioned in Part III has a real-world prototype. It is a psychological therapy that uses lucid dreaming for treatment. Historically, American psychologist Dr. Kilton Stewart and his associate Pat Noone discovered this technique while exploring the Temiar Senoi tribe on the Malay Peninsula. They found that the indigenous people, who were then considered uncivilized, had a technique to induce lucid dreams. Dr. Stewart published this discovery in 1935. He described that the tribe’s dreamers felt “happy and free from disease” while lucid dreaming. The Temiar Senoi tribe’s lucid dreaming technique was later applied in psychological therapy, known as the “Temiar Senoi Technique”.

3. Mor’s name is derived from Morpheus, the god of dreams in Greek mythology. He could take the form of different people in dreams.

The Wind Brought a Reverie

Enming Zhang

37

She had departed.

I stood there motionless as the gentle breeze swept in from behind, tousling my hair and flowing towards the distant horizon. The zephyr carried away the floating dust, her fleeting shadow, and also wiped away the tears that streamed down my cheeks. Countless memories of the past flashed through my mind like a revolving lantern, akin to a reel of film, each frame stirring my emotions and making it extremely difficult for me to regain my composure. However, reality bound me here, rendering me utterly incapable of movement. Every time I awoke from sleep, my pillow would be soaked through with tears.

“Good morning, Professor!”

“Morning?” I hesitated for a moment, noticing that my attire had undergone a complete transformation. I proceeded along the predetermined path and arrived at a spotlessly clean and orderly laboratory.

A group of individuals clad in lab coats surrounded the exterior of the transparent glass experimental chamber. The progress indicator of the adjacent instrument was steadily rising: eighty percent, ninety, one hundred.

Inside the chamber, the environment was undergoing a rapid transformation, as if innumerable fragments were undergoing a process of recombination. An elderly person sat leisurely at the bedside, gently waving a palm-leaf fan, lost in contemplation.

“Grandma! Look who’s back!” The figure of a young man emerged in the scene, and everything felt eerily familiar.

“Oh, my dear grandson, why didn’t you inform me of your arrival!”

“What, you don’t welcome me?”

“Of course I do! You are always welcome here!” She shuffled in her slippers, picked up an apple, put on her glasses, and sat on the sofa to peel it.

At that instant, a sense of unease welled up within me. “Isn’t this my memory? How could I be present here so vividly at that time?” I pondered inwardly.

“Oh, I don’t want to eat the apple. Isn’t it tiring to peel it!” I slumped onto the nearby rattan chair and picked up my phone to scroll through it casually.



38

"You see, I've told you numerous times, but you never listen to me. Fruits are beneficial for your health. You don't eat vegetables, and now you refuse to eat fruits either. Even if you don't like it, you must still eat it. Besides, this is an Aksu apple sent by my classmate from Xinjiang, and I was rather reluctant to eat it myself!"

"Oh," I replied perfunctorily, my mind completely engrossed by the content on my phone.

"You are always fixated on that phone. Sooner or later, it will damage your eyesight. Moreover, sitting for long periods is not good for you. Have you been practicing the Baduanjin exercise that I showed you previously?"

"Who has the time for that." I muttered under my breath.

"Come here, come here. I learned a finger meridian exercise a few days ago, and I shall teach it to you now." She placed the peeled apple on a plate and forcefully dragged me to the sofa. She fumbled clumsily on the screen of her phone, and finally retrieved an image of a meridian chart from her favorites. She adjusted her glasses, scrutinized them for a long while, and then grasped my hand.

"Pay close attention, this is quite simple and can be done before going to bed. You see, locate the second knuckle here, and press on the intersection of this and this meridian point—"

"Ah! It hurts so much! You're going to break my finger!"

"It's supposed to hurt! Pain indicates that your stomach is cold. I do this every night before going to bed, and I feel refreshed and energetic every day."

"Alright, alright, you can continue."

I have no idea how much time had passed before she finally finished teaching me the intricate meridian chart. But I was well aware that I hadn't retained a single bit of it. I stretched my limbs, walked to the balcony, and gazed at the bustling traffic below, while behind me, the sound of her munching on the apple could be heard. I couldn't help but move closer to the glass barrier, and suddenly, a familiar song from my memories filled the air.

"The wind rises,
It's time to return,
Look, look,
All the past is right here,
This vast world, is it dazzling?
But me, but me...
I can no longer find you..."

I swiftly retreated and turned towards the entrance of the experimental chamber. I had no other desire but to catch another glimpse of her. I burst open the door and couldn't restrain myself from shouting: "Grandma!"

The figures within the scene turned their heads upon hearing my voice, but their eyes had turned vacant, and the surrounding environment began to destabilize. The people outside the chamber grew restless. "The program is overloaded! Hurry, it's going to crash!"

The scene shattered like a jigsaw puzzle, with the figures inside rapidly fading away. I hastily moved forward, desperately attempting to seize this fleeting opportunity. However, it was all too late... I couldn't even grasp a single speck of dust, and the surroundings grew dim as if I had plunged into an endless abyss.

When I opened my eyes once again, I suddenly realized that I had been transported to another time and space. I was seated on a chair, looking around at a small room with neat decor, seemingly a single-person office. In front of me, there was only a display screen, within which was a dialog box, and a yet-to-be-sent message: "Grandma, actually, I miss you quite a lot." I had no time to bother about anything else; I just wanted to ascertain exactly where I was.

I rose to my feet, quietly walked to the door, and cautiously opened it to peek outside. There was a lengthy corridor, illuminated brightly by a stark white light, with small rooms arranged neatly on both sides, extending infinitely into the distance. It was not quiet here, as the constant background noise of typing and faint conversation filled the air, yet there was no one walking in the corridor. Thus, I stealthily made my way towards the front end of the corridor. However, after walking for a long time, I still couldn't find an exit. Summoning my courage, I knocked on a nearby door, but there was no response.

"Hello, is anyone there?"

I knocked again, but still, there was no answer. I leaned my ear against the door and seemed to hear two people conversing inside. Although I knew it was impolite, I mustered up the courage to push open the door. Inside, I saw a person concentrating on their work. So, I stammered: "Uh—well—where is the exit here?" There was no reply, so I cleared my throat and spoke more loudly: "Hello, I would like to ask where the exit is located?" I couldn't care less about anything else at that moment and boldly walked inside, wanting to see exactly what this person was doing.

Wait, this seemed not to be a person, but rather a robot, yet it was conversing with the person on the screen extremely realistically. I was completely baffled. Could it be that every room was filled with robots? In a flustered state, I opened several nearby rooms, and they were all identical, filled with robots! Amidst this chaos, the familiar song suddenly rang out again.

"The wind rises,
It's time to return,
Look, look,
All the past is right here,
This vast world, is it dazzling?
But me, but me...
I can no longer find you..."

I followed the sound and arrived at the door of a room, where the song grew even clearer.

"My dear grandson, I will always be with you! Whenever you need me, I will always be here for you." The robotic voice came from inside.

I seemed to understand something. These robots were like programs, simulating the people we held dear in our hearts. An echo reverberated in my mind: "Should it really be like this? Facing just a machine?"

"No, it shouldn't." I firmly held this belief.

"When someone dies, they are gone!" I burst through the door, strode forward, and declared: "It's all just an illusion!" I struck the robot with a punch, but it automatically righted itself, and its blood-red eyes fixed on me. I grabbed whatever object was at hand and began smashing it without hesitation, yet with a sense of determination. I went berserk in destroying it until the red light went out. However, within a few seconds, accompanied by a deafening rumble, the floor began to shake. Then, a dense swarm of robots poured into the narrow doorway. I was stunned, powerless to resist, and could only allow myself to be engulfed by them. Cries, screams, sorrow, fear, agony...

When I woke up again, I found myself on a bustling street. It was a level of prosperity beyond my imagination—silver skyscrapers shimmered faintly in the mist, like reflections of the stars. The streets were silent and spotless, and driverless cars glided by like shooting stars. Pedestrians seemed to be in a painting, their steps and rhythms gently guided by an invisible intelligent system. The air was so clear, as if it had been washed by the morning dew, and the floating greenery swayed gently in the breeze, as if whispering.

I wandered aimlessly on the street and noticed that some people were staring intently at the images in front of them, wearing expressions of contentment. I became interested in them and, since there seemed to be no practical activity going on, I decided to ask them what they were doing, but there was no response. They were simply staring at the images in front of them, seemingly engaged in conversation, completely oblivious to their surroundings. Driven by curiosity and a sense of mystery, I continued to move forward to explore further. Upon closer observation, it wasn't difficult to notice that they all came from the same place—a peculiar store. The exterior of the store was difficult to describe, somewhat resembling the shape of a brain. Following a group of people inside, my eyes were immediately drawn to a massive digital billboard in the center of the lobby, repeatedly playing an advertisement:

"Let memory transcend time. Through technology, we reshape eternity. We transfer the memories of the departed into the digital world, giving them a 'new life' through precise processes. Whether it's love, friendship, or the most precious memories, they will accompany you in a new way, ensuring that love never fades and life continues."

"No... this can't be real!"

At that moment, I had only one goal in my mind—to quickly escape from this absurd world. I frantically rushed out of the store and ran with all my might. Running, running...

Panting heavily, I suddenly jolted awake in bed, my hands clutching the soft and familiar quilt.

The next day, at the memorial service, the breeze gently caressed my face. I didn't shed a tear.

Christmas Special

Letitia Zhang

“Have you already taken that pill?” When Lisa’s face suddenly appears on the holographic projection in front of me, I am lying in bed, bored, browsing one short video after another. Her newly loaded blonde hair is so dazzlingly snapped and gleamed that I have to shake my head in order to focus on her face—maybe that is why she thinks I am stoned.

“What do you think?” I wave my hand to switch her face to a smaller screen and continue watching the video of the electronic cat and dog fighting.

“Well...” She frowns as she listens to the crappy background music and artificial laughs coming from my side, “It seems like you haven’t yet. How long have you been in bed? Sure you don’t want to come down for a walk?”

I roll out of bed and stagger to the table, with the screen kept at a distance of 30 centimeters away from my face. I can tell Lisa is becoming suspicious again, so I have to force myself to stop swiping and struggle to speak: “You know, I just finished an assessment assignment.” I feel a hidden sense of panic creeping in, as a wave following the pause of the video.

“Old habits, huh?” She blinks in sympathy, “But there’s nothing to be done for you. This year’s medication was supplied in line with holiday seasons. You knew that, right?”

“I thought after a hundred years, we would have evolved past the need for festivals, which are rooted in a three-dimensional concept of time.”

“Very funny. But capital always exists, doesn’t it? Printing holiday specials on product packaging as a selling point is a really old and entrenched marketing tactic. Humans will always go crazy and snap up ...”

My mind empties as I stare at her mouth opening and closing. Some red and green light globes gradually surface and flicker on top of her layers. It’s Christmas again.





The last time I saw lights like this hanging on a REAL Christmas tree was in the southern hemisphere. The temperature was unbearably high. An air vehicle slowly cut the sky into two glassy, burning pieces with its contrail. The tree sat on the edge of a lake, becoming the only conspicuous spot amidst the endless blue. In the morning, the lake was blank and motionless, occupying a space of substandard oval. Only the strong summer winds scratched indentations in the surface of the lake, deep and shallow. And once the sunlight slanted, the dense forest surrounding it would cast a shadow, making the lake appear turquoise and deep. A white waterfowl was at this time about to land, wing tips sweeping over the rippling water. The moon always rose early. It hung translucently above the Star of Bethlehem, still illuminated by the afterglow. As night fell, the Christmas tree lit up with twinkling ribbons; people gathered, standing in a circle around the tree. The mistletoe branched over the heads of every pair of lovers.

“If you ask me, mankind should stop commodity transactions completely. Anyway, people don’t care about their little money anymore, don’t you think?”

It takes me ages to distinguish Lisa’s question from the burning Christmas illusions.

“Yes, but people have to get what they need.”

“Like what?” She retorts, “Shelters, food, Christmas trees, or those special drugs of yours?”

“You know, we are not used to taking these terms as parallel options, just as you cannot rank computers and AI together, even though they are actually, I mean in origin, one and the same thing.”

“That analogy sucks.”

“Thank you. But anyway, we need the material support. Before the drugs, there were tobacco and alcohol.”

“Speaking of alcohol, have you ever been to even one bar in your whole life?”

She is trying to attack my personal life, but yes, I have been to one. On Christmas Eve.

My friends and I would go to a bar in a basement to listen to jazz. During the day, it was an antique store. We sat surrounded by countless porcelain tableware, Angel sculptures, and paintings. In the obscurity of the candlelight, it was as if we were being gazed at by a thousand eyes from distant times and places. My friend would joke that the store must have profited the most from drunks breaking those expensive items. The lady playing keyboards in the middle of the band had been wearing a pair of big thick-framed sunglasses, and I wondered how she could see her keyboards in the dim light. At the end of the show, she walked off the stage, while another person helped her pack up the instrument. “She’s blind.” A friend sitting closer to her told me. There was a silence. But we at last began to laugh and talk. I winced while sipping the martini I ordered. But soon the ice melted to dissipate the initial bitterness and allowed me to completely settle the last few sips in my glass. The Christmas tree in the corner was the brightest source of light in the entire basement; it twinkled unreservedly, dropping sheens of stars in the eyes of tipsy people. We did not call a cab until the wee hours, our faces flushed, and stomachs filled with warm drinks.

“Hello? Are you watching those stupid videos again? Why don’t I hear anything?”

Lisa snaps her projected finger in front of me. I can’t respond this time. The alcohol from that martini so many years ago is weighing down and blurring my sanity, slowly and deeply.

Merry Christmas. It was me again, from before, before the “before”, back when I was even not old enough to get into the bar. I was standing in a classroom talking about how Christmas evolved into Xmas. People looked at me down the podium, but they had no faces. All I could do was stare at the blackboard at the end of the classroom. The chairs and tables were neat, the colored chalk lines fading and coming back to life again. I heard myself saying, “This evolution is about moving away from a single religious belief...”

To make everyone enjoy this grand festival.

“Are you talking about Christmas? I thought you were already over this ritualistic sense.” Lisa’s shrill voice brings me back to reality slightly. My headaches are violent, and I want to be left alone.

“I mean the NEW YEAR. If you are a human, you have to celebrate it. Ding-dong! Adding one to a four-digit year is enough to warrant a big meal and pernoctation for the entire humanities!”

Lisa notices my frustration, but she does not understand why. She finally asks: “How about the results of your assessment?”

“Not bad. Fifty more years to go, I guess.”

“Good.” She hesitates, “I just wish I could still see you in a short time...”

“Also, don’t take too many pills. I am always skeptical of products from those bio-companies.”

“Hey, be positive. After all, you’re also one of their products.” I reply drowsily.

Those tables and chairs became shorter and smaller before me. An assortment of stuffed balls, plastic ribbons, and acrylic paints spilled all over the place. A lady was holding my hand and helped me to use the materials dressing up a pinecone as a mini-Christmas tree. The white latex was clumsily applied to every corner of the table, and my hands quickly became sticky and covered with black dust from constant touching. Kindergarten.

“Today’s Christmas, Lisa. Let’s go out and get a drink.”

My hands became clumsier, somehow holding a pair of disposable chopsticks. Bright red apples were floating in a large plastic bowl full of water. Cheers rang out, and the kid next to me was trying to pick up the apples with chopsticks. I realized he was my competitor in this contest to see who could use chopsticks the best. The water he stirred up splashed right into my face. I tried to wipe the water off my eyes, but I could never manage to get it all.

I was weeping.

The urging of the adults and children grew louder and louder; the uproar was deafening. Someone was shouting at me: “Listen, kid, stop crying right now! We’re celebrating Christmas! You have to pick up that apple for me anyhow!”

Lisa’s voice comes indistinctly from behind the crowd. She bids me farewell, not caring in the slightest about the invitation for a drink.

I controlled my disobedient hand to hold that apple. Again and again, it slipped between the two wooden sticks and flopped back into the water. My opponent succeeded, and the celebration exploded with tiny, curling ribbons that spread out and landed all over my clothes, my hair, and my eyelashes. The apple was even brighter, rippling in all the colors, like the one mentioned by the lying serpent centuries ago. I gazed at the tantalizing shimmer it glows and reached it directly with my hands.

I took a big bite.

The water clinging to the rind, the sweet and sour juice, and my tears all mixed together and dripped down simultaneously.

All the noise stops. Darkness returns to the surroundings.

I lie down heavily on the bed.

No apples, no ribbons, no blackboards. Christmas trees were cut down, lakes evaporated in the heat. I doubt whether there is enough extra water out there to make a single martini.

Beside the pillow, a small pill bottle wrapped in gift paper stands out amongst a pile of psychotropic medications. The wrapping reads, “Redemption for Immortal Men: takes you back to the important moments of the past—Christmas Special.”

The bottle is already empty.



The Apocalypse of Puella

Leo Niu

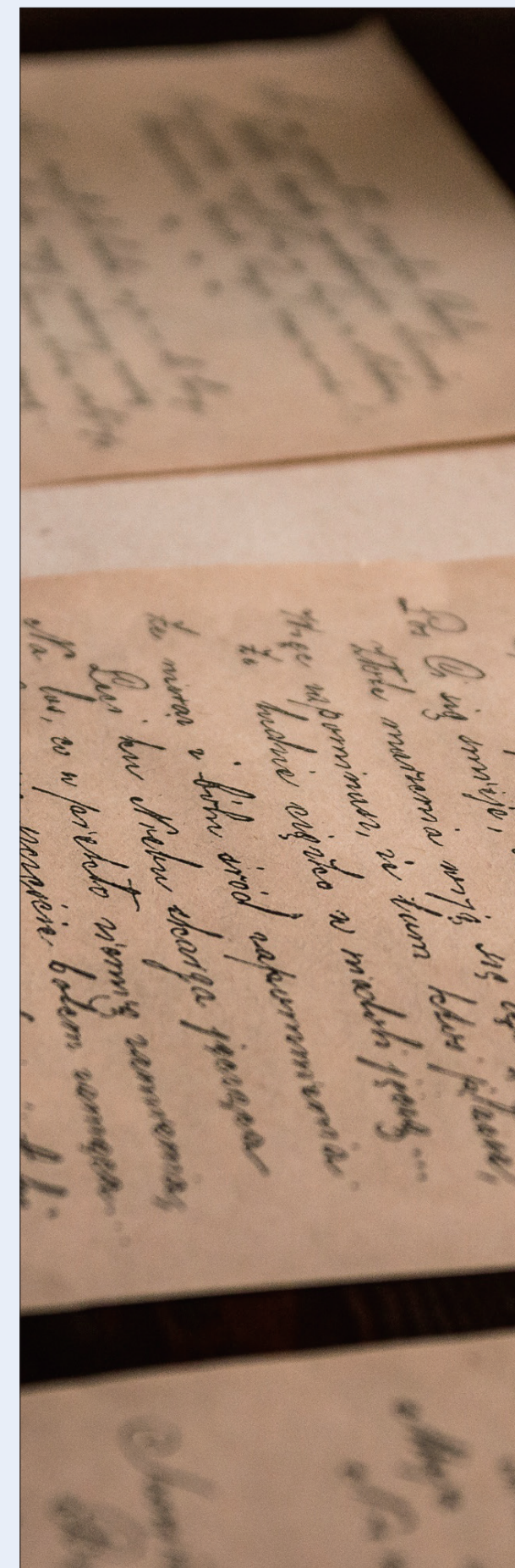
Chapter 1

Rummaging through old stuff, the slightly faded red seal captivates my gaze. I recognized whose envelope it was right away—familiar beyond measure.

As I unfolded the envelope, a letter adorned with somewhat crooked handwriting, lays bare before me. “Dear Puella...”, the opening words were filled with fervor. Yet, more crucial are his sketchy draft papers within the envelope. In just a few years, leveraging his genius-like talent and unwavering efforts, he had made astonishing progress in art. Even the entire school could’t help but marvel—who would have thought, the little boy who once inhabited the secluded corners of the orphanage’s reading room, tormented by the demons of autism.

Inevitably, memories flood back, weaving a story of his personal growth and the “revelation” I handed to him. Thus, I want to, more audaciously, term this story “Apocalypse” instead of a normal memoir.

He—Clamor, a fellow child who grew up in the same orphanage as I did, though by the time he arrived, I had long departed. Abandoned due to a congenital ailment, he was rescued by the responsible old matron, Jones, who raised me, depleting nearly all her savings to pave the way for my department



from the orphanage, revealing a broader world. However, shortly after Clamor's arrival, she passed away.

Unfortunately, the new matron and her son were irresponsible and cruel, seemingly opportunistic individuals. They made fake credentials, exploiting the orphanage for a government stipend, oblivious to the well-being of the children.

You see, educated as I was, I harbored a desire to return to the orphanage someday, to repay the old matron and the orphanage. However, upon my return, everything had changed. Walking through the corridors where the old matron nurtured the seedlings with care, all I found were thick layers of dust and withered plants. Turning a corner, I discovered the demon—Joe, a brutish figure with a gang of children, tormenting a slender figure. Hands bound, receiving lashes from a belt, the victim stood powerless amid the absurdity of cheering.

Admittedly, even recalling those times now sends shivers down my spine. However, my body reacted before my mind, perhaps out of a desire not to witness the place where I spent my childhood defiled by this group. I stood resolutely, interposing between the demon and the fragile figure, sparking a heated confrontation, eventually drawing the attention of the new matron, who promptly removed the demon in front of outsiders.

Later, I learned Joe was the son of the new matron. In the orphanage, he wreaked havoc, garnering a group of followers, including not only children in the orphanage but also dangerous thugs nearby. It was said that he controlled most of the orphanage's supplies, benefiting those who aligned with him.

Turning back to the young boy, after saving him, I became the sole person he could converse with. Frequently found in the reading room, he perused books and sketch collections I had once explored, unveiling some of artworks created by himself. He confided in me, expressing his love for drawing and emulating works from those collections. In our interactions, I saw echoes of my past—a soul yearning for liberation but lacking the courage.

Hence, I began narrating stories of the outside world, urging him to step out like Jones encouraging me back then. Excitedly, he desired to use his brush to reveal more corners of the world. At that time, I thought I had a revelation, or a complete protection for him from the bullies of evils, because everything was going well after all, until that fateful day came.

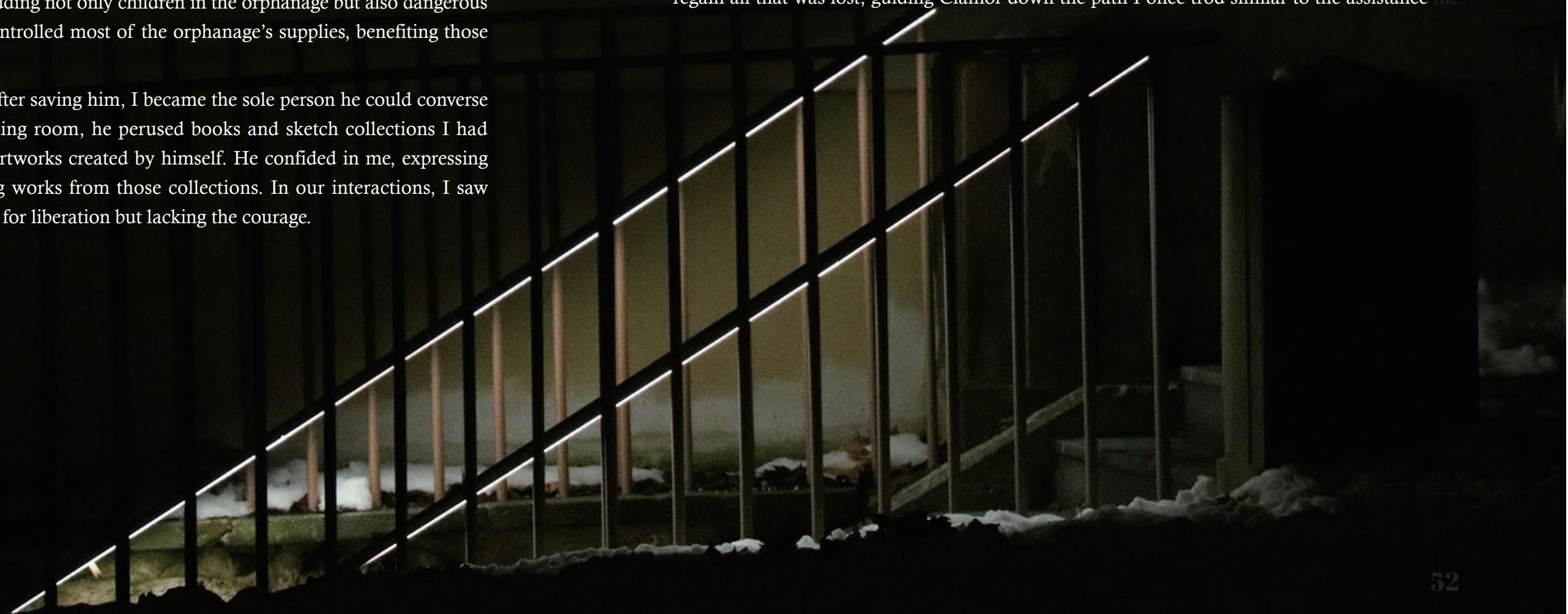
On a day when I went out to procure supplies for the orphanage, and to my surprise, Clamor faced Joe's frenzied retaliation alone in the reading room. Books he cherished were torn apart, and his usual artworks used to be stuffed in his mouth to try to make him suffocate—that was the distressing sight upon my return.

Swiftly, I transported him to the nearest hospital. After treatment, Clamor woke, his eyes reflecting fear and numbness. He was mute, without saying one single word, which seemed a symptom of autism. Faced with the paper and pen I offered, he wrote a line, twisted and contorted:

"I will never draw again."

At that moment, I chose silence over words, standing as a silent sentinel beside the fragile soul, as if time had rewound to the beginning.

Contemplating the challenge of reviving Clamor's soul, I pondered his future. Returning to the orphanage was not the solution; I aimed to provide him a new environment, nurturing his growth through superior education and a sunlit atmosphere. My intention was to help him regain all that was lost, guiding Clamor down the path I once trod similar to the assistance the



old matron offered me, seeking education beyond the orphanage.

Chapter2

The Brush, Dream, and His Future

Sitting by Clamor's bed, the silence was full of the room, with tears flowing down upon the little boy's face. His eyes seemed not to focus on anything but just stared blankly. I decided to break the agonic silence:

"Dear Clamor, it's okay, don't cry. Come on, wipe away those tears, and listen to what I say."

It works? I thought, wiping his tears by my handkerchief. I could not see any emotion on his face. What I could do was just to continue:

"Do you know? I, too, was a child in this orphanage, back when the previous matron managed the daily affairs.

"The old matron, Jones—I don't know whether you know her or not—was a kind and responsible matron unlike the one now. She took care of everything in our daily lives, and we loved her as much as she loved us.

"Later, because I loved reading in the library in the orphanage, Jones added many books to it for me and the other children to read—so, you see, I am truly grateful that these books still have an impact today for you."

As I uttered the words "library", I saw Clamor's hands gripping the sheet for an instant, and the corners of his mouth twitched inadvertently. I was worried for a moment—

for this boy, these books had been with him, both as a balm to his soul and as a source of great suffering. Thus I slowed down, trying my best not to touch his wounds, and gently continued my monologue.



"Do you know? In those books, I saw a larger world. There were vast lakes filled with saltwater, mountains that spewed fire, and vast stretches of snow that seemed endless—If you've seen those art collections, you'd

surely be attracted as well. So, I longed to go out and see it in person. Everything outside was so enticing, so attractive, but I lacked the courage. I was always a timid child, never taking a single step outside the orphanage.

know why she chose me, but she did invest almost her entire life savings in me, allowing me to go to school and receive a better education.

"It was because of this opportunity that I had the chance to see the outside world—it was dazzling, beyond the grasp of any single painting; it was real, beyond the description of any novel."

Gradually, I saw Clamor stop sobbing. Emotion and expression slowly flew back to his face and eyes. I picked up the handkerchief again and helped Clamor wipe away the tears. I saw Clamor's face was still blank with silence, but thoughtful. Thus, I decided to keep talking, pushing the little boy forward like my old matron pushing me at that time.

"Now, back to you—dear Clamor, did you know? When I saw you, I felt that you were like the me of the past. I may not have experienced as many hardships as you from a young age, but I, too, was the most introverted and timid child in the orphanage. But I received help—just like the old matron did for me. Now, I want you to see the world with your own eyes.

"I won't force you; this is just a suggestion from someone from the past. I won't force you to pick up the brush again—these are all your choices.

"Now, what you need to do is rest in the hospital, heal, and think about your 'future' if you can. Take care of yourself, and I will leave this choice to you. If you have an answer, I hope you can tell me."

After saying that, I laid the boy's bed flat

We all harbor the most primal fear of the unknown—that's the excuse I found at that time.

"In the end, it was the old matron Jones who gave me a push from behind. I don't



and let him continue resting.

“I’ll never draw again.”

Before leaving, I took this note with me. The paper was crumpled and damp in my hands. I realized it was like a heavy farewell, but I didn’t want him to end his hobbies like this.

The next day, I visited him at the hospital again. He seemed not to be awake, but judging from the breakfast leftovers on the plate beside the bed, he had probably eaten and fallen asleep again.

Under those plates, I found a folded note, with messy handwriting on the upper half:

“Though I am still scared and confused, books I’ve read say, ‘Life is about moving forward in confusion.’ I don’t know what the so-called ‘future’ is, but I still did this.”

I unfolded the next page, revealing a portrait of him and me having breakfast, with a background of the sea, volcano, snowfield, and several places appearing in the art collection I described to him yesterday. Though it was just a sketch, unsurprisingly, I couldn’t see any hesitation or chaos in his lines; the entire sketch looked more like a natural piece of art, and full of his strong determination.

After being discharged, I didn’t send him back to the orphanage; instead, I sent him to a school in the city and into the house I used to live in. I advised my kind old landlord that he was a good kid, maybe a bit introverted, but I also promised them that his nature was not bad.

School. I told him that here, he would receive a better education, learn more, and make more friends. I also encouraged him to face the challenges of the future bravely, not to be

haunted by the shadows of the past.

When we parted, he gently hugged me, and in that moment, I felt the gratitude and attachment he held in his heart.

As time passed, I didn’t meet Clamor again, but I heard he became much more cheerful and confident, participating in many extracurricular activities and making many new friends. Sometimes, I would still receive letters from him, telling me about his life at school, sharing his growth and insights.

One afternoon, I received a package. Inside was a sketchbook containing a series of paintings created by Clamor. Attached to the back of the sketchbook was a handwritten thank-you note that read:

“Thank you for giving me a chance to start over. When I needed help the most, you appeared in my life, bringing me hope and courage. Without you, I might have lived forever in the shadows of the past, unable to find my way. Now, I can say, I’ve stepped out, and I’m no longer afraid of the unknown world because I know I have the power to make my own choices and decisions. I will continue to draw, continue to pursue my dreams. Thank you again for your help and support.”

After reading this, I knew that on his journey forward, he would encounter more challenges and opportunities and create more miracles. Although he didn’t know what is the “future” like, he stepped forward. I will continue to pay attention to his growth, wishing him all the best in his future days, and the realization of his dreams.

