

N

*We all confront many challenges throughout our lives. Sometimes we face the complexity of our own hearts, sometimes we face difficult relationships with others, and sometimes we face the many contradictions in the world.*

O

*In the process of examining our inner world and pursuing growth and opportunities for finding a way to breakthrough, we may feel despair and frustration. This is the case with the protagonist in Gao Tanyi's story, "The Blind Boy." In the face of mounting pressure we may struggle with our fears like the skier in Xu Mingxun's "On the Edge of the Snow," or we may drop into the abyss and suffer from mental disease like the girl who witnessed her mother's death in Shu Tong's "My Dearest One." However, as long as we put aside the distractions and listen to the sincere voices of our hearts, we will eventually restore the light, regain our dreams and revive our new lives.*

T

*In the journey of getting along with people and building a bond with them, if we are unfortunately hurt by our loved ones, we may release our resentments and open our hearts to new kindness. If we are in distress, why not try to boldly confide our troubles, and maybe we will find a new way of thinking as Liu Yu's and Shu's speakers do.*

U

*While we face the broader world, we may be young women who have struggled to gain a foothold in the workplace, as in Wang Jingyu's "Different Mirrors," or we may be people living in loneliness, as the grandmother in Guo Ruijie's "Budda Beads." We may also just be ordinary people like the detective in Zhuoli Gao's "Theft in a Tech Company," Dexter in Chen Yutong's "Winter Gone," or the speakers in Yao Yi's posts and emails and Zhong Yueqing's reflective narrator.*

I

F

*As tiny individuals, although we cannot change the whole world, we can still fight the darkness and break through the shackles of circumstance, with our small but ultimately immeasurable power.*





# Buddha Beads

Jerry Guo



I missed my grandpa's funeral because I couldn't get back in time. My boss gave me a week to settle things down, but by the time I got off the plane he was already cremated, and all the rituals and ceremonies that I should have attended were finished. So I visited him in the graveyard and spent some time with mom. Then I went to the hospital to help out my dad with tedious, but necessary, procedures. It took me two days to get the death certificate right. Yesterday I finally got some time to sit down with some friends from college and we drank some beer. Before I went back, I figured that I should at least pay Grandma a visit.

It was a typical afternoon in July. Hot and humid. The air felt like glue, and the asphalt road was annoyingly sticky, smelling of burning garbage and plastic. I was still hanging over, feeling even sicker with that smell. No wind. Dead ivy lingered on the faded building walls like claws. Even its yellow leaves stopped casually spinning and, instead, fell directly to the ground in silence.

I had other arrangements later, so I needed to keep it simple. Just be nice, go through the routine and leave, I thought to myself.

It wasn't hard to find grandma's apartment.





The building has seven floors and two apartments on each side and almost every apartment has birds or flowers on the balconies, places for a lovely bit of recreation for anyone with too much time to kill and perhaps also some placebo for those old souls moving toward their own demise. Grandma would never have these birds or plants outside her window. Instead, for as long as I could remember, there would only be a long wooden pole for drying Grandpa's and her panties and clothes from the 80s. It seemed like, apparently, grandma kept her old habits. I went up and pushed the bell. It was singing out of tune.

"Who is that?" A nebulous voice came through the door.

"It's Fan Fan, your Grandson," I answered. "Fan Fan? When did you get back? Hold on, let me get the door for you," the voice got closer.

The door opened. "Hi, Grandma. I'm sorry I didn't make it to the funeral." I realized I should've brought something for her, fruits or milk, that sort of stuff. I was always careless about those matters.

"It's fine. No need to take off your shoes. Just step right in. How's your mother? Is she doing OK?" Grandma talked with her back towards me.

The room was surprisingly chilly. But no air conditioner or fan was on. Grandpa's leather shoes and sneakers were piled up randomly on the front carpet.

"She's doing great. How are you doing, grandma?" I stepped into the living room with my shoes on.

"I'm fine. Have a seat," Grandma sat on her chair towards the television. She always preferred a hard chair to a soft sofa. The sofa was on the right side of the door against the wall and her chair was on the farthest side from the door.

Grandma was 87 or something. Her hair was so thin that I couldn't even see it from a distance. But I could clearly see her saggy breasts, her big belly and the dark blood vessels on her legs, which poked out of her black pajama. The way she walked was kind of funny.

I grabbed myself a chair and sat opposite Grandma. A wave of dust rose in the sunshine blurred by the gray curtains, as I moved the chair around. We sat at the opposite ends of the sofa. It was an old green leather sofa. In front of the sofa was a wooden desk and on the desk were a set of tea cups. The television was off.

The rest of the room was filled with grand-

pa's stuff: grandpa's clothes on the ground, grandpa's newspapers beside grandma's chair, grandpa's photos lying on the sofa. Obviously, grandma hadn't sorted his stuff out yet. Now his stuff was everywhere, while he was nowhere.

"How are you doing, grandma?" I said while adjusting myself. I certainly wouldn't call it a comfortable chair for it was making crunchiness as I moved.

"I'm doing alright. Your grandpa left quite abruptly." She said as looked down at a string of brown beads that rowed around her left hand. "But I saw it coming a few years ago."

"We all did," I said. I took a look at the phone and put it back in my pocket.

"He had his days. He's 92 after all." She said as she kept looking at the strings and put her left thumb on her left index finger's knuckle to turn those beads one by one.

"A lot of people don't make it to 92," I added.

"That's right," She said.

"Is your mother doing alright? She didn't come to the funeral," She asked.

"It's not appropriate, grandma, although I'm pretty sure that she wanted to." I shook my head.

"Why isn't it? She was supposed to come. I wanted to see her," She used her right hand to straighten out the strings.

"They divorced, and not in a good way. It's not appropriate for divorced couples to show up together." I said.

"Divorced people can show up together. Who said divorced people cannot show up together?" She raised her voice a little.

"Then perhaps *They* can't," I said.

Grandma turned her head aside and put her hands down on her laps. I started to feel better as my shirt was getting drier.

My mother's nonattendance was the best

for everybody. They divorced five or six years ago. We discussed this matter in quite a civilized way. Dad told me that it was totally up to me to decide to stay with whom, and I chose mom. He stopped and said he was fine with that, too. Although later mom told me that he smashed a few things when I was away, everything else went smoothly. Grandma was perhaps unsatisfied because none of us told



her and grandpa that they would be divorced. To me, that was just history, something that was certain and reasonable. I haven't thought of this for years until grandma brought it up again.

"You want some water?" Grandma suddenly stood up and grabbed her cup and walked to the kitchen.



"No, I'm fine," I said and put on a smile.

"Well, I'm getting myself some." She walked to the kitchen with her old teacup. I could hear the water running from the kettle.

I looked around and realized that this apartment had never changed. It was always darker than outside even with the sunlight, and the rooms had a damp, musty, old smell. Grandma didn't seem to have changed a lot either. May-



be a bit older, a bit weaker, but people got old all the time.

I noticed that some parts of the leather on the green sofa, close to grandma's side, were almost worn out and sank beneath the flat surface. When I jumped on it as a kid, it used to be smooth, soft, and bouncy like all fine sofas are. Grandpa must have sat there the whole

time. He has always been a vivid and likable figure in my memory. People always felt more comfortable around him.

"Your dad didn't visit me very often," she came back with a cup of steaming hot water, "before your grandpa went."

"I didn't know that," I said. Me and my father didn't talk to each other a lot.

"Of course you don't. What do you do these days?" She asked quite abruptly.

"Well, I'm working in a local sales company, you know, doing some regular office work and stuff. Temporarily." I replied. It was supposed to be a temporary job.

"Oh," she took a tiny sip of the steaming hot water, making a weird sound at the same time.

"Didn't you always want to become a lawyer when you were little?" She asked while she swept the water with the cup lid.

"I guess I changed my mind," I said.

"All right. Did your dad help you out financially?" She asked.

"What? No, I'm doing just fine on my own," I was a little irritated by that question.

"I still have some cash left. The rest goes to your dad's housing fund. I don't mind giving you some." She put the lid on the cup and put the cup down on the desk.

"That's very kind of you," I replied with some irony, at least that was what it sounded like in my head.

The next half hour was a close interrogation of my personal life, from work to my college degree to the house prices in the city. How was I supposed to know that? This was way more exhausting than I thought it would be. I never liked visiting grandma. She was just the opposite of grandpa. I watched her playing with those beads and tried to think of a good reason to change the subject.

"What are those?" I pointed at the beads.



"These?" Grandma raised her left hand, "these are Buddha beads. A religious friend gave it to me years ago. I started to play with it when your grandpa moved to the hospital. You know, to keep my hands busy."

"So, you believe in Buddhism these days?" I couldn't help but ask.

"No they're just beads, to keep my hands moving. Doctor said it was good for the brain, to keep parts of your body moving. I don't want to end up with Alzheimer like your grandpa." She said.

"How's your mother doing?" She suddenly changed the subject again. This time she was looking at me.

"She's doing fine, grandma. Why are you so curious about mom?" So far, I was doing fine on that "be nice, go through the routine and leave" principle.

"Because I like her!" grandma suddenly raised her voice as if she was making a public speech, "They shouldn't get divorced in the

first place. I tell ya, your dad, he didn't even realize what he had given up. Your mom was a kind and organized woman. That was a stupid, stupid mistake. I would never let that happen if I knew about it beforehand, Fan Fan. I would go to his office and yell all day to stop that. I would! They really should stick together like your grandpa and me."

"Your dad's 57 and he lives alone. He needs someone like your mom to help him pull himself together. He had this bad temper, but he could fix it. It's no big deal. Your grandpa used to be like that," she sighed and looked right back at me.

I took a deep breath. I just wanted to go. My dad was a fucking loser. He's 57 with no places to live, who was one hundred percent an alcoholic. Grandpa was way better than him.

"Look, if I could *just* talk to your mom, I might make it work," she leaned forward and pointed out her finger as if she was saying anything that mattered, "your dad won't al-





low that, but you could do that right, Fan Fan? You could bring them back together. We could all go out and have dinners together and you could come and visit me on the weekends just like before. Isn't that great, huh?" Her eyebrows went up and she smiled for the first time.

The good old days. We used to visit grandpa and grandma and took them out to parks, played Mahjong, and had dinners together. I was about 7 or 8 and always full of energy, running around in the playground with other kids. There were moments of joy, laughter and genuine happiness. I've always believed that saying *"everything was better when I was a kid"*. Everything is supposed to be better when you were a kid. It was also a good time for my family when my father would interrupt my mother while she was practicing calligraphy and ended up with funny ink marks on his face, and we three would laugh all night long. But it was gone, little by little in the following years, gone for no apparent reasons that I could tell.

"Why do you always make this so difficult, grandma?" I responded with bitterness. I put my hands on my knees and confronted her while she was baffled, "They are divorced. Period. You just have to accept that. I mean, mom's OK with it, dad's OK with it, I am OK with it. Nothing could make things the way they were five or ten years ago. It's none of your business. It's none of anybody's business after all these years. Why can't you just let it go, and move on with your freaking life?" Before I knew it, I was standing and yelling. My blood vessels were popping out from my neck, and my spit landed like missiles all over Grandma's face and hair in the dim light.

"And you don't give him your pension. You don't spoil him anymore. You know better than anyone you'll never see that money back." I added.

She looked at me in shock for a while and looked down at her hands. "I don't know what you're talking about."

I went to the kitchen to get myself some water to regain control of myself. I picked up the kettle but there was no more water in it. I shook the kettle back and forth and back and forth but only a few drops of water came out, so I gave up.

Weirdly, grandma reminds me of mom. When I was little, I got into a fight with another kid and made his nose bleed. I insisted that the other kid started it all and refused to apologize. But then my mom came and apologized to his mom on my behalf. She reached into her bag for some candy for the kid and some cash to put towards the medical costs. I and this kid have been best buds ever since.

I went back to my chair. Grandma looked down and began playing with the beads, again, in silence. She picked one, pushed it towards herself, and then picked another one, repeat-



ing the same motion again.

I tried to breathe my anger away. I felt dazed, probably because of the hangover. All sorts of emotions came in waves and submerged me, leaving me overwhelmed. The air got thicker as if there was a weight pressing upon my shoulders and it was getting heavier and heavier. My head ached, my heart beat faster than ever and my whole body started to sweat.

That's it. "I gotta go," I stood up and headed for the door. This visit was a total mistake.

"You're not gonna stay for dinner?" Grandma anxiously asked while putting down the beads.

"No, no, Grandma, I have plans for this eve-

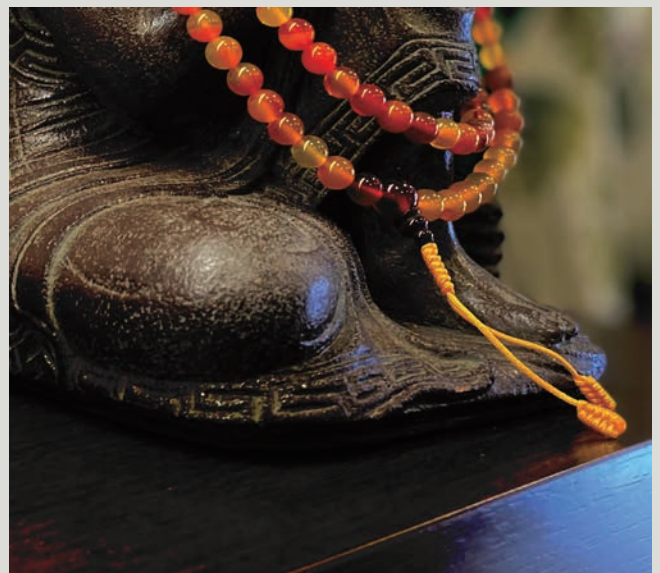
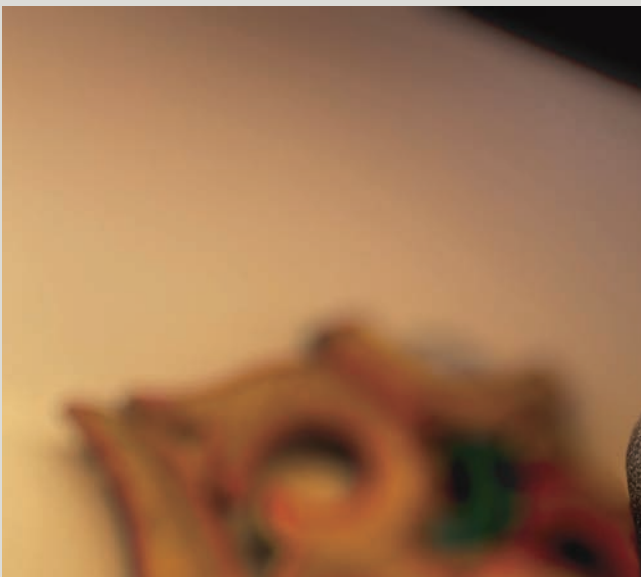
ning. Dinner with friends. 6 pm. Can't miss it," I said.

She froze for a while, frowning, looking a bit disappointed. Then she got back to the chair, "all right, then."

I reached for the door handle. God bless you, Grandma, I thought.

It was right then that I heard a snob. I stopped and I looked back, and there she was, covering her face with her hands. Grandma looked smaller than she ever was. She was bent over and her face fell to her knees, with her whole body huddled together, twitching, like a baby in a womb.

There she was, breaking down, dissolving. It was right then that I realized she was just



an unlucky woman. She used to be a girl who grew up in a village; a follower who endorsed the call of the Party and left her family; a wife who married an officer and moved to a big city; and a mother who spoiled her kid. But now she was just a woman, old and broken, all by herself, whose life had never really been her own. Right now her life has shattered, and all she could do was to hold on to that string of beads.

Then I looked at the spot where grandpa used to sit on the sofa. His cold tea cup was still there, standing beside grandma's. It was almost as if he was still sitting there accompanying grandma.

I let go of the handle, walked up to the sofa and sat where grandpa used to. I rubbed her back with my right hand slowly and gently, trying my best to ease her.

"I...I... I really need you to..." grandma cried with a broken hoarse voice.

"I know, grandma," I said.

"I...I...I..." she cried.

"I know," I put my hand on her shoulder.

"I'm not doing fine, Fan Fan, I... my legs...I can't go to the market, so I have to ask other people..." she turned to me, and it was the saddest expression that I've ever seen. All the wrinkles crushed together like a rag; desperation gushed out from her little pale black eyes.

She said that she had to ask people to buy her food. She said that her memory was fading and she couldn't remember anything the doctor said to her after she left the hospital and she worried that she might take the wrong medicine and die, as I looked straight in her eyes.

She said she was scared that she might take the wrong medicine, and nobody would know that she was dead until her body started to be smelly, like what happened on the news. She

said that one time she woke up at midnight, and she thought why can't she just jump out of the window and put an end to it all. And she repeated that she was scared. Flecks of spits came out of her mouth as she spoke, but I was still looking at her.

Then she murmured in the smallest voice possible that her legs were too weak to even climb out of the window. Then she wiped her tears with her arm, looked away and said that she misses my grandpa so much. She missed him so much. She said "my dad" but didn't continue. She started to ask me what on earth she had done. And she asked me again.

I felt bad. I had never seen grandma, or anyone else for that matter, this desperate and hopeless. It was too much for both of us.

"Aren't you going to dinner, Fan?" After a long, silent pause, she said without looking at me. "You can leave if you have to."

I need to stay. I turned around and tried to find tissues but there weren't any. Then I noticed the photos on the other end of the sofa. There were about a dozen of photos lying in the corner of the green leather sofa. So I took them on my knees and said, "grandma?"

She stopped sobbing and looked at me.

"I still got some time left. I'm not in a hurry. You wanna look at these photos with me? I haven't seen these in years." Taking her hand, I slid the beads from her wrist and put the photos on our laps.

"Sure, sure." She paused for a few seconds, touching the photos with her fingers. We turned the pages of the book in silence. Gradually her sobs stopped and there was only the sound of pages turning.

"You remember this one? Mom took it for you and grandpa at the park," I picked out one and showed it to her.

"Yes, yes I remember. It was springtime,





wasn't it?" She squinted her red swollen eyes and said.

"Yes, it *was* spring. You remembered," I looked at her and said.

"This one was taken on New Year's Eve, right? Everybody was at the table, having dinner. You were the only one who wasn't drinking," she picked out another one.

"Ha, I was too young for that. I haven't seen this one before," I laughed a little.

"This one? Everybody was in this one. We took it when you were so little. Look, you were naked." She pointed at my naked butt and smiled.

"I haven't seen this one before. Grandpa looked so young in it," I pointed at grandpa.

"He's the most handsome man I have ever known—he was my darling," she said with pride.

"And look at dad. He looked so different. He was fitter and fresher. His belly was so much smaller," I said.

"He just married your mother and had you, the gift from heaven. And he wasn't drinking at that time," she said.

I stared at this young man in the photo, "he looked like grandpa in this one."

"You know how much he loves you," she turned to me and said.

I looked at grandma, then turned to the photo and nodded.

"It was probably his happiest time," she said.

"It was the happiest time for everyone," I said.

"It was," she said.



# On the Edge of Snow

Marcella Xu

She sat in the waiting room and prepared for her final jump. Till now, her score has been completely capable of winning the silver medal. She had a call with her mother who told her it was okay not to do the hardest trick. But if she could do that motion that she had never done before, she might win the gold medal, or tumble into the snow and hardly make it to

the podium.

Beijing has good weather today, she thought. She remembered the times when she was dancing on the Great Wall. Stepping on the jagged stairs—her toes were feeling the wet and slippery moss that rustles in between those timeworn bricks. The sky was an unfolded canvas dotted with thick and soft clouds like those cushions in the practicing room. Every time she soared and failed, falling into the sponge pool, it was like falling between the clouds. The sponge pool is her temporary bed, caressing her ceaseless heart—although, the sponges smell like the pickle juice which lasts for years. Whenever she looked at the ceiling in the practice room, she was wondering if there is no gravity, could she be soaked up into the clouds when she reached the mountain peak? But these thoughts only flashed across her mind because the coach always said: “do it again.” Then she had to leave her comfort zone and redo the twist again.

“Challenge your limitations and get a gold medal. Everything should be perfectly accomplished at the Olympics.”

The waiting room is crowded. Everyone is waiting anxiously for their final performance. She leaned forward and started to observe the jungle of human legs. The connection between coaches’ thighs and shanks is like those skyscrapers that she saw in New York when she was four, going straight into the clouds with no ends. New York, A city filled with vexation and competition. Competition, competition, competition. She turned around and saw Antoinette. “She is the potential first prize winner” the loudspeaker raucously shouted. Antoinette was chatting with her coach as if she had already won the medal. Antoinette was smiling. Antoinette’s mouth opened into a strange oval shape. Antoinette’s mouth was



dark as an abyss. "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you." Nietzsche's classic cliché echoes in her ears. Fear and unwillingness, flooded as an avalanche, straight down colliding in her ears. "Am I willing to leave the stage with regret because I am scared?" she asked herself.

Risk and opportunities always simultaneously appear. Trying hurts nothing. The worse circumstance is breaking a few bones. Bones can be healed flawlessly as time goes by, but regrets can never be ironed like a new suit. There should be no regret, everything should be perfect. She stood up, calmed her trembling heart down and started practicing the movements that she is going to do at the edge of the snow.

("Oh! Number five Claire fell from the edge while doing the cork, which seems pretty bad.") Sighs flew through the crevices of the human wall and immediately struck her face. Claire was covered with snow. Her face was inscribed with regrets and frights. The camera did not stop shooting her until she left the arena. Her skis abruptly stuck into the thick snow, announcing her failure to the world through the camera, judging Claire's failure, tearing her ski suits apart, exaggerating her faults, waiting for the public to put her on the ethical crucifix. People were talking about her flaws. Her coach was vexed and left. No one cared whether she was hurt, no matter emotionally or physically, as if she was a skiing machine, who can easily be replaced, being left behind by the glory of the peak as a fragile and vulnerable creature who can only lick her wounds by herself. Everyone is afraid of being left behind. Purely New York City style.

"My god, she will be completely swallowed

by the media!" Antoinette's acrimonious words rushed into her ear. She knew Antoinette was poking her spine. She sat down, her trembling heart started beating painfully. She is the one being called a "skiing genius" and is favored by the camera. Everyone is waiting for her to win the gold medal, but, for now, it seemed she could hardly surpass Antoinette unless she did the hardest trick in the final round. But if she fails, what will be waiting for her is the beast-like media and the public. They can either put you into the clouds of praise, or turn you



down into hell with the devils in a second. "If that happened, where will my life lead to? How should I keep my medals and reputation glittering like gold without stains? I can't. Winning can never be maintained. All I can do is to obediently receive it when it comes." But when success wants to leave, she has no idea what to do but is manipulated by the god of fear. The more she wants to hold the sense of winning tight, the more her winnings will slip

away from her hands. Will she be pushed into the edge of the snow and fall to the ground and be covered by an avalanche of comments and judgment just like Claire did? Everyone knows it, she knows it. But when the god of fear comes—nothing can stop her trembling.

Her heart was trembling, hitting her chest strongly with fear. Yes, she did say many times to the public that she has already fallen in love with the dreaded horror, but courting this emotion also means she had to carry herself through the stage of tortuous hesitation. And



now, she is drawn into the bewildering mire of the hesitation, asking herself again and again: whether she needs to reach her extreme merely because she is doing x-sports.

("Oh! Number seven Katrina fell from the edge while doing the grip. But she did pretty well since she is only 16 years old.") Age! She was filled with anger. People always talked about her age. Yes, she is only 18, but that doesn't mean winning young means one will

fail young. Yes, she is born into an upscale family, but that doesn't mean she is an elite. Yes, she sleeps a lot, which is the reason why she can work efficiently, but that doesn't mean she is a genius who can win without any hard work. Yes, she is.... As if her beauty is given by her parents and her mind is a gift, nothing belongs to her. "She is not that good." "The more she talked, the more she would fail." "She can never win, she has already been excessively hyped." "She does not have enough experience—all her prizes are purely coincidence." "She is just beautiful. She has no mind." "She has already been to the edge of her ability, she will not win in this Olympics." "She should have stayed at the university instead of doing such dangerous things, these are for the boys." She found herself chained by these invisible words and comments coming from the public—she could hardly breathe and nearly fainted. Why these do these swords and praises flood into to her at this significant moment? She could not rationally explain but feeling that power made her drown in the endless eddy of evil words and turned her into a state of numbness. She is now forced to the edge of the world by these invisible arrows and the fear itself. Half of her body had already been hung by the world in the sky. She cannot fight against the internal irrevocable fear and thousands of snowflakes swirling like anger from the outside. It seems like at this end of the skiing season, she will resolutely carry the heavy snow of anger and all her fame will be into the abyss just like Claire and Katrina.

Emotion. Emotion is hard to avoid because it appears without any sign. She could hardly be sure which feeling is true or false, and how to perceive and consider these things. Maybe some of them are telling the truth, maybe she has already passed her prime. Not everyone





has seen her tears, blood, her broken legs and fingers. Every time her head was struck on the concrete of snow, she knew the mother of the snow would not have any mercy for her passion for skiing no matter how many tears or blood poured onto the ground. Not everyone knows that she is always the first one to the skiing resort. Not everyone has seen her fall from the edge more than a hundred times. Not everyone has seen her pain, not everyone has seen her as a complete person but as a flattened “beautiful, ambitious, gifted young girl.” Not everyone has seen her eating and writing homework in the car, watching how skyscrapers, human beings, or cars were written in water and leaving raindrops on the windows. Things are changing, not in minutes, but in seconds. She is growing, growing for grasping the opportunity. And now, “the perfect time” is calling.

Time is calling! Nothing is predictable. No one can be one hundred percent prepared. She had to stand up and get prepared before going onto the stage. Her heart is pumping as a drumbeat. Go for it. Go, go, go! But how far could she go?

“Today is a good day,” her coach suddenly appeared. “Look at the sun. It’s just like your exclusive spotlight.” She looked up. The sun was pumping its lights out from its heart. The light was gentle but direct, as if it rushes straight towards her, but then is being in the middle of the competition, before finally being gently scattered on her body. The glittery sunlight made her shine and glitter like the chosen one, soaked into the sheen of the sun. Fighting. Fighting! Fighting for the glory and her ardent love for the skiing resort. She wanted to tell her mother about this vibrating experience—a solemn praying to the sun which pours its energy into her mind. Now, she had no time to think about the worst ending that she was trying to avoid, and the caress from the snow dust. No time! She had to be on stage!

“Make yourself proud.” Her coach said.

“Make myself proud. Who am I? Whom should I be? Be a daughter, be an athlete, be a student, be a person, be a—woman.”

Her heart was pumping like a drumbeat. “Be a woman!” Her heart was roaring. She should make herself proud. She should be no one but

herself.

Woman, woman, woman! The wind was striking her mind. Subtle snowflakes floated in front of her face, tickled her eyelashes and sneaking into her hair. She remembered the first time she went to the skiing resort, all there were men. Some of them would laugh at her, joking about her as a scraggy girl. She remembered sometimes she would dream of men chasing behind her, trying to use a bandage to tie her up like a sheep without a mouth. Men, men, men.... Men are everywhere, branding women with humiliating stigma, drowning women into the dark ocean, locking women into the house like an angel, and placing women on the stage as beasts for fun. When can women speak? When can women be seen? Is it now?

("Now comes to our skiing star.") It is now. It is now. She put on her goggles. "Enjoy the journey of changing." It was mom's voice. Her heart was pumping like a drumbeat. Enjoy, enjoy, enjoy. Changing the result of winning to the accessory of chasing the love of skiing. Everyone is asking for a result, but the most important thing is enjoying the process. Enjoy, enjoy, enjoy. Changing the fear into courage. The horror made her heart thunder with energy and excitement. Enjoy, enjoy, enjoy! Under the spotlight of the sun, with the pure white stage for her to enjoy the adrenaline, to interpret the energy of females, to do the crucial twist on the edge of the snow. Indeed, she does not have much experience, but she can be free as a bird without the baggage which is called "glory".

"So which one are you going to do?" her coach asked.

"The one that represents me as a woman," she replied. She can be anyone, but the first thing is to be herself. Enjoy, enjoy, enjoy being

a woman. She took a deep breath and dashed into the shining abyss. Snowflakes were surging to her face and blocking her eyesight. The rustling of the wind is like her dream, howling around her mind, trying to stop her. But she already knew when to do the twist. Whatever the sense of chaos she is experiencing right now, it would no longer be an obstacle. This was not a terrible feeling, not an unfamiliar time, not a bleak end. It was a start. It wouldn't take long, when she swiveled on the edge of snow which is nearly eighty-one meters high, she would feel a small release, a relaxation, a project that was done. All these feelings—no matter the excitement, fear, or anger—will lessen in her until she crossed the edge of the snow—all of these will stay at the edge of her memory.







# Different Mirrors

Iris Wang

---

## Chapter 1

### *Bird in a Cage*

I'm Aiden. Elena Chan is my ex-fiancée. Even though I broke up with her not long ago, I still believe that my judgment of her is fair and objective. She is beautiful, charming, but ambitiously complacent. We have known each other for nearly six years. I gradually saw her become someone I could not understand, and watched her mess up her life step by step. I have tried so many times to get her back on track, but everything was in vain.

To be honest, she was a good-looking woman: her thick, dark, curly hair was always combed up into a ponytail. She had a fresh

face with shallow dimples, bright eyes, and smiling lips. She was like an insouciant college student—pure, stunning and energetic. We had been in love for four years and everything was going quite well. I even started to arrange our wedding date, yet she suddenly quit her stable job and chose to go abroad to continue her postgraduate studies for two years. It was like a sudden bomb blast in the clear and steady road ahead of us, throwing me into confusion. She kept trying to persuade me, telling me that her current job is dull and meaningless. She hoped that she would not have regrets about her life. A dream job and a beautiful marriage are what she desired throughout her whole life. I respected her decision to go abroad. Although I still had many worries, she promised me that she would definitely set the wedding date after returning.

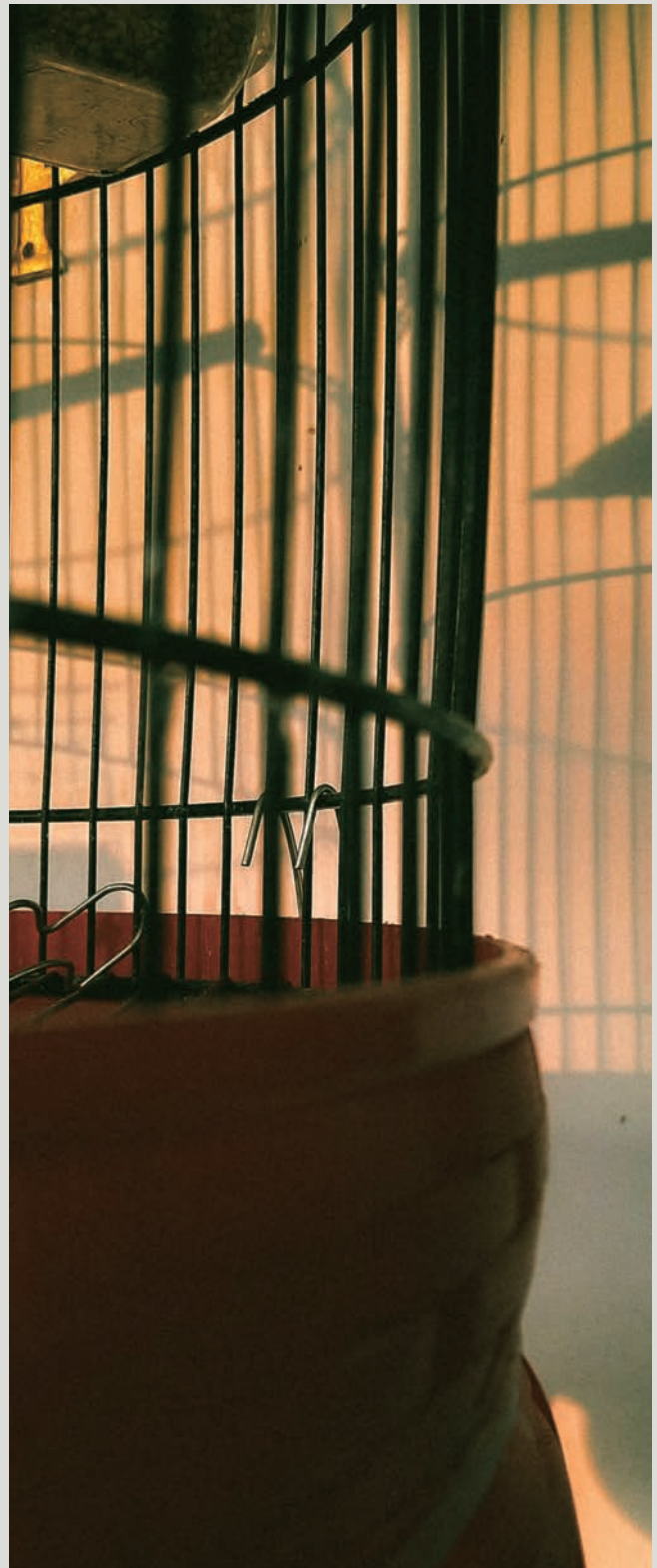
I thought our life would get on the right track when she completed her postgraduate studies. However, it ended up being worse. She was a non-stop spinning top—searching for jobs and attending interviews have become the only two pivots in her life. Initially, the results of her search were not satisfactory. In addition to feeling sad for her, I was unexpectedly relieved, because I could finally express the thoughts that have been held in my heart for a long time: she really seemed to have made an absurd decision, carrying on her study.

Eventually, however, she landed a job at a top advertisement company. She was as excited as a bird just out of a cage—proud and thrilled. We had dinner together to celebrate. Perhaps because of the dim and swaying lights or the joyous atmosphere, I didn't notice her particularly flattering smile and apologetic shifting eyes that day.

More and more things got out of control. Gradually, she flew away from my life like a

bird. Working overtime day and night, avoiding discussions about the wedding date, making anxious sighs and sinking into endless silence. Eventually, she became aggressive and alienated from me. This silent torture finally broke out in a middle of the night when she returned home with a strange man.

"It was my boss. It's too late tonight. He in-





sisted on taking me home. I couldn't refuse..."

"Why didn't you tell him you already had a fiancé. I can pick you up!"

Her cheeks flushed, and she fell into silence again.

I hated this dead silence. Our lives seemed to be falling into a deep vortex, which was suffocating and inescapable. I chose a sunny Friday to pick her up at the company. I ran into her with her colleagues. The moment she saw me, she chose to turn around and leave, ignoring my existence, almost fleeing. I grabbed her hand with anger and asked her loudly if she forgot she had a fiancé. In an instant, like a boulder falling into a lake, all the colleagues around us started whispering. I still could not forget their expressions, full of sarcasm and playful mockery. What an indecent and clownish farce.

She was fired from the company because she lied about her personal situation during the interview, and I finally broke up with her, understanding that her abnormality was due to her concealed shame and guilt. She had told the company that she was still single in order to increase her advantages and optimize her employment opportunities. So stupid. She should clearly be aware that nothing is ideal. If she wants a happy marriage, she needs lower her career ambitions. However, she is happy to pursue her aims by weaving one lie after another, thinking that she could balance the two things easily. However, her choice led to the complete destruction of her stable life.

As Stefan Zweig has written, "She was still too young to know that life never gives anything for nothing, and that a price is always exacted for what fate bestows." As the person who knows her best, I hope she can learn to be realistic and contented.





## Chapter 2

### *Flower in a Greenhouse*

I'm Ivy, Elena Chan is my ex-colleague. There is always a kind of woman, surrounded by flowers and appreciation, standing at the center of the stage, glossy and willful. They have an easy and pleasant life.

Obviously, I don't belong to this clique. I don't have a pretty appearance or a wealthy family. I'm plain and dull.

Elena Chan is one of those women. From the first day she came to work, I knew it. Everything about her was so typical—exquisite makeup and elegant work suit, precious shiny earrings dangling gently with her long curly hair. As a newcomer, she was hired into the department with the best chance to get promoted by our supervisor, David, who provided the details of her new position with exceeding enthusiasm. Elena sat down next to me with an excited glint in her big eyes. Her sweet smile reminded me of a fragile flower in a greenhouse—the most pampered flower without any stress and worries in life.

I heard from a colleague that she is approaching thirty years old and still single. She quit a particularly stable job to study abroad. I wasn't shocked to hear this. She doesn't have to live carefully as I do to keep up with the household expenses. She doesn't need to worry about other people's judgments. No one asked her to marry at 25 and have children before 30. She did not adopt a normal lifestyle accepted by society, but it seemed that the world was still very tolerant of her. Destiny is indeed very unfair. Who doesn't want to be her?

Two months passed quickly. My life was still the same. I know I am a dispensable per-

son for the company. However, she was truly a celebrity. Her table was piled high with flowers and gifts day after day. Many colleagues liked her, invited her out both on weekdays and weekends, especially male colleagues, who surrounded her like directionless bees.

Supervisor David often took her to meet with clients, which was a particularly precious opportunity for a newcomer. I knew he was never a good person. I still remember, one day, Elena gave me a box of chocolates and begged me in a low voice, "Ivy, will you join me in the banquet at the winery tonight? I will ask David. Lots of important customers will come this evening, but I have no experience at all..."

"Oh, sorry dear... I need to work late at the company tonight." Without hesitation, I rejected her request. Accurate self-perception is probably my only merit. I apparently knew that I would only annoy David by following Elena to the event. David's special treatment of her was noticeable to all the colleagues at the company. We pretended not to care, and there was no way to interfere. Just mind your own business—this is the principle that all sober people in the company bear in mind.

She left the office with a sigh. I saw the loss and anxiety in her eyes.

"Ding," I clicked on the new message from a WeChat colleagues group without Elena.

Linda: *I heard that David took princess Elena to that important annual banquet! I bet she will be promoted in half a year.*

Nova: *Wow! David is literally crazy about her...*

Hailey: *I'm sooo jealous! She's only been here for two months!*

Nova: *Let's just face it. We don't have that mesmerizing pretty face.*

Linda: *Jesus...Her life is so easy.*

Hailey: *Can't agree more. Lol...*

Hailey: *Whatever...I'm gonna have dinner with*



Elena tomorrow.

Linda: I'm in! I also invited her to go shopping this weekend.

Nova: Take me with you! Please!

For the first time, I lost interest in their conversation. It felt weird that I started to sympathize with Elena, who is blessed with a much superior life. Perhaps because of her flustered and helpless eyes at that moment, or maybe because I am just tired of the profit-oriented indifference of my colleagues—everyone wears a delicate mask of hypocrisy.

Well, who am I to feel sorry for others? I thought. I laughed mockingly and threw the chocolates into the trashcan.

Not long after the night of the dinner, Elena's dismissal from the company became the most dramatic news of the year. The whole company was buzzing for days.

It was hilarious to bump into her fiancé in front of so many colleagues. No one understood why she chose to give up a stable job and delay her wedding, but everyone clearly knew why she lied about being single. It is impossible for a company to hire a 30-year-old woman who is about to get married. The cost of marriage and maternity leave ensures the interviewer passes her over.

My WeChat group messages did not stop ringing in the days after witnessing the scene with her fiancé. The staff mocked excitedly, judged condescendingly, and exaggeratedly spread the story. I did not forget to follow laughing in these groups, yet I couldn't help staring at the empty seat beside me in a daze, entangled in mixed emotions.

One night, I had an odd dream: In a cozy greenhouse, a beautiful flower broke the glass shelter, swaying tremulously in a violent storm. The frozen wind kept blowing this flower fiercely, as if to satirize its childish rebellion.

## Chapter 3

### Lost Boat

It is widely acknowledged, that a woman approaching the age of thirty can hardly find an ideal job without a perfect marital status.

Only after I failed the fifth interview did I finally learn why the above sentence is true. My name is Elena Chan. No matter how well I performed in the preliminary interview, how my experience and knowledge fit the position of the company, and how sincere my attitude was, as long as the interviewers knew I was almost 30 years old and had a fiancé, they would eventually perfunctorily reject me with some flimsy excuse.

Finally, I had an interview that worked out. It was at the world's top advertising company, my dream job. The interview went quite well. However, then came the last question:

"What is your current marital status?"

In just a few short seconds, all the grievances and resentment of the past few months poured into my mind—piles of rejection emails, anxious late nights, and endless insomnia. The most unbearable thing was the arrogant disdain in my fiancé's eyes, constantly reminding me of his sanity and the absurdity of my choice. They drove me crazy.

"I am single and have no intention of getting married any time soon. Developing my career is my current priority." Except for a guilty conscience, I unexpectedly felt a touch of excitement. The lie was so easily uttered, simple and weightless, while it became the heaviest stone in my heart, leaving me out of breath.

"You are born to be pretty and happy."

"Fate is very partial to you."

These are the judgments I have always





heard since I was little. In most people's eyes, as a woman, I have a good appearance, a stable job, and a reliable fiancé. Being content is the only thing I need to do. However, the gift of destiny will not listen to the wishes of the recipient. It seems that I have received a lot, while my spiritual world is never enriched. I'm like a beautifully packed sailing boat, with a route arranged by others, who continuously warn me: once you deviate a little from the established direction, you will be dragged into a violent vortex and terrifying darkness.

Courage, what a remarkable quality. Unfortunately, I am not born to be brave.

Remembered the day at the annual banquet, starry, luxurious, and crowded. The golden hall was dazzlingly with brilliant decorations that lit up the velvety blue night sky. Hot and humid air mixed with the full-bodied aroma of wine, paralyzed the nerves of the guests. They held wine glasses, laughing and chatting with intoxicated looks. That day, however, I remained hopelessly sober. David, my boss, even though I could clearly see the silver ring on his left ring finger, kept touching my shoulder and waist with his gnarled hand. He and his clients have no qualms about making unacceptable jokes, whispering in my ear and staring at me with an intense desire for control. The feeling of nausea and humiliation stuck in my throat like a fishbone. I couldn't get rid of it.

Finally, escaping back home, I was greeted by aggressive confrontation and explosive fury from my fiancé. Ironically, I had nothing to justify myself with because of my own ridiculous lies. All I could do was lock myself in the bathroom, and splash cold water on my face. I didn't shed a tear since my swollen eyes would prevent me from going to work the next day—to the job I used to dream of.

Tomorrow morning, nothing had changed.





Fake ingratiating smiles from colleagues and intensified molestation from David made me sick. I can't trust anyone, including myself. I didn't have the courage to confess my lie to my fiancé, nor did I have the courage to report the dirty behavior of my boss on my own.

Things can be worse. I had expected that my lie could be punctured at any time, but I didn't expect it to be in such a ridiculous and embarrassing way. I'm sure the office would be buzzing for days because of this stupid scene. Under the burning sunlight and teasing eyes of my co-workers, my arrogant fiancé began to recount my mistakes and pour out his grievances. I listened numbly, unable to respond. After deceiving myself for so long, I finally faced the reality—he never treats me as an equal in our relationship. He likes me to be naive, vivacious, and obedient, but he can't accept me being out of his control. No matter how much he indulges this delicate bird, I must be caged. Six years of love and compan-

ionship have evaporated completely in this scorching sun.

By adopting a rebellious spirit, I thought that I could find a route of my own, while the reefs on the bottom of the sea and tyrannical storms tossed me around. I wanted to step out of my comfort zone without having the courage to completely let go of the past. Finally, I was overwhelmed by my lies, faltered, and was in imminent danger of collapse.

I got fired, broke up with my fiancé and everyone thought I had ruined my life. hilariously, instead of being distraught, I could only think of one thing: I am now truly single and have no plans to get married at all—I now meet the perfect criteria for a 30-year-old woman to find a job.

The turbulent waves continue to beat upon the reefs, and thunder rumbles in the distance. What is the destination of a boat lost in this yawning darkness?









# My Dearest One

Claire Shu

*I*

---

I heard the officiant read the eulogy. His voice was so cold and sounded like it would freeze.

"Today, we bid farewell to our dearest family member. May she rest in peace in heaven."

Then we bowed to the coffin. Once, twice, three times. The whole process took no more than 20 minutes. This was the farewell ceremony, and this was the last time I saw Mom.

We sat in the lounge next door while they cremated Mom's body. Grandma tightly held my hand. I felt her palm wet and cool—she seemed to be struggling to endure something. There were only the two of us in the big lounge. I looked down at my knee and noticed two black scabs there that looked hideous.

"I can't remember. My head hurts," I say to Dr. Lin. Once again, my recollection stops. Dr. Lin frowns, unsure if it is because of the con-

fusing story or the hindered healing process.

Today's clinic hours are coming to an end; I can see the next patient peering in through the glass door of the consultation room.

Dr. Lin gives a reassuring smile as if my interpretation is correct. She looks in her forties, with a well-proportioned body and very white skin. I can tell that she's not exactly young. She has a few wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and her mouth. But these wrinkles make her look very friendly and reliable. "This is not a problem that we can solve overnight, Mei. Let's start with your somnambulism and prescribe you some Doxepin for now."

She taps away on the computer with ease, humming a song under her breath and giving me a sense of relaxation, as if I am not one of her patients, and we are just out there for an afternoon tea.

"The drug's side effects may cause some drowsiness symptoms if you have to go to school during the day ..."

Suddenly, she frowns with a worried expression, which makes me feel like she is genuinely helping me. I can't help but want to trust her.

"No," I say, "I don't have to. I've taken a break from school."

Grandma sits in front of the clinic, waiting for me. "Wait for a moment, babe. I have something to talk about with Dr. Lin," she says.

So, I sit outside the consultation room and wait for Grandma. A low voice comes from the consultation room, which I can hardly hear. In my mind, I keep picturing Grandma talking to Dr. Lin. "My poor Mei..." I imagine Grandma saying this to Dr. Lin. This speech, which she had already given to our relatives should be familiar to her. "Mei loves her mother and is in huge pain...she's just recovering now," she would say that.

I know how those relatives described me. "I've never seen such a cold-blooded child, without even a tear in her eyes when mother died," they would say this as they walked out of the funeral home.

Did Grandma know? Even if she did, she would still be sticking to her story. As long as you stick to the story you're telling, one day you'll convince yourself that it's true; as long as you believe that everything is going in the right way, one day you'll convince yourself that nothing wrong happened—the days are still peaceful, and you can still go on. This is a tacit agreement.

Suddenly, the voice in the clinic becomes louder and clearer, and this time I hear it clearly. It is Grandma's voice.

"What if this will cause her more pain? I mustn't take that risk!"

Then the voice drops again. For some time,

I keep hearing the feeble voices of wrangle coming out from the room, rising, and falling. Finally, the door creaks open, and Grandma comes out. The expression on her face looks helpless and exhausted.

"Mei, remember to take your medicine on time. Next time, we'll start hypnotherapy, okay?" Dr. Lin says to me in a very relaxed tone and pats my shoulder.

Sitting in the back of the cab, I feel a little sleepy—the sleepwalking symptoms are becoming more frequent, and I always wake up feeling a million times more exhausted. After Grandma found me cutting my wrist with a piece of glass at midnight, I am even more afraid to go to sleep. Whether I am awake or asleep, the tiredness would not go away.

It's so strange. I've forgotten a lot of things since Mom died, but still, I remember the words my friends used to describe me: "optimistic, easy-going, and well-behaved." I remember all those words, but it's hard for me to picture myself that way. Years after the divorce, Mom died, and I became a cold-blooded orphan. They've said that for many years, Mom was the only family I had, my dearest one. But I didn't even shed a single tear at Mom's funeral because I couldn't remember anything related to her at all. It feels like an extra black hole in my head, so empty and numb.

I play with the bottle of pills to keep my spirits up. This is a small white plastic bottle with "Doxepin Hydrochloride" written in small blue letters. Below that, a few lines of small black letters say, "This product is a tricyclic antidepressant that also has anxiolytic and sedative effects." This line of text gives me a sense of déjà vu as if I had seen this bottle somewhere.



“Did you take the pills?” Dr. Lin asks. “How’s the effect?”

“Yeah...the sleepwalking has lessened,” I reply, “but I started to have recurring dreams...”

“Dreams? What kind of dreams? Please tell me,” Dr. Lin asks.

I close my eyes and try to bring myself back to that dream.

“I was running. Someone was chasing me.”

“Who?”

I struggle to remember my escape. “It was... it was not a human being. It was not even a creature...”

As I remember what it was, I am struck dumb with horror. I am speechless for a moment. I cannot resist the impulse to call for help, but no sound comes out of my throat. Dr. Lin is still waiting for me to continue. “It’s okay. Just tell me.”

“It was a...palm. A large palm of a hand, of a human, but many times bigger than my body... It was trying to hold me.

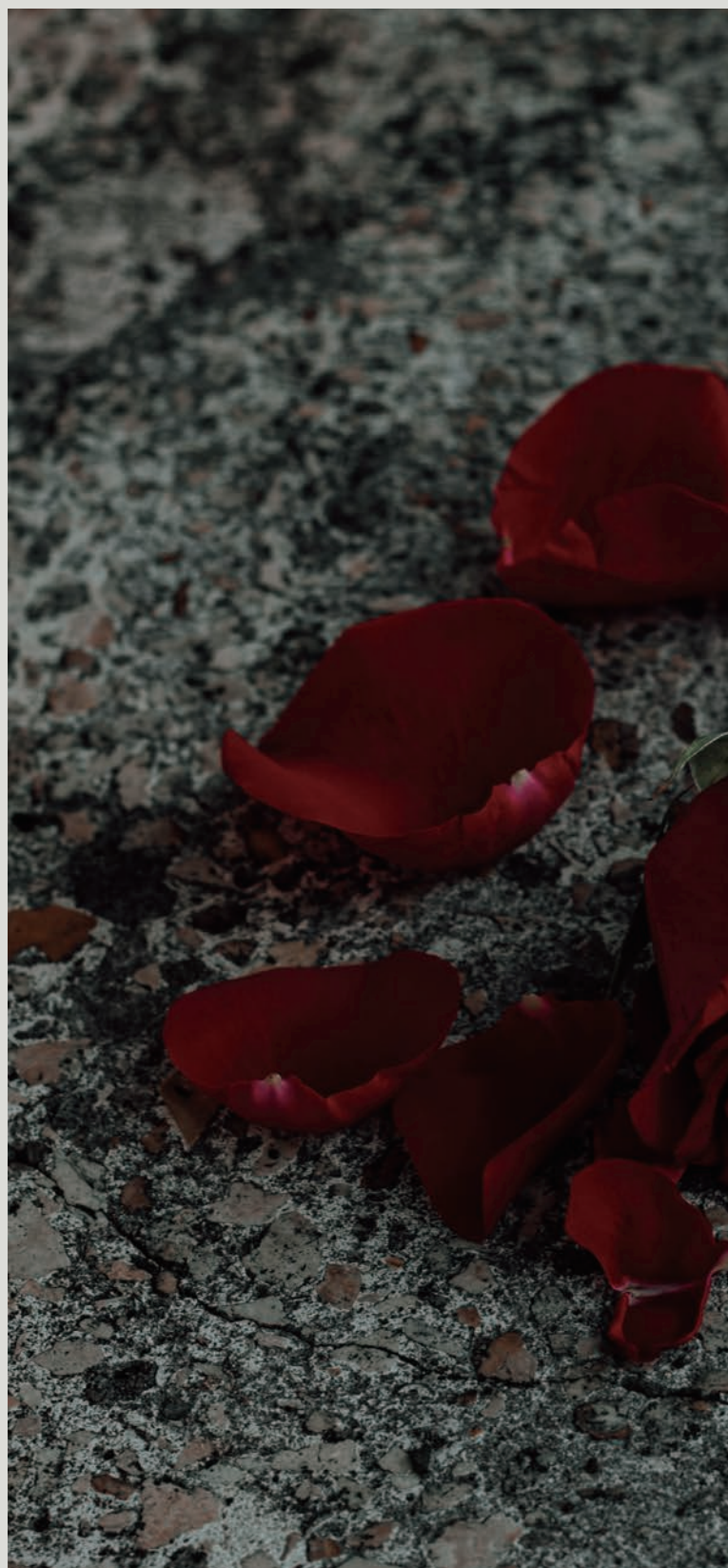
“I got caught. Somehow the ground was soft...”

The memory breaks again. My eyebrows knitting tightly. I try to recall more, but fail. Finally, I give up and open my eyes in helplessness and bewilderment. “I can’t remember.”

“It’s okay, Mei.” Dr. Lin pats my shoulder. “It is a good sign, and I suppose this dream is also related to your lost memories. Now, try to go back to that scene again.”

I close my eyes again. “No, that’s not the ground... It’s not that hard, but there are many tiny thorns... I fall among the roses, in the thorny bush, and feel a stinging pain in my knee.

“I see myself, a very short one, in an elemen-



tary school uniform. She might have been six? Or seven. She is crying, her head down.

“I hear someone asks, ‘Why do you have to go to Daddy? Isn’t it good to be with Mommy?’ I see a woman squat down and hold her shoulders. It’s... It’s Mom,” I say.



It's Mom, looking young, in her early 30s, without wrinkles around her eyes and with full cheeks. But the pale face and furrowed brow are familiar as if I had seen that look a thousand times in my life.

"That young me sobs and replies, 'I miss

Daddy. I haven't seen him for a long time.'

"Mom's fingers grip her shoulders, knuckles protruding as if they are going to come through her skin, and she shakes her vigorously, 'tell Mommy, who do you want to be with? Whose child do you want to be?'

"She looks at Mom with a terrified look, 'I'm Daddy's and Mommy's child...' she whispers.

"No, Daddy doesn't want us anymore. Daddy doesn't want you, and he doesn't want me; now you're all Mommy has... Tell me, whose child are you?' Mom asks with wide eyes while shaking her."

I feel confused and stop talking. Then I see her fall into a seated position on the floor, crying loudly. As if awakening from a dream, Mom goes up and takes her in her arms, patting her back soothingly.

"I am Mommy's... I am Mommy's child ...." Finally, she cries out.

"Sorry ...The dream was so real that I found it confusing," I finally say.

"Never mind." Dr. Lin pats my shoulder again.

On the car ride home, for the very first time, I ask, "What kind of person Mom was?"

I can see that Grandma has a moment of dismay. Immediately after, she smiles and replies, "Your Mom was a strong girl. She grew up to be strong, did her best in everything, and was an uncompromising perfectionist. She was my pride; she was all I had. "

Why would a woman like that give up her will to live? That seems impossible to explain.

As the car moves forward, I keep playing with the pills Dr. Lin prescribed for me in my hand. I must have seen this medicine bottle somewhere long ago, but I neither found it in my room nor saw it in the living room. Where exactly had I seen it?



“During hypnosis, you will be awake, even more than usual,” says Dr. Lin. “Not only will you remember the whole process, but if at any time you want to end the hypnosis yourself, you can do as you wish: open your eyes and wake up.”

I nod as I sit on the couch in the consulting room.

“Please close your eyes. Once your eyes are closed, you will begin to relax.”

Dr. Lin’s voice is soft yet flat, without a hint of ups and downs. I can hear her start to play a delicate piece of pure music.

“Good ...While your whole body relaxes ...I want you to think back ...The stairs you used to walk up ...”

“Now ... When I count from 10 to 1 ... Walk down each step the way you like.”

One-step and another. I walk downstairs in my head and breathe deeply to the sound of the music.

“Keep going down to the tenth step. You are about to walk down into the basement to explore the depths of your heart....”

Finally, I arrive at the “basement.” To be precise, this is not a basement; I’m in white light. Amazingly, my consciousness here suddenly becomes incredibly sharp and awake. I breathe deeply in silence.

“Now I will slowly count from one to ten, and when I get to ten, your subconscious mind will automatically guide you back to a time in your past, when an event that was pivotal and influential for you happened. Whatever you see, whatever comes to mind, please tell me like a reporter on a live broadcast.”

“One... Two... Three... Four... Five... Six... Seven... Eight... Night... Ten.”

I’m at home. I am staring death in the face at the dining room table, but it’s empty. Then a stern scolding rings in my ears: “Is this what you’ve been thinking about in your head? Getting out of here without a word?”

Oh, it’s Mom. This time, I take my eyes off the TV and stare straight at her. Her hair is messy, her face pale, her two eye sockets sunken deep, and it seems that her eyeballs are about to fall out of her eyelids with the force of her glare, so angry. I hear a voice speak, a voice that trembles and is horribly hoarse. Then I realize that it’s my own voice.

“Yes, that’s what I’ve been hoping for. To get out of here, to get away from you and your failure, and to live my own life.”

Mom’s eyes open wide, and I can feel the tip of her nose begin to flush; and those ebony eyes turn red. “My failure?”

I feel a strong urge to stop, to apologize to her, to pray for her forgiveness, and make everything become peaceful and acceptable, just like before. “Yes, your failure.” I shoot back viciously, pick up something, and drop it hard on the ground. There is a crash, and I hear something scatter.

It’s pills. I scatter Mom’s pills on the floor. The medicine bottle rolls around on the floor for a few times and then stops. The label reads “Doxepin Hydrochloride.”

Before I can even think about it, I yell out: “Because of the departure of a man you fell apart, lost yourself, and muddled through your days. Not only have you failed, but you’re also even afraid to step out of your failure. You even want me to be buried for your failed life. You coward.”

A slap is thrown in my face. Even though Mom has tried her best to look upwards, tears keep rolling down from her eyes. “Get out,” she growls.

I want to go up to her and wipe away her tears, but my limbs won't listen. "Stop tying my life to yours! Mom, don't you get it yet?" I shout and turn around and slam the door with a loud "bang."

There is another flash of white light, and I appear at the door again the next second. My legs are weak, and I almost fall to my knees. A note is taped to the door: "Don't open the door, call the police!" it reads.

I remember a movie, "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri." I watched it with Mom, and this note reads exactly the same as the one warning of a scene of suicide in the movie.

Mom is dead.

I feel a little tickle in my ankle, so I look down and find that I'm bleeding a lot—the blood spreads from my knee all the way to my ankle. I feel dizzy; my legs cannot support me anymore, and I fall like a puppet with its strings cut.

Dr. Lin's voice comes from far away.

"Good, now, we are about to end this hypnosis. What you have just experienced and felt will be clearly preserved in your memory. When I count from one to ten, you will open your eyes, return to the real world, and resume your normal condition. You will be fully awake."

I open my eyes and realize that my face is already covered with tears. Dr. Lin pats my shoulder. "That's good, Mei. Just let your emotions flow in spite of yourself."

I see the logbook in her hand filled with words I have just said. "I said something really mean to Mom," I whisper.

Dr. Lin still has that very calm look on her face. "Don't worry, Mei. It's normal. It's just a process." She gently strokes my back to adjust my breathing.

After I gradually calm down, she asks me,

"Would you like to attend the next session?"

Fear suddenly surrounds me, as I recall how Mom's hair was disheveled, and her eyes were wide with anger floating before my eyes, as well as the Post-It notes. "Mom is dead," a voice roars. "Why do you want me to recall? Why do you want me to feel such pain?" I ask her back.

She doesn't apologize or explain, as I walk out of the clinic without looking back. I feel a sense of anger like I have been betrayed.

"That medication—Doxepin—does have sleep-aiding properties, but it is also widely used to treat depression and anxiety, so it can have some side effects. Please be sure to contact me if you feel uncomfortable." Before I close the door, she says, "When you decide, you can always call me for an appointment."

## IV

---

Grandma is flipping through the evening paper while eating her food. The silence that I am used to in the past somehow makes me extra uncomfortable today, so I ask, "Grandma, Mom seems to have had a serious case of insomnia."

She stops flipping through the newspaper. "Is that so?" she asks as she softly and resumes the action of her hands.

"Didn't she tell you about it? What went on back then?" I stop my chopsticks.

"Everyone has bad moods at times, but ups and downs are supposed to be a normal part of life," Grandma says. For some reason, Grandma's calm; that peaceful face makes me sick to my stomach. Mom's tearful eyes keep replaying in my mind.

"But I'm the one who got Mom killed," I say.



Grandma frowns and her soothing mask seems to crack. Before she speaks, I go on.

"Mom killed herself because I said hurtful things." I stand up, unable to control the trembling of my voice.

"It's not like that, Mei," Grandma finally speaks. "It's not your fault, don't blame yourself like that. Your Mom doesn't want you to blame yourself either."

"Did she say that to you herself? That she doesn't blame me?" "I can barely contain myself. I'm no longer a child. I'm seventeen! How long are you going to lie to me?"

"How can this be a lie?" Grandma comes over and tries to grab my hand. "Your Mom is gone, but our life goes on. I've lost your mom; she was all I had. I can't lose you again."

"But I can't go on anymore!" Without waiting for her to finish, I break free from her hand and run into Mom's room.

With the lights off, I sit silently, looking at the outlines of the furniture in the room and imagining Mom sitting here just like me. Did she feel lonely as well? I feel exhausted, my eyes getting heavier as I breathe. So, I bury my head down into Mom's sheets, breathing hard and dazed. I recognize a familiar fragrance in the air, which makes me feel safe as if I am back in her arms.

The fragrance makes me feel warm. It's Mom's hug; I can tell the texture and smell of her sweater. A floral mix, with some fruity notes, yet warm and dry, with some roughness. The moon is bright and quiet in the clear night sky. A wooden radio sits on the coffee table in Mom's bedroom. I rest my head on her lap, and she looks happy as she hums a Cantonese song along with the radio.

"

Sayonara'o Sayonara'o

(Goodbye, Goodbye)

而为何心中总有情义在

(And why is there always love in my heart)

你在我心头像永远没变改

(You're still in my heart like you've never changed)

是我的我的宝贝亲爱

(You're still my dearest)

"

The news anchor begins to read aloud from the listener. "Today, I am going to part with my dearest one," reads the anchor.

"Part with my dearest one! What is 'part with,' Mom?" I ask in a childish tone.

"Mei, you're still a little girl. You won't understand. When you grow up, you will know it."

"Oh...Then what is 'the dearest person?'" I ask again, undeterred.

"It's...It's you! My dearest one is my little Mei." Mom takes out a thin cotton swab. "Do you want me to clean your ears for you? Your favorite stuff."

The quiet, happy evening seems like a clip from a movie. All of a sudden, everything around me changes. I know I'm still in Mom's arms, yet I feel a tinge of despair and fear as if this hug is the last. The air stinks. It's getting hard to breathe. I feel my eyelids—heavy as lead. I struggle to open my eyes to find her eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry; I'm really sorry," she says. "How would I live on without you? How would you live on without me?"

I have a lot of resentment in my mind. Mom looks sad, and somehow, I know her sadness is all because of me. I want to speak up and call for help. I want to tell her that I would be a good girl, that I would never let her down—but I can't make a sound.

"My girl, my little Mei, you're all I have." I'm

about to completely lose consciousness, but I can hear her voice shaking.

I realize that Mom is taking both of our lives.

Immediately after, someone shakes me vigorously by my shoulders, and the light pierces through the darkness around me like a dagger, taking me away from the suffocating dream. I lift my face.

A little cold, a little itchy, I feel tears.

"What's wrong with me?" I ask.

"You were just yelling for help," Grandma says as she sweeps me up in her arms. "It's okay, Mei, it's just a bad dream." The wounds on my knee are bleeding again, bright red rubbing against the ground. My hands are also covered in half-dried blood. It seems that these two wounds are bleeding forever and will never heal.

No, it was more than a nightmare. Seeing the look on Mom's face, smelling the fragrance on her clothes, and hearing her words—that apology. What does that mean? I don't understand it, but I instinctively know it is essential, and dreaming about it makes me feel like the jumbled puzzle in my head had nearly found its missing piece—like I'd been waiting for this moment to come.

"No, it wasn't just a nightmare." I look up from Grandma's arms and feel tears sliding down from my eyes because of this movement. "I know; I remember. Mom wanted to kill me; Mom wanted to take me with her. It wasn't a dream; I know it happened for real."

"Tell me! Tell me everything!" I hiss at the look of horror and sadness on Grandma's face.

## V

---

Once upon a time, there was a girl, a strong girl. She grew up to be strong, did her best in everything, and was an uncompromising perfectionist.

She made herself her mom's masterpiece, her mom's pride. Her mom's happiness is her happiness. She would never say "no" to her mom, and their life was always beautiful.

Everyone thought her life would always be as beautiful and smooth as this until, at the age of 31, she had the biggest shock of her life—a broken marriage. They had been the happiest family in the world, or at least that was what their friends and family thought, with a hard-working wife, a thoughtful husband, and a lovely daughter. With all that taken away from her, her soul seemed to be drained away as well. Her only request was to keep her daughter with her.

She lived a chaotic life, and at the age of 32, another significant change in her life occurred—one winter afternoon, she and her daughter were found unconscious and nearly dead from a gas leak. Still, fortunately, a neighbor smelled the gas and came to their rescue.

The accident seemed to make her realize how precious life was despite her melancholy. She tried to pull herself together and determined to bring up her daughter and raise her to be a good child.

At this point in the story, I stop. "That's the story of my mother," I say as I look up into Dr. Lin's eyes. I realize that she's looking into my eyes too.

"And you don't believe that, do you?" she asks.

Do I believe that? I can't tell. Grandma told me all of this. It was a seamless explanation



that Mom was a strong woman, and no one knew how she healed from her trauma; she was amazing. But none of this can explain the fragile look I have in my fragmented memories of her.

No one knows how she healed, but what if she never healed?

"If you believed that too, you wouldn't have come to me." At this moment of my contemplation, Dr. Lin has answered for me. "Let's start today's treatment."

So, I'm now lying on the bed in the consulting room again. Everything is the same as last time, only my nervousness has increased, and, after today, everything will change. Suddenly, my hands are held. It's Dr. Lin. "Your hands are cold," she says to me gently. "Are you afraid?"

I don't know how to describe to her how I feel. |Will everything be different after today?" I ask in a whisper.

"Yes, Mei, when you pick up your lost memories, everything will change, and I can't promise you that the change will be for the better or, for the worse."

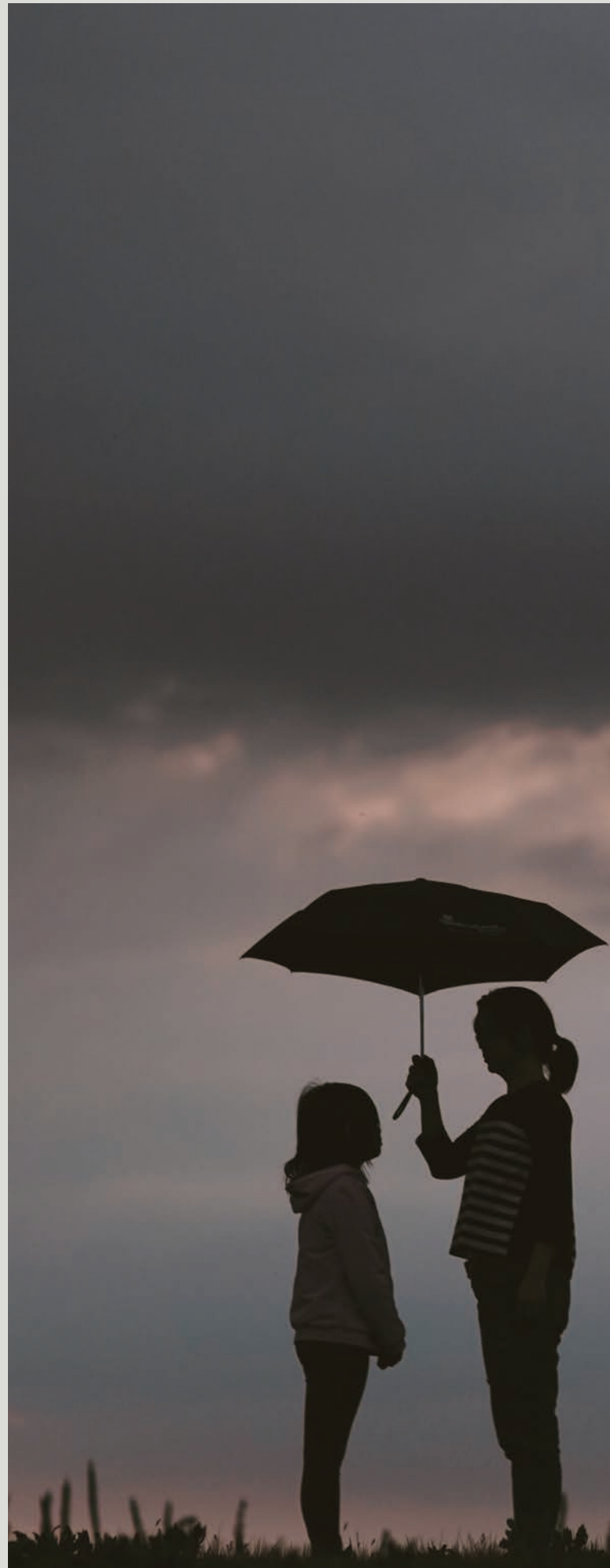
Her brow furrows slightly, and she also seems to feel some difficulties.


"But what I can confirm is that your heart wants to know about this emerging memory—you feel confused, you get pained by your confusion, and you need an answer, which is the only possibility to stop you from hurting yourself."

I know she's right. The dream makes me feel like the black hole is filling in, reminding me that I've been longing for that answer all along.

"Are you ready?" she asks.

"I'm ready. Let's get started." I close my eyes.





Five, four, three, two, one. The elevator descends floor by floor, and when the door opens, I stand on the school building floor. The evening sun is burning the clouds like flames.

I have a sense of sadness in my heart, vaguely like worrying about something. Then I remember that this is an evening after that argument. I'm still hesitating if I should apologize to Mom.

Just then, I hear the phone ring. "The phone rings," I say.

"Who is it?" Dr. Lin asks.

I look at the phone screen. It's Mom. I pick up the phone.

"Mom?"

"Mei, it's me," Mom says on the other end of the line. "Are you still mad at me?"

For a moment, I don't know how to answer, so I listen quietly. Soon I realize that something's wrong with her when a shaky breath comes from the other end of the line.

Mom is crying.

"I'm sorry, Mei. Is it too late now to say sorry? I hope not."

"Don't apologize, Mom. It's my fault, and I'll be home soon ...."

"Don't come back, Mei. Don't come back yet..." My words are interrupted, and she goes on. "It's always been you who apologizes, but it's me who's at fault."

I quicken my pace, running out of the school gate and into the street, towards home. "Mom, where are you?"

"My little Mei, may I call you that? You are right. Mommy is a failure; I have tied my failed life to you. I have nothing, but I wish at least you were mine. How afraid I



was of losing you, Mei. I know that I hurt you deeply when you were four... I didn't give you the right to choose. I am a sinner.

"I'm lonely, very lonely... I've been loyal: a loyal daughter; a loyal wife. How I wish there was someone loyal to me and there for me too.

"I never realized that I was guilty for the pain you felt..." she pauses from choking.

Suddenly my ears hurt, sharp ringing explodes in my ears like a bomb, and I cannot hear anything. I feel sad, grief like a pincer clamp on my windpipe, making me suffocate. "I can't hear you, Mom; I can't hear you!" I shout.

Two warm, dry hands take mine, holding my hands in her palms. "Don't be afraid, my little Mei. Don't be afraid," a very familiar voice whispers, as if it is Mom's voice. The voice is soft; the sharp pain is gone; and the streets with all the traffic become very quiet.

"Mom, I don't want you to leave. Don't you go..." I cry.

"My little Mei, pick up the phone and listen. Listen well; Mommy wants you to listen. This is what Mommy must say," the voice says.

I lift the phone again, and there's a noisy current coming from the other end of the line. Mom's voice comes in, seemingly inauthentic, like a radio show.

I suddenly remember that radio show, her favorite one, "Starry Night", with the anchor reading out audience contributions in a soft voice over the cacophony of currents.

Tears fill my eyes as I carefully identify every word she says.

"Mei, how I want to go back to when you were little... You were short, and you were always bullied when you played with other children. But you were never afraid, and the other children couldn't beat you. Every day you came home with a dirty face, and I always scolded

you while laughing and helping you wash.

"I like to see you playing and at ease; I like to hear you talk about what happened today and what new friends you made ... I like to see you happy.

"My little Mei, how afraid I am to turn you into the next me. Mommy is lonely, hurt, and may never be free—but Mommy wants to see you free and happy. I always want that," she repeats.

I pass by a square where many children are running and flying kites. It's a cool day; the breeze is light, and the kites are flying higher and higher like birds. Faster, faster ... My feet hit the concrete hard, just as my heart hits my chest.

"I'm returning your life back to you. You must live a free and happy life, okay? Would you promise me?" she asks.

With a thud, I get moved by a step. My knees knock on the ground, which is rough, but I don't feel anything. "Mom, wait for me... I'll go back, we'll have a new life, and I'll listen to whatever you say and never piss you off again... Don't you go, I beg you..." I sob, pleading in a trembling voice, a voice that seems not to belong to me.

"It's not your fault that Mommy is too tired to hold out. But you, you will have a new life; you will have freedom. Don't blame me, will you? And don't blame yourself," she says, her voice shaking. "Promise Mommy, would you?"

The noise of the electric current comes; I gradually lose her voice, and one thought becomes clearer and clearer in my mind—these are the last words, and this the last chance to talk to Mom. My heart is in my throat, and I realize I'm now losing her. I have to say the words: I must promise her. This is the last chance. We don't have any more time—even just another night, even just another minute.



"I promise you, Mom... I promise you. " I whisper into the phone with every ounce of strength I can muster.

In the distance, the bird-shaped kite flies higher and higher in the sky. Finally, its string snaps. As if free from gravity, it disappears into the sky.

Ten, nine, eight, seven... Dusk is approaching... The world in front of me is disappearing, the street full of traffic and the square all turning into darkness. I open my eyes, and Dr. Lin is still holding my hands tightly.

"I remember... I remember it all..." I cry.

She holds me tightly. Across her shoulder, I see the sunset outside the window, as red as blood.

---

## *Epilogue*

### *When the Sun Goes Down*

It's dusk again when the last patient of the day leaves. This is the most relaxing time of the day for me when I can say goodbye to the fatigue of work and not yet welcome the tedium of family matters.

"Dr. Lin, I'm off duty! Aren't you leaving?" the assistant nurse at the front desk asks me from the door.

"I still have some documents to check. See you tomorrow!" I wave goodbye to her.

Now that I am alone in the clinic, it is an excellent time to relax. I take a small wooden radio out of the drawer—which, of course, I couldn't have bought. Who listens to the radio these days?

But, this morning, I found it in front of the clinic, wrapped in a beautiful gift box with a card inside.

"When you are tired, listening to the radio



is a good choice. I hope it will keep you company for a leisurely and comfortable time! –A patient who appreciates you.” It reads.

Now I turn on this radio. The last time I listened to the radio like this seems to be last century. I operate it very inexpertly, tentatively pressing a few buttons until a voice comes from the radio.

“Dear listeners, welcome back. This is Starry Night! Here we come to our second phone call!” the anchor says.

Ah, how vintage! I say to myself. What kind of people would call the radio station to confide?

“Hello, this is... This is Plum Blossom. I’m calling today to say goodbye to my dearest one, who left me a year and a half ago, and we didn’t get to say a proper goodbye, which I regret.

“We lived together for sixteen years. She hurt me, and I hurt her and tried to forget her. But lately, I often think about everything we did together... Listening to the radio together; flying kites in the square together; we were all so happy then.”

Her voice sounds familiar and reminds me of a patient, a 16-year-old girl. That was one year ago. It took me a lot of effort to convince her grandma in order to do the hypnosis for her. She had been in great pain and hadn’t made any appointment for an in-person consultation since she recovered that trauma-related memory. I wish I knew if she was okay, and I hope she has been able to face that traumatic memory.

“I want to tell her... She is not a loser or a coward, and even with many traumatic memories. She is still the most important one to me. I no longer resent her. I no longer resent my past. Now, we’re even.

“I want to tell her that I know that she had suffered the same injury as I had and therefore couldn’t have a free and happy life. Now I have recovered from that injury. I have two black scars on my knees, not very pretty. I know she would scold me if she were still here. But, anyway, they are no longer bleeding.

“I left home and am living a hard but free and happy life, just like I promised her.” A thought that strikes me as unbelievable comes to mind. Plum Blossom...Mei.

“It’s so good to hear that you’re now recovering, as if the healing process was so difficult.” says the anchor.

“Yes, it was almost impossible for me to recover,” says Plum Blossom, “but I met someone who gave me the courage and the means to face all the terrible things. At the time, we were not sure if ‘facing it’ was a good solution, but now I want to thank her, and I’m glad I made that decision.”

“I believe that the person you thank will be happy to hear all of this! Now, we’re ready to play the song you ordered. Anything else you want to add?”

“Today, I can finally say goodbye to...my dearest one, properly. It’s her favorite radio program, so I guess she’ll hear it. Goodbye. This time it’s a real goodbye. Please leave in peace and don’t feel worried.”

“Thank you to this listener for calling in! She wants to order an old classic Cantonese song: ‘My Dearest’ from singer Leon Lai. Let’s listen to this wonderful song together,” says the anchor.

The sky has wholly darkened, and I don’t know when tears have filled my eyes. I draw a Kleenex and hum along with the music.



*"Sayonara'o Sayonara'o (Goodbye, Goodbye)*

*我没法隐瞒, 我未放开 (I can't hide that I haven't let go)*

*但我却继续爱你 但你总不再理睬 (And I continue to love you, but you are turning your back on me)*

*Sayonara'o Sayonara'o (Goodbye, Goodbye)*

*而为何心中总有情义在 (And why is there always love in my heart)*

*你在我心头像永远没变改 (You're still in my heart like you've never changed)*

*是我的我的宝贝亲爱 (You're still my dearest)."*





Photograph by Carina

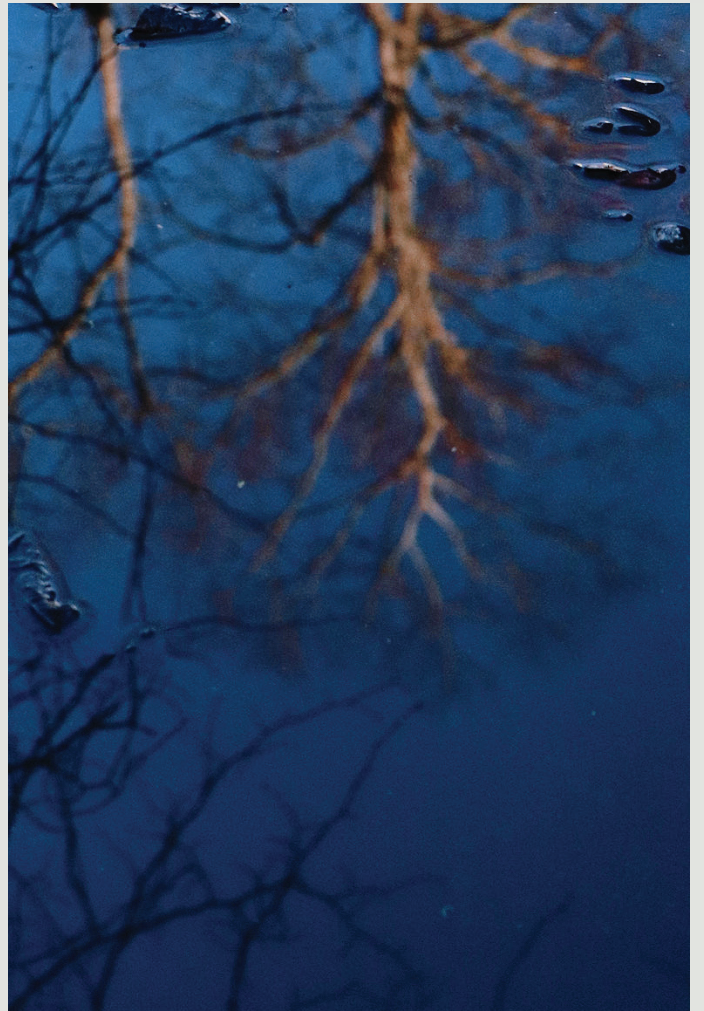
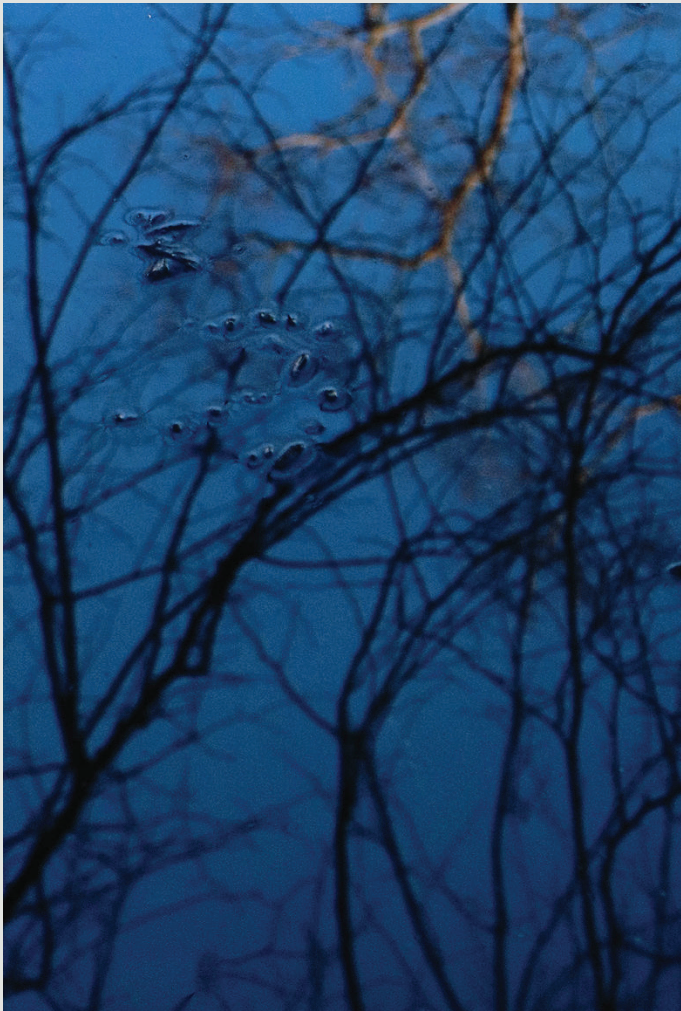
Photograph by Jialin Yan

Photograph by Jialin Yan











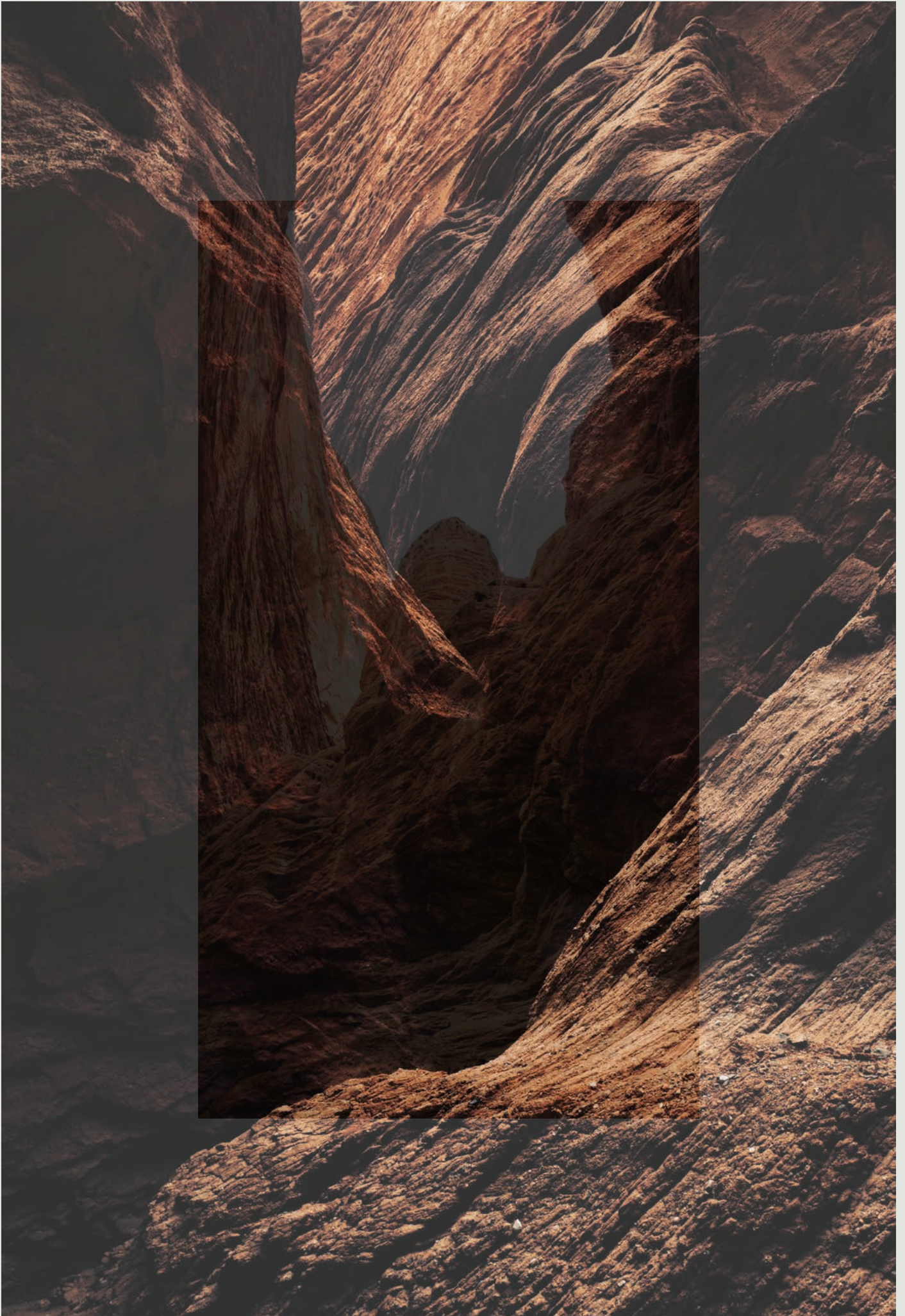


*I feel the breath of the summer night,  
Aromatic fire:*

*The trees, the vines, the flowers are astir  
With tender desire.*











Photograph by Jialin Yan

# Tianshan Grand Canyon





"Winter Dreams" is a short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald that was first published in *Metro-politan* magazine in 1922. It is also widely understood to be the first draft of his idea for his most well-known novel, *The Great Gatsby*. This story tells how a middle-class young man, Dexter Green, attempts to win the affections of an upper-class woman Judy Jones and become part of the old moneyed elite of the American Midwest, but ultimately fails to realize his romantic dream with Judy. As a boy born in rural Minnesota, Dexter first meets eleven-year-old Judy while working at a golf course, and from that time, he falls in love with her. After graduating from college, Dexter becomes starts a successful laundry business and returns to the country club at Sherry Island, where he again meets Judy and starts a romantic relationship with her. However, their relationship does not last long as Dexter soon discovers that he is merely one

of a dozen beaus whom Judy is clandestinely romancing. After eighteen months, when Dexter becomes engaged to Irene Scheerer, Judy appears and asks Dexter to marry her, making Dexter break off his engagement with Irene. Judy again cheats on Dexter and abandons her promise to him. After seven years, when Dexter eventually becomes a successful businessman in New York, he accidentally hears how Judy's beauty has faded, and her husband treats her callously. This time, he cries and realizes that: "long ago, there was something in me, but now that thing is gone. Now that thing is gone, that thing is gone. I cannot cry. I cannot care. That thing will come back no more." What does the "thing" referred to by Dexter? Does he still love Judy? What will happen if they meet again? The following story continues the narrative of "Winter Dreams" and answer these questions by giving Dexter a chance to meet Judy again.



# Winter Gone

Rainie Chen

**D***exter never imagined he would go to Detroit, just as he never imagined he would meet Judy Jones again.*

He ran a chain of drugstores in New York. In the past years, he married and had children with a woman named Emma Channing, whose family ran a trust company on Wall Street. Emma had dark curly hair and brown eyes. When she smiled, she would drop her gaze, with air of overflowing tenderness. He believed it was this smile that led him to their marriage and the beginning of new life.

He and she had two boys. They always spent their weekends playing golf or sailing, but Dexter didn't always take part in those pastimes. Mostly, he just watched this family from a distance. In summer, he would take them to Bar Harbor for a holiday.

Finally, Sherry Island, the Midwest, and Judy Jones became a tiny shadow in his in the back of his mind, which he hardly noticed.

But in his thirty-fifth year, things were changing subtly. Time showed great affection for Dexter, rewarding him with energy and maturity. When the crisp winter began to withdraw at the beginning of this year, an invitation to meet a business partner in Detroit threw Dexter into a preoccupying uneasiness. Still, he was soon comforted by Emma, who said she would stay home to care for their children.

The night before he left Detroit, the partner warmly invited him to a party: "Just for a drink or two, a little party." After a second of hesitation, Dexter accepted, feeling a disturbing but irresistible expectation rising in his heart, and the familiar but vague name rising up from the back of his mind.

The smell of alcohol and perfume washed over him as he crossed the threshold. Under the dim yellow light, the shining ornaments of women, the lifted voice of men, and the flowing piano music all brought him back to the past. Dexter stood aside to indulge himself in a Cole Porter tune. But suddenly his sight fell on a familiar figure, who was listening next to the pianist, resting in a huge fluffy shawl. Her long eyelashes cast a sad shadow on her ivory face. Though she seemed thinner than before, Dexter recognized her with one glance. Judy Jones. He came close to her, as she felt this, she turned around slowly.

They sat down in an inner room.

"I'm certainly glad to see you again. I seldom come here now, you know." Judy tried to be as natural and confident as before, but, apparently, this required some effort. Her lips trembled slightly when she spoke, and her hands were narrowly placed on her knees. Her moist eyes flickered sadly like two bright pools of water.

"I am certainly glad to see you, as well," said Dexter, trying to assure himself of her beauty



in the sombre light. "She is absolutely beautiful, but now so thin," he thought.

Judy's voice swayed in the blooming crimson room: "So how are you doing? I mean, your life in New York."

Dexter wanted to mention his marriage, his sons, and—potentially—his wife, but all he could manage was: "Not bad."

"Well, you must have some children."

"Two boys."

"Adorable." She took a long pull on a cigarette, leaning back slightly.

"So, what about you?"

"Me," Judy tried to squeeze out an alluring smile, but what appeared was a resigned expression of exhaustion: "I have a girl named Edith. As for Lud, Oh, he's..." She tried to piece together her words in a light tone.

When the piano piece came through the crack of the door, Judy's chest began to heave slightly. She put out the smoke and buried her head in her hands.

"Dex, forgive me." She wept, trembling like a rose in torrential rain.

Her sorrow could still touch him, and he came up to her, unconsciously putting his hand on her shoulder.

"In fact, I've had a hard time these years. Lud is just a liar, and the marriage is a hoax. I miss you badly, you know. We should have been married back then. Darling, don't you think so?" She sobbed. Dexter couldn't tell whether she was deliberately showing such grief, but Devlin's words about Lud came to his mind. He felt angry about Lud Simms, feeling Simms ruined his favorite, his joy, but then he was overwhelmed by the irresistible concerns for Judy.

"I know I can't ask too much. But could you stay with me tonight? Won't you, darling?" She raised her limpid eyes with a vague expecta-

tion, holding his hands.

"Maybe you can tell me..." Dexter struggled with his words. But before he managed to speak, there was a knock at the door, accompanied by a series of nervous calls: "Madame! Madame Simms!" At that point, they both noticed a commotion outside the door.

"Yes." Judy got up and came to the door. The servant whispered something to Judy, and her sadness was soon replaced by irritation and anger. "Such a bastard!" she said indignantly.

"I'm sorry, Dex, please allow me to leave for a moment." Judy looked back and speaking it in a sorrowful tone.

The lobby's light fell on Judy's face. Dexter seemed to see Judy's face so clearly for the first time. It was a strange face, and wrinkles were visible. Her big eyes were sunken in the pale skin, and her mouth turned downward in a displeasing crescent. She then vanished behind the curtain.

He looked out of the window, seeing the stars twinkling in the sky. They were beautiful, moving, and flashing. He suddenly understood why he collapsed when he heard about Judy's life many years ago. He was not only grieving for the collapse of Judy's beauty but a more vulnerable and fragile thing. He was mourning for a man who devoted himself to pursuing a mirage but eventually found it a barren illusion built up by the vacuity of wealth. As the dream's emissary, Judy led him towards prosperity, then emptiness and decay.

Judy didn't come back.

He was drunk. The next day, when he woke up, the night was melting in the golden dawn. The snow was melting too. Winter has passed, he realized, thoroughly passed. But this time, he was no longer melancholy nor regretful.

# The Blind Boy

Tammy Gao

*I*

---

Listening tears swirled around the corners of his eyes. Then a string of glowing orbs rolled down his cheek, dripping on the corners of his lips, onto his chest, at last, onto the ground.

The photo on the desk still shows his smiling face as he picked up the trophy. He, who should have had a vigorous boyhood, had his bright eyes taken away by a terrible accident, leaving him in endless darkness. Deprived of light, he could only huddle in a corner, waiting for the arrival of despair.

The collar of his shirt was soaked through. The boy had little strength left to do anything but cry in silence, let alone sit in front of his piano and move his hands. He didn't dare strike a note. His pride had been mercilessly robbed from on high and was scattered in broken pieces of gold on the ground. It was relentless—not a single ray of light shone in his eyes. His heart was charged with sharp pains, and even the shedding of tears could not alleviate them.

What could he do? What could it do? The piano stood there alone, with its black and white keys unguided by his delicate and graceful fingers. It became an ornament in the room, or, perhaps, a colorless pitiful black and white souvenir. Like him.

The boy hobbled to his feet and groped in the air. He knocked the trophy over, and it hit him right in the heart. There was the sound of





glass shattering, and perhaps something else breaking with it. His strong feelings were like a tyrant; they were relentlessly grabbing him by the throat. His limbs were numbed, blood clotted, and his heart was choked. A knife was stabbing into his heart with the rhythm of the raindrops, and his organs were going to crack.

The boy clutched the broken glass—clutched against his body. Finally, like a raindrop spattering the boy threw the glass away from him and sank to the ground.

“Well, it seems that God has made me be like a person searching in the dark, a blind detective with his eyes wide-open, endlessly drowning in the memories of the past,” he thought. At last, he fell asleep covered in dried tears.

## II

---

The boy rambled along the road with only a guide stick without the slightest idea that he was walking into a muddy path. Amid the profound silence, there was a sudden inexplicable sound of something falling to the ground. The boy could not describe the strange sound and could not even imagine what had made it. It was as if a drop of water had fallen into a lake, or a rock had knocked on the door with a thud, or the sound of the wooden fish in the temple. They both seem to come from far away and yet so close to the ear. Overhead there was the sound of birds flapping their wings, surprisingly loud. The boy clutched his guide stick tightly and continued to tap forward.

A falling leaf was like a dead butterfly dancing with the wind, up and down, high and low. After a short journey of floating, it finally crossed the tip of the boy’s nose in peace. His body trembled, and his pores suddenly opened

as if a knife had cut through his face. The boy shuddered. I am alone in this deep forest, he thought, and I am a completely empty cocoon wrapped in darkness. The great darkness swelled little by little, eating away at his remaining pride—a chewing sound could be heard. No direction, no sky or ground. Alone in the dark labyrinth.

The boy pondered seriously: how nice it would have been if my life had ended in that accident instead of continuing, forcing me to spend the rest of my time in the dark! I will stop breathing in this forest, and muddy path, bury my last trace of consciousness in the infinite darkness. Let my last drop of blood dry up, and, finally, let me rot under the trees. My pride has faded into the wind. I would rather it had never come. For the first time since the accident, he heard another sound other than his tears. The darkness, roughness, and messiness inside him spoke of nothing more than the sweat of unwillingness.

The fog lifted and the leaves of the shrubs gleamed against the sun. The sunlight poured soft rays through the dense clouds, and the raindrops on the leaves reflected the crystal light. The wind stopped, only leaving the sound of his pounding heart.

It was as if something had been replaced in his skin. There was a crack in his head. He gulped for breath and threw away his white cane. The sound of something landing seemed to come from far away, making his body much lighter. His sense of smell grew sharper, the greenness in the air became more intense. He felt it again—the dead leaves were once vividly alive.

He is empty, there is no longer anything to make him afraid.

### III

---

"So-Do-La-Fa-Mi-Do-Re"

A beautiful string of notes came from upstairs. He pricked up his ears and listened intently. Yes! It was the sound of the piano. He got up slowly and fumbled with his hands. Stumbling, he came to a familiar place. The boy gathered his courage and put his hand on the lid of the piano, rubbing away the traces of time. The dust floating in the air made his nose uncomfortable. He sat down on his buttocks, the familiar touch of the chair lifting his body.

"Do"

He relied on his memory and pressed down with his index finger at a familiar spot. The crisp sound of the piano made him feel ecstatic. It was as if he was back in the spotlight at this moment. His fingers kept dancing on the keys, and the moon, the cicadas, the flowers, and the breeze all changed into moving notes that flowed down from the piano.

At that moment the empty cocoon was cracking.

### IV

---

When the first clear note was struck on the keys, the melodious notes were like ripples that swept through the audience's hearts, and the whole hall fell into silence. With a series of soft and leaping notes, the murmurs in the hall were swept away. Everyone in the audience was reduced to a stone statue with only their sense of hearing as if under a spell, their spirits dancing with the ethereal music.

The sound crossed five octaves, breaking free from the confines of the concert hall recalled the best of times, the splendid frost

on the night of his first performance, slowly flowed up through his memory. At the end of the song, the blind boy rose to show appreciation. The spotlight hit him, and he was no longer depressed.

### V

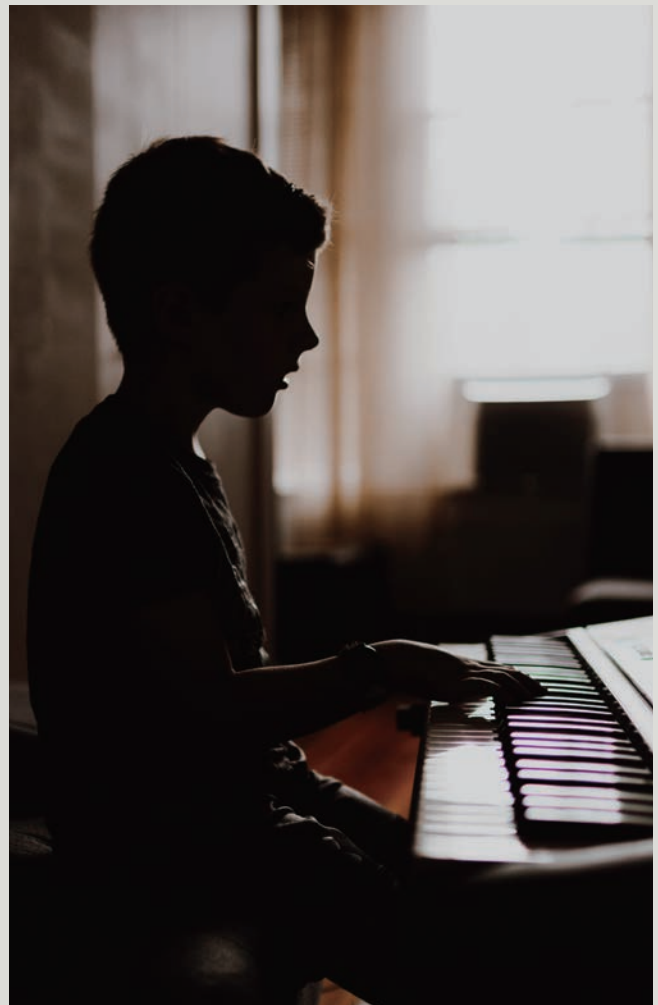
---

The boy wanted to thank his strange and familiar neighbor upstairs. It was the string of notes that led him back to the piano when he was down. The boy knocked on the door, his heart surging like a lake moving with layers of ripples. For a long time, his heart was full of gratitude and joy.

"Da-da, da-da."

Only then did he hear the rhythmless sound—the door opened.

A blind boy stood in front of him....





# Theft in a Tech Company

Jenny Gao

## *I*

---

“The man committed suicide, hanging himself in the staff dormitory.” I tried to suppress my emotions, but my voice was shaking.

“I heard about that. Well, that’s a pity,” Mr. Zhang leaned on the office chair, examining a chip, “we have found that he is the criminal anyway.”

“What are you going to do with that guy?” Tears welled up in my eyes.

“Thank you, Detective Wang,” he rose his head and avoided my question, “we will transfer the commission to your account immediately. Secretary Zhao, Secretary Zhao! Transfer the money to Detective Wang!” He shouted outside his office.

## *II*

---

A man rushed into my office last week. His white sports vest looked odd inside the black suit jacket, and a pair of blue Nike shoes



were out of place with the suit outfit. Sitting down, he put a bunch of keys and the latest iPhone 3 on my table, making an unpleasant noise.

"My secretary has contacted you. I am Zhang, the president of Victor Tech Company." He introduced himself while sitting down.

"I hear that you're one of the best private detectives in Shenzhen, good at—small-expression?" He reached his hand to me, "I need your help, Detective Wang."

"Thank you, Mr. Zhang. It's micro-expression by the way," I shook his hand, "I learn that there are problems with the quality control testing of the cell phone chips. MOTOROLA found that 20% of your chips are not satisfactory?"

"Yeah, but my staff had checked the raw materials, machinery, and manufacturing process. Everything is clean!" He suddenly sat up, and his voice got higher, "it's crazy!"

"Have you given feedback to MOTOROLA, saying that you had checked those production processes and nothing went wrong?" I said

while writing his words down.

"I did, but MOTOROLA doesn't give a shit! They fucking urged us to fix this problem, or they will terminate our contract relationship!" He shouted, raising his fist, "God knows how much I have done to get this precious American client." This is a \$200,000 order!"

"I am sorry to hear that, Mr. Zhang," I interrupted him, "assuming MOTOROLA is correct, then someone must have substituted the original chips with the fake ones."

"Damn it!" His face suddenly turned red when hearing my words, "I knew it! My instinct was right."

"Have you mentioned this quality problem to your employees?" I asked.

"No, not yet. I didn't want to alert the criminal." He raised his eyebrow, staring at me, "This bastard may escape without paying anything for his crime."

"OK. I need a copy of the names of the employees, the production process, and all employees' bank accounts. I will visit your factory tomorrow." I arranged my notes, filtering his



furious emotions out, "See you then."

"Why bank accounts?" Zhang showed confusion.

"To check whether they receive extra money from unknown resources." I replied.

"Brilliant! Brilliant!" Zhang left satisfactorily.

I showed up in the company the next day. Looking up, a big slogan in the gray factory read, "Time is money, Efficiency is life, Out of China, Based on the world."

"Morning, Detective Wang," Boss Zhang ran out and greeted me in front of his office, "Sorry for keeping you waiting. I was in a meeting just now, preparing for my company's expansion."

"I have read the materials, there are four groups of people who have direct access to the chips. They are workshop workers, packers, warehouse managers and supervisors," I took out the documents in my briefcase, "based on your usual observations, is there anyone suspicious?"

He lowered his head and frowned. After a moment, he said,

"No, I don't know. I'm suspecting everyone right now." He cried, "Detective Wang, I haven't slept for two days. I just want to know who stabbed me from behind."

"I caught a slacker on my rounds today," he continued. "I slapped in his face and fired him immediately." Mr. Zhang became loud and the blue veins on his neck popped out, "Machines don't make mistakes. Machines don't steal! You agree?"

I felt uncomfortable with his word and was about to tell him that it was wrong to treat his employee in that way, but on second thought, I decided not to confront him because it was unprofessional.

"Please calm down. I know you're under

a lot of pressure and want to do things perfectly." I patted Boss Zhang on the shoulder and continued to do my job. "I need you to make a speech in front of the staff." I showed Zhang my plan, "you imply to them that you had already known who did it and that you're angry about it. I will examine their reaction. But you don't need to be very straightforward because..."

The secretary knocked at the door and interrupted me.

"Boss, lunch is here. You have been working consecutively for 7 hours and haven't eaten anything."

"Get lost! Can't you see detective Wang and I are talking?" Zhang threw a pack of documents at the door. Secretary closed the door with a bowing position and kept apologizing.

"You can have lunch first, Boss Zhang." I pretended to be calm, but I hated his ruthlessness.

"No. I won't eat until we fix the problem," he turned to me, "I will do the speech now. Terrify them, right? I got it!"

"It's not like terrifying them, but..." I tried to continue the speech which was interrupted. But Boss Zhang was so swift and had already grabbed the microphone.

"Attention! Attention! Everyone gathers in front of the stages in 10 mins! 10 mins!" He shouted in the microphone that connects to the whole factory.

Mr. Zhang and I stood on a one-meter platform and could see 40 people's faces clearly. These workers all wore grey labor suits. I scanned their faces, no expressions, and no life in their eyes. No one was talking to another. Some played with their nails, some stared at their feet, and some stared straight ahead.

"I know what you did! You rat!" Zhang's voice broke the dead silence, and the micro-

phone made a huge humming noise.

"You ruined our big order!" The boss kept spouting mouth water, "I declare that everyone's wage is decreased 10% for three months because of you, the worthless creature ever!"

Suddenly there was a great uproar. People cursed the "rat" with each other, but they dared not to say anything about the wage-cutting. My eyes fell on a young man. He was the only one showing expressions that a human has. His forehead knotted in a frown. He kept biting his lip, and his hand was clutching the corner of his coat. Based on my 8 years of experience, I could tell that he cared about the

boss's vicious speech. It was likely him. I felt sorry for him, but I had to do my job. Before he left, I took a quick glance at his name card. His name is Lee, and he is a packer.

"Got a reason to cut down their wages," Boss Zhang smiled proudly, "all those money will go into your pocket, Detective Wang, bonus for you. Keep working!" He blinked his eye making a shushing gesture, and left. I felt humiliated. I wanted to punch him in the face and say that I don't want your damn money.

I found Lee's staff dormitory in the evening. I wanted to tell him to leave Shenzhen and find somewhere else to make a living. This was





very unprofessional, and could ruin my reputation as a private detective if anyone knew about it, but I had decided to take the risk. I knocked at his door, but no one answered.

I looked up at the window: A head was hanging on the roof. It was Lee. With great panic, I used my elbow to break the window without thinking. The glass fragments wounded my arm. Blood stained my white suit red.

But it was too late. The gash on Lee's neck had already turned purple, and he stopped breathing. I saw a letter on the table with neat handwriting:

I am sorry. I have no courage to face anyone. I am a coward. I have no way to go.

My daughter has been sick recently, and my dad has Alzheimer's. I cannot afford my family's living expenses with my little wages, so I came up with the idea of stealing. I managed the number of chips I steal—under 10 per time—so that we wouldn't fail the quality control test. I can get \$20 more each time, perfectly covering a day's expense. But God is watching me all the time. I am guilty. Now my wages decrease by 20%, I can no longer afford anything. I am a loser. Sorry for letting everyone down, especially my daughter.

I took a deep breath. Looking at his young face, I saw several white hairs on his head, and messy stubbles. He was still wearing his grey labor suit with red oil stains. His shoes were not his size, and they were dirty. I helped him close his eyes, and I started to cry. The man's life ended in 2009.

This is not a suicide. It is a murder, and I am one of the accomplices.

### III

---

He has a desperate reason for doing so! He can barely support his whole fami-

ly! And he didn't take much, either someone else was stealing chips too, or MOTOROLA's report data was wrong." I insisted on speaking for Lee.

Mr. Zhang frowned, and narrowed his eyes into a small line. The dead silence in the office told me that the first reason was not correct.

Meanwhile, Secretary Zhao hurried over, "Our expansion agreement is settled, and the contractor is ready to start construction on the new factory tomorrow."

"Arrange the meeting tomorrow morning and give me the briefings." Zhang reopened his eyes, "tell MOTOROLA that we will deliver the missing products again, and guarantee them that all the products will be self-tested before delivery in the future."

"And send Detective Wang out," Zhang turned his chair behind me.

### IV

---

"MOTOROLA made the mistake?" I stopped Secretary Zhao outside the office.

"I am not supposed to say, but..." Secretary Zhao lowered her head. She thought for a while, and looked at me determinately, "MOTOROLA sent the wrong QC report. The real data is 5%. It is still not very qualified, but since they got the report wrong, they didn't cut off our contractual relationship. They emailed us yesterday night to apologize, asking us to reissue the chips, and pay more attention to the quality next time."

"Thank you for telling me this." I smiled at her, but my heart was bleeding.

"Anyway, I am going to resign next week." She smiled back.

"Wish you have a bright future." I shook her hand.

The background of the page is a photograph of a misty landscape. A low, orange sun or moon is visible in the sky, partially obscured by mist. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of bare trees and hills, all shrouded in a thick mist. The overall color palette is muted, with various shades of blue and grey, and a single point of orange light from the sun/moon.

# The Edge of the Fog

Rachel Yao



---

## Chapter 1

### Forum

Topic: How to pretend to be normal?  
Date: 14:22 10/09/2018  
User: V

---

**D**oes fog have an edge? If so, what would it look like?

These two questions came to my mind when I first saw this forum's name, *The Edge of the Fog*. It sounded like a vague philosophical notion and reminded me of the short-answer questions on geography exams in my high school days. Although I graduated only four months ago, my short-term memory had been constantly stretched and mixed up with different feelings and emotions, finally melting into a blurry and unshaped gummy candy.

Well, I'm a freshman at a university in a coastal town. Since the sea was integral to my life, I was pleased with the admission result at first. Salty and humid air, beautiful coastline, the sound of gentle waves crashing on reefs—all these scenes are similar to my hometown. I thought the familiar surroundings helped to ease my mind. More importantly, the sea has the power to calm me down at any time.

However, things didn't always go as I expected. After the college entrance examination, everyone thought that the weight of the interminable exams had finally been lifted, and everyone immediately reveled in newfound freedom, and so did I.

I soon realized that it was more of a beginning than an ending. Most of the time, peo-

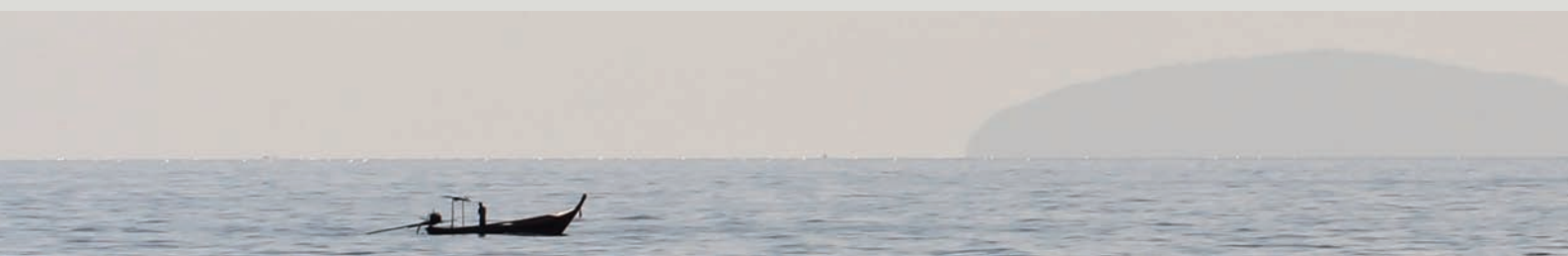
ple chuckled as they talked about their big dreams and aspirations for the future. When they turned to me and asked what I thought, I tried to force a smile but failed.

I didn't say anything till the end. Then they left with their pipe dreams.

Sometimes I felt the so-called freedom conflicted with and challenged my daily routine. As a result of lifestyle changes, I was no longer enthralled by the things that attracted me. I tried to fit into this new life, so I went to parties with my friends or sat on the couch and watched sitcoms with my family. But I was still unhappy, and I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me.

During most of the holiday after the college entrance examination, I was trapped in a whirlpool of negative feelings. My brain was blank for a long time, and I barely reacted to the people and things around me. The emptiness and lethargy that never faded gradually engulfed me, and I did almost nothing during the day...GOSH.

Sorry to bother you if I sound like a whiner. It's my first time posting on a forum, and I have to stop now because I have a three-hour lesson on business law at 3 pm. After the class, I may return. At the very least, saying these words out loud makes me feel better.



Topic: Re: How to pretend to be normal?  
Date: 17:05 10/09/2018  
User: Gill98

---

Thank you for finding this hidden tree hole and sharing your innermost thoughts here, V. It's not exactly a hotspot, as you may be aware. Several wanderers came upon this forum and stood for a short while before moving on. Perhaps you are the only other person who left footprints here after me. I am Gill, a third-year computer science student. I started this forum as a practice, but it's already proven worth the effort because of your participation.

I think there is no absolute answer to the first two questions you asked. How do you define fog? It can be concrete or abstract, dull or colourful, shaped or formless. It can be whatever you choose. Let me give you an example: your current mood. Understandably, you'd like to know when and how to get through this difficult time as soon as possible. You can't see anything but the void and desolation in the heavy fog. It was what I was afflicted with as

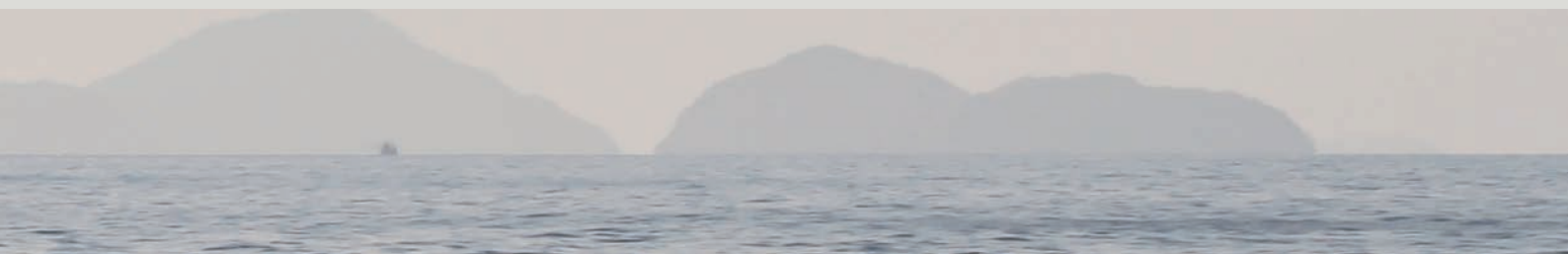
well. So that's it; I have made it through, and now I am still here, alive and kicking.

The fog used to put me at a loss. Like a blind man without a guide stick, every time I reached out my hand cautiously, I felt like I was on the verge of securing a safe haven this time. But the truth is I couldn't hold anything but air, no matter how hard I tried. The upside is that I came out of my comfort zone and explored more new worlds. It's wonderful.

Anyway, I hope you will come up with your own answer one day.

P.S.

There is no need to apologize for this. You are free to say whatever you want here. That is why we have this forum. You can also find me at [greenrain@123.com](mailto:greenrain@123.com). If it helped, I would be glad to be a good listener to you.





Topic: Can't be happier  
Date: 09:44 13/09/2018  
User: V

---

Hi Gill!

These days I have been occupied with my first essay, and I didn't find your reply until now. After reading it three times, I could finally believe it was true: someone took the time to respond to my ramblings. At first, I was only looking for a private space to pour out my joys and sorrows. Now you listen and talk to me, which is much more helpful. :-)

It's good to know that you are out of the fog, and it inspired me a lot. Oh, I haven't introduced myself yet—just call me Vivian. I had attempted to rid myself of those blue “fogs,” too. But in some ways, I'd rather just break through them entirely.

While laying on my bed at midnight, I tried to recall happy memories, such as a joke my friend shared with me, the scent of Jasmine quietly booming under my windows, or the spaghetti my mother made for supper. But soon, my mind drifted away from here and now. Then I turned to seek help from elders. However, they tended to believe that I was exaggerating the common teenage issues, at least that was what my mother thought.

“Only worrywarts shed their tears over something pointless,” she said, interrupting my words without turning her head.

Adults tend to treat my emotions as if they aren't important at all, and I find this IRRITATING. I wonder whether they had similar feelings as me when they were young.

Getting support from peers appears to

work, I guessed. So, after a glass of champagne at a party, I plucked up the bravery to speak up. Just while looking for someone to confide in, I realized that everyone was dancing, singing and rejoicing as if they had nothing but happiness at this moment. I decided to swallow the words and continued to sip the wine instead because I didn't want to ruin anyone's good time at the party.

“Come to join us and have some fun tonight!” one of my friends greeted me delightfully. Normally, I would be grateful if he invited me. But at this time, I just wanted to conceal my vulnerable side. I was too tired to pretend to be happy and involved at the party. The thought of not fitting in here made me want to escape from the deafening music and laughter immediately. I am not an introvert, but in this case, I preferred to spend hours looking after my quiet floral friends in my little garden.

Well, that's all in the past. Today is the thirteenth day of my college life. I am still getting used to my new surroundings. Some of my new friends invited me to have a trip together to a small island on the upcoming National Holiday. Still unsure if I should go or not, as I had initially planned to return home because of some kind of homesickness. I also want to see whether my flowers have been well-tended since I left. Btw, do you have any plans for your seven-day holiday?

Topic: Re: Can't be happier  
Date: 22:08 17/09/2018  
User: Gill98

---

Dear Vivian,

Okay, I bet your college life is more challenging but rewarding than mine. At least I never wrote my first college essay that early. Having a trip on the island sounds great. The change of scenery might lead to something completely different. For this holiday, I'm supposed to keep working on a project with my team members. Long story short, we attempt to use AI technology to prevent suicides by detecting suicidal messages on social media. It has a lovely name, "Tree Hole Action".

I am very happy to see that you make your every endeavour to change the status quo rather than let yourself fall into the quagmire. Seeking help is good. We must admit that sometimes our strengths are not enough to solve the problem. Have you ever thought about finding a therapist to figure out your current confusion? I think maybe what you need now is not only someone listening to you, but also someone who can guide you on how to get through the difficulties. I dare not say that the consultation is 100% effective, but my therapist has certainly been an important partner in the battle with my disease.

Yes, I was depressed. A few years ago, an unknown but powerful force robbed my vitality for life and the ability to be happy. No one

knew I was going through a lot of pain because I was no different from anyone else on my surface, and I still laughed and talked with people as usual. Actually, I almost couldn't do anything when I was alone. Even replying to a message made me miserable. I didn't realize I was undergoing a mental illness. What's worse, my pride wouldn't let me expose my condition and I was afraid that people would talk about me behind my back. I could have avoided all of this.

I can't remember how long this situation lasted, maybe for a half year or longer. But one thing is sure - I was sick of a life full of "don't" and "can't": don't want to socialize for no reason, can't read any sentence from a book, don't know what I should do tomorrow, can't feel useful.... "I might seek professional help," I said to myself before the thought of committing the self-harm emerged. One week after, I walked into Jamie's office and became her newest patient. It was not easy for me to trust others and open up, but Jamie made it happen. Now I don't feel ashamed to admit that I was attacked by depression, and it was over.

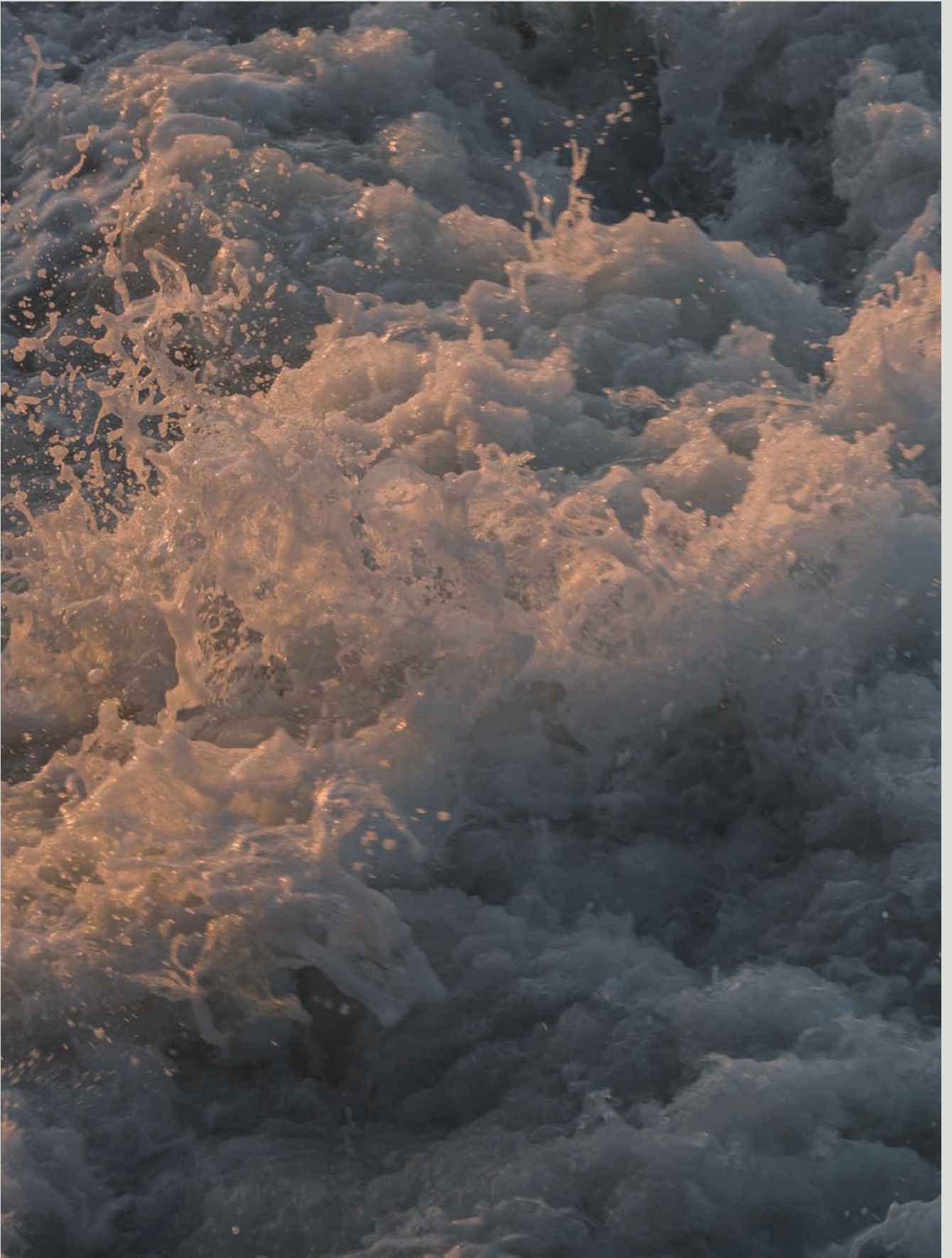
It seems irresponsible to promise you that everything will be alright. Unless you take action, nothing will change. Good luck to you, Vivian.



---

## Chapter 2

*E-mails*



Date: 21:22 22/09/2018  
From: Vivian <thevivian@123.com>  
To: Gill <greenrain@123.com>  
Subject: Final decision on the destination

---

Dear Gill,

I guess you must have been too busy to log in to the forum recently, so I decided to “talk” with you via email.

I felt sorry about what happened to you before. If I could meet you at that time, I would give you a big hug and send you some flowers planted by myself. Sometimes I receive great relief from their scent.

Your project reminds me of a line from Tagore’s poem: “The world has kissed my soul with its pain, asking for its return in songs”. Past experiences endow you with extraordinary empathy and creativity. You can now make full use of these gifts to help more people in deep trouble. What doesn’t kill you will make you stronger. Now I believe in this quote.

To be honest, I envy you to some extent. You have already found something that you will strive for. I am still struggling with a variety of articles of law. For the thousandth time, I have questioned whether I had made a wrong choice because I am really not that interested in law. This doubt caused a fight between my mother and me last night.

After finishing a class at 8 pm, I followed the crowd out of the classroom, and suddenly one of them shouted: “A full moon!”

The video recorder in my mind rewound automatically. It brought me back to the scene of the last Mid-Autumn Festival that I spent with my extended family when my grandfather was still alive.

On this still warm evening, a surge of nostalgia drove me to dial the number. It was 8:15 pm; maybe they had just finished dinner. As

I stood by the ivy-covered wall beneath the dormitory building, the laughter and conversations of my classmates blew through me like a gust of wind. After about 15 seconds, mom picked up the phone.

“Hey, dear.” She sounded a bit tired but still fine.

“I just finished my class, and I am on the way back to the dorm. How is everything going?” We exchanged updates casually. Then she started asking me questions about my schoolwork.

“I’m not cut out for this major at all.” I twirled a strand of my hair between my fingers.

“Vivian, I want you to take it seriously rather than just complaining all the time like you did on holiday.” Mom’s voice was tinged with anger.

I felt wronged because I have already tried my best to be a good student, but the legal field is complicated. My mother is a lawyer and she expects me to achieve as much as she did. To be honest, I don’t know what other major I could choose besides this one—I was bewildered about what subject truly appealed to me.

Looking at the brighter side of this issue, I have finally decided how to spend my holiday: going on the trip with my new friends. The thought of spending a few days at the seaside has really relieved my spirits. Last but not least, thanks for your suggestion about the therapist, Gill. It means a lot to me and I will try. Hope your project goes well!





Date: 21:22 2/10/2018  
From: Gill <greenrain@123.com>  
To: Vivian <thevivian@123.com>  
Subject: Re: Final decision on the destination

Dear Vivian,

Talking with you becomes what I look forward to most of these days. I am more productive than before and work well with my teammates. You made me feel needed, and I

appreciate it. In return, I would like to give you some other lines written by the poet Tagore: "If you shed tears when you miss the sun, you also miss the stars". I tend to understand it as saying that if you view things that upset you from a new perspective and you may realize you are lucky. It might be annoying that your mother kept chattering about your study, but at least she cares. I know it sounds ridiculous, but none of my parents attended my high school graduation ceremony. You see, we envy



each other and forget what we have already had.

I agree with you about the magic of flowers. At the end of that graduation day, I stood by a flower stand. Its owner, a girl I never saw before, came and sent me a bunch of flowers consisting of daisies and cornflowers.

"It is the last bouquet today. I want to send it to you," she said. I seldom receive kindness from strangers, but I couldn't say no. I really needed comfort.

"They mean new beginning and hope. Congratulations on your graduation." She gave me a shy smile, then returned to clean up her stand.

Your words reminded me of her. In a moment, your image in my heart overlaps with her, although we have never met. Your passion for plants and kindness, that's it. Viv, the answer is always in your mind.

Enjoy your holiday. xxx



---

## Chapter 3

### *Monologue*

2018/10/3

Dear Diary,

It is 5 am now, and I am sitting on the balcony of my hotel room and waiting for the sunrise. It's chilly outside on an early autumn morning, so I head back to the room to get my coat and you, my dear old friend.

Let me write down three good things that occur each day first. My therapist Louis recommended I do so, and I have kept these notes for a week.

The first thing is, while out with my friends, I saw things that are quite usual but I had never really paid attention to them. Actually, I "felt" them rather than "seeing" them. Louis came up with this idea and it was the first time I heard about the term "Highly sensitive person." Will sensitivity be a good thing? I was a bit confused. "It is both a blessing and a curse to feel everything so deeply. Obviously, you have such a talent. Try to embrace and use it appropriately," Louis told me at the end of our second session.

Thus, I felt the green leaves' dancing and rustling in the wind, birds' singing, pedestri-





ans' footsteps and the sound of dogs sniffing the bushes all intertwined. All these elements make up the movement of life. Meanwhile, the song "Feeling Good" began to play in my head.

Even in October, if you stay in the sun for more than five minutes, you will melt. One must wait until nightfall, then everything seems to get better.

The scorching heat was gone with the wind, and so was my fidgeting. I walked barefoot along the seashore and squatted down sometimes, feeling the sand and saltwater flowing through my fingers. All I could see was blue, varieties of blue, and a sea of people. Families, couples, and groups of vigorous teenagers all had peaceful smiles on their faces. My mood was lit up by this atmosphere, and then there's the second good thing: I haven't felt relief for such a long time, and now I got it again.

The sky had already turned a darker shade of blue, blurring the line between water and sky. The sea drew an invisible line and strung glittering lights of buildings standing distant from the beach. After taking photos, I sent an email that I had already written to the dean. It's a request about transferring to the horticulture major. This is the third good thing: I made my own decision for the first time. I swear one day I will send an actual bouquet to Gill.

The waves kept licking my toes and wiped away all of my footprints. For a moment, all my self-consciousness melted away. Like a drop of water, I quickly dived into the sea, becoming an inseparable part of this seascape. Everything in the world was closely connected, harmonious and unified.

As I felt this, the sea was shrouded in a thick blanket of fog, but it began to vanish slowly. Then, a thread of sunlight was gilding over everything.