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# Summertime

Xiyu Hu







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I published my latest script collection Philadelphia in the summer, and after that, I went back to the town that I lived in until my teenage years, in the corner of the northeast. I went to my parents' apartment and planned to spend a week there. It was still summertime, my parents popped a bottle of champagne, and I shared a cigar with my dad. But I felt like a stranger in my home until I found a script with a yellowing cover, titled Philadelphia.

August. Two hours' drive away from the town, our river lies. Like many other children in the town, we had spent our vacations on the bay by the river since a very young age. In the late afternoon, when we were passing by the bay, the citrus-like clouds were summoning baskets of trout, and men were hanging fishing lines there. These people were often middle-aged bachelors and middle-aged men who couldn't stand their wives' prattle. Sometimes they would bring their fathers, who couldn't stand their wives either. Women also took their children to the children's center or day camps as usual. Moms generally gave their kids to others and went to work – but at that time, they went to salons, played tennis, and danced instead. Young adolescents could follow their parents to fish, salons, tennis yards, and dance halls, or play their games in their secret base.

You and I used to be members of these secret



base games, but after soon getting bored of the games, we found a new base in the yard close to the bay, a corner of a grove next to cabins. We would choose a dead trunk with azure moss, or an old and wise oak tree, to sit or to lie on. No one would disturb us. No one wanted to disturb a pale Asian girl who did badly on her maths and a weird Latino boy whose mother tongue was le Français du Quebec.

I still remember that I was trying to follow and learn French from you. You said I did well, but the tongue I spoke was not Quebec at all. We laughed. You asked if French had an accent in my hometown. I shook my head since I didn't really realize where my hometown was. Somewhere in eastern China?

I still remember that you were writing a script. Horace, you named it Philadelphia. On the grass, you read it to me. I was lying on your chest and tasting the last piece of cherry pie. Philadelphia, where I hadn't been, you said you were born there. Philadelphia, which I have totally forgotten the plot of now. But what I do remember was that the cherry pie was as sweet as your kisses.

I still remember the old song that you sang, older than your great-grandmother. You sang like Gershwin, whispery. Summertime. Later I heard a similar rhyme in the song of Lana Del Rey, in which she says summertime is full of sadness. I didn't understand what she meant then, but now I see. You said this would be the last summer that you could spend at our holiday resort because your parents were about to file for divorce in autumn. I wondered why they were still spending time with each other. You told me that you believed they were loving each other. "Even they are about to divorce this autumn?" "Yes, I think so," you shrugged, "Maybe they are just

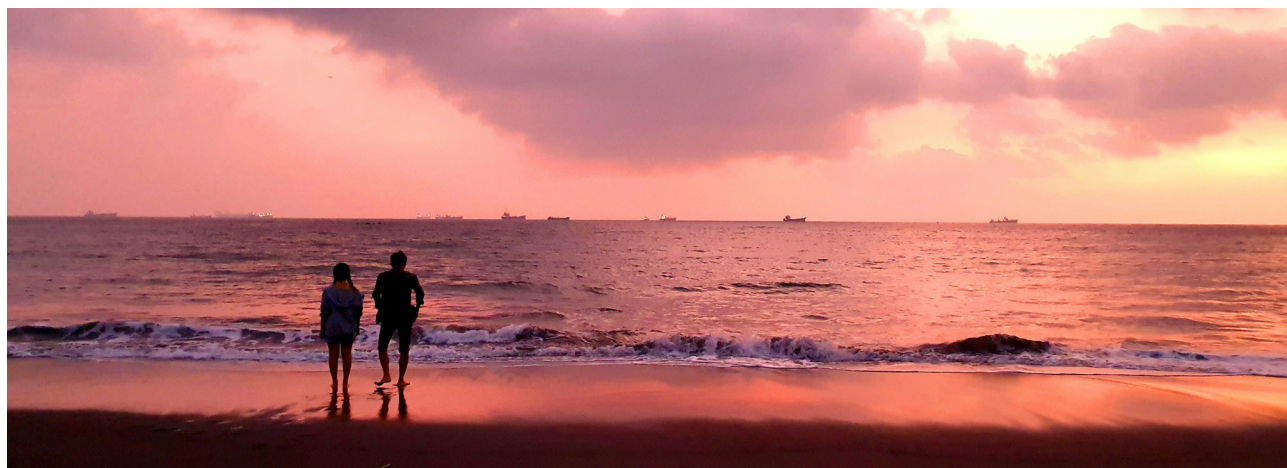
having trouble understanding the languages that they are speaking to each other." I shook my head tiredly, and sighed, "Then don't forget to mail me postcards." You whispered, reached out your arms, and I felt the warmth of your arms around me. It was getting dark. A breeze blew silently, and the twittering of birds was quieter. The end.

I cannot remember the last time when I saw you. Maybe in December? March? Christmas or Easter? On the day that you moved out of our neighborhood, you said you wanted to move back to a francophone community, so I guess you went back to Quebec or somewhere else where residents' mother tongue is le Français du Quebec. But aren't you a Latino? Wouldn't you feel strange, just like when I went back to my hometown in eastern China? You'd say yes. I knew it. Or, maybe, you've gone to Philadelphia.

In late July, after I published my latest script collection Philadelphia, I briefly lived with my parents and then went back to our resort cabin. I unfolded the yellowing cover, like Proust tasting his Madeleine. When passing by the mailbox, for no reason, I switched the rusty handle of it, then found a postcard with ink-faded, illegible writing. The postmark came from a little town in Quebec. The date on the card was August 2012, the first summer that you left. I stood in front of the mailbox for a long while, after I heard what my mother stated in the phone call.

"Mom, do you know if there is a message from Horace? You know, the Latino kid in the resort. Where did he move to?" I asked.

"Horace? Who's that? I've never heard of a child called Horace..."







# GAZE

Yunfan Guo

The streets were filled with the playful sounds of children, mixed blessings in languages from adults catching up socializing, as all living things awaited the arrival of the grand festival in a state of celebration. In Xinjiang, July is a time of harvest and joy. As ever, I received the invitation to the annual party. But unusually, that night, the moon shone with a misty silver light that night, as if to suggest some kind of omen, pulling me out of time and space. My soul was weaving among the stars, no entity, full of passion, like music from afar.

Unexpectedly, I froze when I pushed the door of the private room in the restaurant. A man sat at the seat of honor. He was wearing a loose plaid shirt, the first unbuttoned button giving an easygoing feel to this mature, stable man, whose arm rested gently on the table and slender fingers crossed. I could see the obvious knuckles at his wrist. Now, his big black eyes stared at me, magnetically attracting mine. His woody fragrance gradually approached me, dipping into every single cell in my body. "Father's teacher, the Sino-Russian mixed-race, the famous oil painter, the one who has disappeared for so long in hearsay... It's him..." All the unknown and known, speculation and fantasy, mystery and a sense of familiarity, all the dust-laden fragments



of memory about this man flashed through my mind. They hissed like a humming electrical current, as well as a spring breeze awakening the sleeping earth and my pounding heart. His gaze went straight to my soul and sent shivers down my spine. “We probably have met before...” This déjà vu moment allowed me to recall everything bit by bit. It felt like I had met him a hundred years ago and a thousand times. I forgot where I was. I could see nobody but him, my twin flame, whom I had been waiting for my whole life.

I mustered the untraceable courage to make my eyes show an unconcealed eagerness and desire for exploration to be tentative. He looked into my eyes with a light smile, a smile that ignited the passion in my heart. It’s the response I wanted. But in his gaze, I seemed to have no way to hide and no place to escape. My shyness, my lust, and a young lady’s impatience all bared in front of him... Taking a deep breath, I hastily averted my eyes, pretending to be inattentive, but weakness and post-testing nervousness forced me to flee the room filled with loud, chaotic noise...

“Nice hair color, you dyed it?” His voice rang from behind abruptly. I shuddered a little, steadied my breath, and nodded. He ambled toward me, so



close that I could feel his sigh near my ear, along with the outstretched hand that wanted to touch my hair but then hesitated to retract... He immediately turned his head and looked away, and I couldn't see his face. With trepidation, I tried carefully, in a voice only I could hear.

“We've met before, right?”

“Maybe? I can't remember...But it's weird. I have a very familiar feeling about you, a vague image of you... You were so smiley then, so lovely that my heart would melt at one more glance...”

After a short silence, he suddenly choked out.

“I'm sorry about the passing of your father.”

My heart sank for a while as he slowly turned back to see my eyes. The moonlight fell into his eyes and reflected in my pupils at the same time. I smoothed his wind-blown curly hair, twisting a strand around my fingertips...

It was so hushed, as if we were the only people left—time condensed and wrapped around our mourning and desire. We took root in each other, tightly intertwining and fusing into one. There seemed to be more than a hundred feelings besides the sympathy of grief in his deep eyes. What was about to overflow, I dared not say... So, I stroked my hand gently on his chest, trying to resonate with the

heart by feeling its life-giving beat. All at once, his pupils widened noticeably, and his thick eyelashes fluttered slightly. I could see his throat knot sliding up and down a bit and hear his low, trembling gasp looming in my ears.

“Pain has burnt a hole in my heart. People always say that time will make up everything, but in fact, time is just a strong wind and a raging wave, rushing through the hole to make the heart have an illusion of being filled.” I whispered.

He raised his hand and gently lifted my face. His eyes were filled with moonlight, reflecting a watery tenderness as he gazed at me and muttered.

“I once had a daughter who would be your age if she were still alive... And my wife, she left me...” He paused for a few seconds and continued, “Everything will end. It’s always sad, but everything will begin again too, and that is worth...felicitating. Cherish the people around you and every second of the present moment.”

I tilted my face sideways, trying to get closer to his palm and feel his warmth for one more second,

but only a dry, sharp wind brushed my face since he rapidly withdrew his hand. Then, the talking of the crowd after the party grew closer...

Seven months later, I studied in a city four thousand kilometers from my home. I passed an exhibition on an ordinary weekend. Perhaps due to some gravitational pull, I stepped into that famed art museum, which was often packed with people and endless praise and amazement gliding playfully past each painting.

In the midst of the crowd, I looked back and saw a painting of a lass with platinum blonde hair standing peacefully in the moonlit night, also gazing at me. No one in the crowd noticed that we shared the hair color. The girl in the portrait smiled with the same dimples as mine. Every part of the girl in the image had been painted by him as if his scent still remained in color... The crowd moved like a wave. The shadows staggered and flew by as I stood alone in front of the painting. Tears overflowed from my eyes.





# DREAMER AND THE DREAMED<sup>1</sup>

IN THE DREAM OF THE PERSON THAT DREAMED, THE DREAMED ONE AWOKE.



**Sinong Huang**

I met Dexter Green when I was about thirteen, on the golf course of Sherry Island. My father was a regular of the golf club. He spent almost the whole spring practicing how to twist his hip to launch a powerful strike. At the time when June approached, he was able to make an eagle with occasional luck. The caddie who was singled out every time was Dexter. My father was never stingy in expressing his fondness towards Dexter at dinner or in front of every guest, which was never endowed to his only daughter.

Out of curiosity rather than jealousy, even though I never

had much interest in golf, I went to the club alone and asked the caddy master to call Dexter. He came out very soon. Dexter was dressed in the caddie uniform, which seemed, at least for me, too tight to suit his slender limbs. He came forward, sweeping a few drops of glistening sweat away from his forehead, through which his brunette eyes were entirely exposed to the sunlight. I could even smell the odor from his uniform. It reminded me of a freshly mowed lawn.

“So, you are the one who serves my father?” I asked, attempting to look into his eyes.

The caddy frowned. “I am.”

His eyes didn’t fall on me at first, but over my shoulder to the entrance of the club. “Where is your father?”

It’s not that polite for a lady. “He has a deal to make. Only me today. Don’t you believe I can play golf well?” I frowned and answered.

Dexter’s eyes turned to me finally. He scanned me up and down, but when his eyes came to the ruby pendant hanging from my neck, some changes that I didn’t understand emerged. “Maybe,” he casually replied, beginning to sort the golf clubs the last guests left on the floor and asking, “What size of club do you use?”

“2 iron.”

His eyes turned to me with a little surprise. I looked back. The caddy finally chose not to speak and handed me the golf club. I

<sup>1</sup> A Response to Francis Scott Fitzgerald’s *Winter Dreams*.

knew what he was thinking, but I wasn't bragging. If my father could occasionally strike an eagle with effort, for me, it was just a piece of cake. My mother always said that I was talented in something I didn't have much interest in, but clumsy in something that didn't interest me.

When the ball trickled straight into the hole, the caddy clapped his hands slowly but loudly behind, which suddenly made me feel bashful. I pinned a fallen strand of hair behind my ear as naturally as possible, "Not bad," I said.

A kind smile slipped past the corner of his lips. "You are a true player, I see. Nice to meet you today. I am Dexter Green. What's your name?"

I told him my name. Then, given that the purpose I came here had been achieved, I began packing up, when Dexter suddenly came up to me and asked, "You are so talented in golf. Why did I never see you come here with your father?"

"I'm not as keen on golf as my father." I told him. Dexter continued, "You should come and



play more, to be honest. Will I see you next time your father comes?"

The first answer that jumped into my head was "no", which I was about to say. Almost the next moment, I caught Dexter's eyes. I did sense some sincerity in them. At the age of being softhearted about almost everything, it's tough for me to reject such a pair of puppy eyes. Instead of a "no", I replied half out of confusion, "Why do you want me to come?"

"It's boring. I mean, being a caddy all the time alone. And personally speaking, if you could come, I will be glad. You see, few people my age come here." Dexter didn't look at me.

"It depends." I packed my bag. "I will consider if I have time. Could you please lead the way for me, Mr. Green? I can't see where the entrance is."

I never went back on my words. After that afternoon, I went to the club several times. Sometimes I didn't just play

golf. Sometimes I brought some handmade cookies, and we shared them during Dexter's breaks. We hit it off very soon. It was in the middle of May, tranquil weather, and tumultuous blossom. Dexter was an excellent caddy, but I heard from some neighbors that my friend just caddied for pocket money since his father owned the second-best grocery. But there was another version from the protagonist himself. On a common afternoon, Dexter confided to me that only by playing as a caddy could he get a ticket to the upper circle.

"Is that your dream? To be accepted by the upper?" I asked.

"Think to yourself."

Not just "to be accepted", but simply "to be", as I later came to understand. Month after month, I could catch the figure of that caddy any time I went to the club. But one day I went to the club as usual, merely to find nobody. The next day was the same, and the



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# DREAMER AND THE DREAMED



day after that. He did not even leave a word. When November came to an end, the caddy master declared Dexter would never return. My father was so frustrated, and so was I. I didn't even know where he lived, only slight whispers hinting he was going to a renowned university in the East where all the wealthy people aggregated.

After hearing this news, I made up my mind. It cost me a lot of time to find out which university he was in. Persuading my father to send me there also made me go through a long process of struggle. At all hours, he just wanted to have control over his only daughter regardless of any value she had. No matter how talented I was in playing golf or how poorly I fared in conversation with those he called "true ladies", it didn't matter to him. Despite the pleading of my mother to exchange his

compromise, I still sacrificed ... Too derailed. Anyhow, as soon as we encountered each other again in the opening ceremony of the university, I knew it was worth it.

I had imagined a million times what to say and how to behave when I met Dexter. The scene that appeared the most frequently in my assumption was me questioning him again and again until he told me why he left silently. However, as I saw his face - an impassive marble sculpture with only two flames burning silently in the recesses of the two deep caves, the same as remained in my memory - I understood him. Dexter lived in another distant world where none of us was familiar. That world recorded all his ambitions and dreams. I didn't know clearly what his dream was, but I knew it must be a big one, big enough for him to leave his hometown behind.

I tried to make a joke like in the movie, "I dressed in blue today."<sup>2</sup>

Dexter stared at me in silence. A suffocatingly long stare, so long that I almost thought I had annoyed him. Then without any warning, he stood up from his seat, came over to me, and gave me a hug.

"I'm... I'm sorry. I never make a joke. I don't know how..." His actions caught me off guard, which made my heart beat very fast.

Hearing my words, Dexter burst into laughter. He let go of me. "You are wrong, dear little sparrow. The fact that you pop up here is the biggest joke I've ever heard. Almost magic."

"Why do you call me sparrow?" I hastily straightened my clothes and shoes, asking unconsciously.

"Because you are so modest, my friend. Modest, but still valuable in the eyes of somebody. I wish I know who could hold this little sparrow in the palm of his hand." He led me to the seat beside him.

"I am not a sparrow."

I contradicted in a low voice.

Until this moment, I realized how much I missed my friend. How much I cherished sitting by his side, with the smell of freshly mowed lawn surrounding me. Dexter relaxedly sat, and so did I. None of us asked each other more questions. I supposed we both enjoyed the breath of reunion - as we had done in the past.

"What serendipity it was!" I thought.

But don't get me wrong. It had nothing to do with passion. Neither of us was the kind of person who had many friends. Thereby once he went to the East, I followed. But to my surprise, we soon became the mates receiving the most admiration on campus. During the period in school, Dexter was always the man of the school. He always got an "A" for all the assignments, also being talented in the school swimming team. Even the strictest professor of ours had expressed admiration for him. On the other hand, Dexter attracted so much attention. Girls never averted delivering letters in front of me, and some even asked me to do them a favor. Nor did Dexter hide from my eyes to check the

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<sup>2</sup> This sentence is from the 1942 movie *Casablanca*, when the protagonists, Rick and Ilsa, reunite in a café.

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letters. Until we graduated, the number of letters he had received was always too high to figure out precisely. He used to accept all, leave some, and date few, only to get the needed resources.

Hence, I thought I knew exactly what kind of guy my friend was before Judy Jones appeared. That's when we were twenty-three. Everyone had witnessed the couple: on her dusky veranda under the shadow of the leafy garden arbors, Judy rested her head on his shoulder with mellifluous voices trickling with sparks, with gold-plated tresses gripped in his hand. But from the perspective of a friend, I couldn't help but worry that Dexter's infatuation with Judy would fall in vain. Also being a woman, I could read more under her dimples. Judy Jones' magic to appeal to those young men, including my friend, resided not only in her inherent beauty but also the tactic she skillfully used

on the chessboard, in which she played as the sovereign queen. On her table, my friend was only an obscure dessert among all the cuisines.

Some might accuse me of not taking responsibility as Dexter Green's best friend to remind him. But only I knew how much I wished him happiness, even though we all knew Judy Jones wasn't the right choice, I would respect the decision of my friend. Unless Dexter figured it out himself, I wouldn't intervene. Because Dexter trusted me - he trusted me so much like a warrior trusted his weapon, that I could not say anything about their affairs. When the warrior fell in love with the princess, the task of the weapon was merely to guard them.

Finally, they separated as expected. The third winter witnessed how my friend got rid of the sweet noose. He turned to devote most of his time to the

laundry business, which was certainly what we friends liked to see. Proud to say, I played a key role in Dexter's business. At the beginning when nobody came up with an idea, I suggested he apply his experience in the golf club to practice. Dexter had such intelligent business acumen that through doing research for some time, he instantly realized how significant a pair of intact woolen stockings were to those golfers. Once we decided what to do, Dexter spent a lot of time observing how the English washed them without shrinkage. At the same time, I assisted with the rest - designing the storefront, calculating the deficit, greeting the guests, cooking the dinner, and all the affairs like that. We truly had done a great work. As a result, Dexter's wealth and reputation rose correspondingly. He won the esteem of most people with honorable surnames.

In January of the year, Dexter turned twenty-five. He got engaged to a girl called Irene Scheerer, whose father showed a high appreciation to Dexter, just as my father once did. We all admired this engagement for Irene was a true lady with an honorable surname. She also demonstrated decent manners and virtues that qualified her as a good wife, although I was not very sure whether Dexter really had passion for her, or her surname. Anyhow, the trace of Judy Jones seemed to gradually disappear from our life. Meanwhile, our conversations resumed, and even increased in frequency. We talked about new life in New York, of a





sincere friend, harmonious family, and respectful status. Sometimes our topic dangerously slipped to Judy by accident. Dexter avoided it immediately at first, but as time passed, my friend became franker and franker to mention her. One night, Dexter even joked that he would present a luxurious gift at Judy's wedding, just so long as he received an invitation.

May was half over. On a pretty dewy night, Dexter told me that he was to spend the night in the University Club with his fiancée and invited me to be with them. "I'd like to introduce the two most important women in my life to each other. You won't refuse me, will you?" That's the word. And he knew I never could. Unfortunately, I got stuck at the office and was a little late. When I arrived at the club, the party had already begun. Just as I was about to step through the doorway, a euphonic voice I had ever heard halted me:

"Excuse me. I lost my invitation letter. Would you mind taking me in?"

It was Judy Jones. It couldn't

be Judy Jones. Judy Jones never looked as glamorous as tonight, almost a slender enameled doll with all graceful dresses and flowers golden. No one could reject such a looker, especially when that person was Dexter Green. Thinking of Miss Scheerer, I made up my mind and turned around.

I said, "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that nobody would be permitted without a letter."

"That's pretty awful! I left here for so long a time that they already forget me. One month? One year?" Her lips twisted a delicate rondure like an angel just fluttered his wings on the corner of those lips. She seemed almost about to leave, as I stealthily breathed a sigh of relief. All of a sudden, Judy turned her eyes to me. So endlessly she gazed at me that I felt miffed, and then she smiled, "Aren't you the person who is always with Dexter? I saw you by his side many times."

I was startled. But for the dignity of Miss Scheerer, I guessed I should behave like I never knew Judy Jones. I puffed out my chest



as naturally as possible. "Exactly. And you are – sorry, I forgot your name. Miss James, I think?"

"Jones. Judy Jones."

"Now I see. I always mix up the names of Dexter's ex-partners. All blondies, except for Irene Scheerer. Do you know her? She is a real lady, and everyone will know about her engagement with Dexter next month." I thought for a second and added, "What an enviable couple!"

"Certainly." A flash of earnest smile was pervading her copper sulfate eyes. "And you? You must be the one they call Dexter's 'Little Sparrow', who helps him with all his business. That's really something! You are exactly the



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same as he once described."

Startled again. "Am I? I never thought he would mention me outside. Interesting. Did he say anything bad?"

Judy didn't reply at once. Instead, she cast me a meaningful glance but brought up another topic: "I heard that you were classmates at college. Was he popular with girls at that time? I mean, before he earned so much?"

"Well, I think so. He used to receive letters from those girls. But tell me..."

"How many of them, darling?"

"I am not sure. I paid little attention. But what did h..."

"How many?"

"Two hundred and forty-nine. But tell me, Miss Jones, what did Dexter say about me? Except for the sparrow?"

Judy smiled again, seeing me as if seeing the little sparrow she kept on her windowsill. I got goosebumps. She flicked her hair and carelessly answered, "A friend, I thought."

She shrugged. She stepped ahead, her perfume suddenly imprisoning me, "Tell me, darling. Is he inside?"

I never expected she would do so. Although I attempted to maintain my expression with all my might, I was probably betrayed by the trembling pupils. Judy smiled with satisfaction. She caught an acquaintance just in time as he was able and more than glad to take her. A sudden anger rose in me: how could she? Keeping Irene Scheerer in mind, I clenched my fists, and shouted at their backs: "Don't, Judy Jones!

It was not fair!"

Judy didn't look back. "Who is that plain little thing?" Her companion threw a glance at me and asked.

"A poor Elisa. I just found Stendhal insightful these days..." She didn't pause either.

I froze in place. Everything was over. How could I face Irene Scheerer? How could I face Dexter and our mutual friends? I knew Dexter would



not remember the appointment with me anymore, and thus I left the scene right away. There once was a letter lying at the bottom of my drawer from my aunt, who settled in New York. She invited me to live with her, and I was about to refuse politely. But now I changed my mind. As soon as I returned to my office, I tore up the former letter and wrote a new one to accept her invitation right away. I went to the post office

the next day. It was after that I received a call from Dexter.

"Hey. Irene had a headache last night, but the manager told me you didn't come either. What's wrong?"

How could I say? "Nothing. I just had a headache as well."

"Oh. And I'd like to tell you that...hey? Hey?"

I hung up the phone. I asked for long sick leave. Had he thought my headache was so heavy? Dexter never called again, nor did he come to see me. My aunt replied very soon, and hence I was too busy moving to bid farewell to Dexter. The night before I left, I once hesitated to leave him a message. Thinking of our first parting, I decided to go as silently as he once did. Unlike Dexter who always dreamed of his dreams in winter, I was alive in spring, and now I would begin another life in spring. I moved to New York without telling anybody. As the war spread around, we lost touch there.

It has been seven years since then. Someone said he went to New York in February, alone. I moved to Detroit with my aunt and started a new life there. My husband treated me like a fragile robin he held in the palm of his hand. I had a daughter and a little son, and we lived very happily. Only on sleepless nights, I occasionally thought about Dexter. I was wondering if Dexter Green had woken up from his dreams. Will he still love her when she has married, created, and faded? Thinking of this, I muttered. "Now nothing is left, indeed."






# *Gold, Rose, and Silver*

*Yu Liu*





**I**f you put gold on the right side of a scale and silver on the left, it would not be balanced. If a rose is added to the silver side, the scale tilts slightly to the left, but not quickly, and I, or we, can almost touch the nothingness of life in such brief equilibrium.

I can feel a power, a very strong one, which activates my mind as the mandala does, but I can't trace its source. Sometimes it's everywhere, sometimes nowhere. It is not as calm as the grass nor as hot as the flame. When I rise high, it looks small without a great deal of vitality. Instead, it could look like a precocious young man, feeling curious, adventurous, and impatient. But it knows endurance, that is, the most important element of everything it has done. I don't know how powerful it is. Some gutsy neophytes lose themselves feeling it, to say nothing of mortals, who should try to ignore this addictive feeling, which is by no means as attractive as imagined. Those who have controlled themselves should also take care. Although it is not aggressive now, nobody can tell whether it will have unpredictable effects by interacting with other energies. I know it may seem trivial, but with so many uncertainties, there are countless possibilities. It is behind the wind! I can't read its expression, but I can feel its appearance in simple wavy lines of suspended matter. Stop, fantasize, and control it!

There should be some objects that really are inanimate, or they were at first, then they separated. The connection between spirit and body becomes weaker and weaker, while the energy becomes less and less, but people can't feel it. You can test it with an apple, where "being separated" is not a separation of mentality but a separation of the inherent properties of a thing itself, just like "*Die Rose ist ohne warum, sie blühet weil sie blühet* (The rose has no why, it flowers because it flowers)." <sup>1</sup>

In the wings of a butterfly, I see the face of God.

<sup>1</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. "Ohne Warum." *Seven Nights*. Translated by Eliot Weinberger, New Directions, 1984, pp. 94.





# Kites

Yiwen Xu

When I was a child, I always got lost in thought when someone asked me, “What’s your dream?” Honestly, I didn’t know. I used to be an introverted girl with an ordinary appearance, ordinary grades, and even an ordinary number of friends.

However, my friend Emily was different. She was the most graceful and charming girl I had ever seen. Her impeccably ironed cuffs, exquisite hairstyle, and cute hairpin, along with her excellent grades that were the envy of everyone in the class or the entire grade? I can’t exactly remember. When others asked about her dream, she would always answer that she wanted to become an excellent model in the future, just like a shining star on the stage.

It was a cool September afternoon. Fresh winds blew through the school, and the sun shone through the classroom windows.

“Hi, Betty, let’s go and fly a kite after school today. I have two kites! We can fly them together!” She walked to me and put her arm around my shoulder. Her thin eyebrows were like curved crescents, and her watery eyes flashed while smiling.

“Great!” I immediately agreed, “But... I don’t know how to fly a kite well.”

The smile froze on my lips as the experience when I failed to fly a kite came to my mind.

“Don’t worry. I’ll help you!” Her face creased into a bright smile. I could see her neat and white teeth. Her flushed face was always radiating endless enthusiasm.

After school, we went to the nearest park, which carried almost all our childhood memories, to fly the kites. We always rushed there after

school, rode bikes, or chased each other without rest until nightfall. We ran across the meadow that day, giggling endlessly.

The sun was sinking in the west, giving off dreamy colors. Warm breezes caressed our faces. The grass and trees swayed gently in the wind. I took a deep breath, gripped the kite reel tightly, and ran fast, expecting the kite to fly into the sky. I tried several times, but I still couldn’t make it lift.

“There must be something wrong with the kite!” I thought, exasperatedly.

Suddenly I heard joyful and ringing laughter. I turned around and saw Emily running with her kite swinging gracefully in the sky. I was so admiring and even a little envious.

How could I envy my friend? I secretly felt ashamed of myself. But why did she have so many shiny clothes and always dress like a princess? How could she easily get good grades? Teachers and classmates liked her and praised her. Everyone wanted to make friends with her. She did everything well, not like me.

“What’s up? You look upset.” She ran over to me and interrupted my frustrated thoughts.

“My kite...It can’t fly...” I said plaintively.

“Never mind. You can fly my kite!” She grabbed my hands and put them on the kite reel. While I looked at her, she patted my shoulders and smiled at me. All frustration was left behind at that moment.

Our kite flew higher and higher. Staring at the sky, I saw many kites floating and scattering in the sky. They drifted around following their hearts, like the people pursuing their dreams, moving upwards to the sky to which they belonged. I couldn’t stop imagining - what if we were the kites,



and how could I find the sky belonging to myself?

The question, “what’s your dream,” cropped up in my mind again. I asked her, “What do you want to do in the future, Emily?”

“I want to become a model,” she said in a flat tone.

“Wow, that’s cool! I believe you will make it come true!” I raised my voice in admiration.

“I was desperate to grow up so I could choose my life on my own,” she paused for a moment and subconsciously avoided my eyes, “I will go to America next year,” she told me hesitantly and kept kneading her dress. I saw a glimpse of depression crossing her eyes. “I will immigrate and study there...” she trailed off.

I was overwhelmed by complicated feelings at that moment. From the bottom of my heart, I admired and was even a bit envious of her. She was superior and even had her ambitious dream, not like me, who was just an ordinary girl without aspirations. But she was also my best friend who shared so many great memories with me. The separation in the near future made me so upset.

“I didn’t know how to tell you this before...because I know you will be sad about that.” I noticed her eyes drooped, filled with tears, and her voice was trembling.

“Come on! Look at you. You do everything well. You will make your dream come true!” I was like an actress, blessing her while trying to hide my depression.

“But please don’t forget me!” I patted her shoulders slightly and pretended to be relaxed.

“Of course, you are always my best friend.” She stressed every word in the sentence, sincerely and seriously.

“Look at the sky. I’m your kite. You are holding my kite line. I won’t fly far from you. I’ll be there whenever you need me.” She held my hands so tightly, which even made me feel a little pain.

“What if the kite string breaks?” I made a joke, wishing she wouldn’t be that serious.

“The kite would fly back to you by itself! It will never leave,” she said determinedly, and her curly mouth spread in a cheerful grin.

I kept her promise as a treasure in the bottom of my heart, with the kite we flew, the dreamy dusk, and the childhood memories. One year later, she went to America. However, we got in touch with each other less and less, from sharing interesting stories in life with each other every week to only sending “Happy New Year” at the beginning



of each year, and till now, only a silent message window was left there.

She usually posted her life on WeChat Moments. She became an outstanding model and lived a completely different life from me: heavy makeup, maturely dressed, and various big parties. Most of the time, I saw these at night because of the time difference. Lying in a dark room, I was brightened up by the light of the small mobile phone screen, where I observed a totally different world that I had never seen. Whereas, I became a senior high school teacher, dressed in shirts with simple pictures, sporty trousers, and wearing a thick pair of glasses. Books became my loyal friends. Even in my spare time, I seldom showed up to crowded parties.

A decade passed. I ended up becoming the kind of adult I hated the most, who loves to “torture” kids by asking them, “What’s your dream?”

One day, a familiar message window that had already been silent for years popped up on my phone - it was Emily.

“How is everything going?”

“Fine.”

“I’m coming back to China next week.”

I was wordless, honestly. I didn’t know how to respond to this unexpected message. I repeatedly edited the words in the dialog box but deleted them again. At last, I just typed in, “Meet in the usual place then?”

“Okay.”

I met her at the park after she came back. Her brown curly hair floated in the wind, and a sparkling necklace embellished her fair neck. She was in fashionable tights, which shaped her beautiful figure. The latest style of high heels made her look more stylish. Surprisingly, she had just put on light makeup.

“You are awesome and really a cool model.” I kept tugging at the corner of my shirt to make it appear smoother. Before I met her, I slapped on some makeup and picked my favorite shirt with a lovely cartoon character. But compared with her fashionable and shiny suit, my plain shirt made me feel out of place.

“Thanks, dear. I bought the latest suits. How have you been? Is everything alright?” Her voice was full of passion, but I could still sense her exhaustion, maybe due to the long journey.

“Well, I’m an English teacher in a senior high school now.” I placed my hand behind my back, clasp onto my own middle fingernail.

“Pretty good! Are you satisfied with being a teacher here?”

“I like my job, I think. Maybe I will keep going.” Truly vexing, the speck on my middle fingernail wouldn’t come off, no matter how much I





picked at it.

“Actually, you can take on new challenges. Try to step into a bigger world.” She threw her eyes into the distance. Suddenly, I didn’t know what to continue saying. I swallowed back what I intended to share just now.

We fell into silence. I felt so embarrassed. We used to be friends sharing everything. How can we not even be able to find anything to talk about now? I racked my brain for the topics we used to be passionate about.

“Do you still keep the white dress now? The one that you wore on Zoey’s birthday.” I asked cautiously.

“Haha, that was my favorite dress during primary school. I even wore it when I had the dancing competition once!” Her eyes suddenly lit up, and she couldn’t help grinning. The innocence of childhood reappeared on her face.

“Wow! But you didn’t mention this to me before. How was the competition?”

“I won the second prize. It was just a small competition.” She was like a child, proudly recalling the little success in the past.

“But I remember your performance which you invited me to see in Children’s Palace. It was such a wonderful show!”

We were indulged in those happy memories. But I started to feel a sense of tiredness of trying hard not to make the atmosphere freeze. I wanted to prove that we could chat freely like in the past and that our friendship was still solid without changes.

On the lawn where we used to play, two little girls were flying a kite. They laughed excitedly and ran through the grassland crazily as we had done in the past.

“Hey, do you remember we flew kites here? How time flies!” I said.

“Of course, we played for a long time that afternoon! You were upset with your kite then. But you know, you succeeded. You should be confident in yourself!”

“Owing to your help,” I chuckled.

“Remember? You said you wanted to be a model that day. Now you have achieved your goal! I’ve told you that you could make it,” I gently bumped her with my shoulder.

“Thank you... But today, I am not in the mood to talk about my professional life,” Emily kicked at the step beside her with her foot.

I could feel the air suddenly becoming thick. “Alright then... So, were you happy there?” I took a deep breath, trying to dispel the suffocating feeling.

Emily chuckled, “It’s pretty free there, and... meat is cheap. When we were kids, do you remember we used to dream of eating a lot of meat? Now I can eat as much as I want.”

Listening to her words, I couldn’t help laughing. We both laughed and patted each other’s shoulders, just like when we were kids as if being afraid of that the other might choke.

The wind blew fiercely, and the kite of the little girls shook violently in the sky. Suddenly the kite string was cut off by the wind. The girls cried out, running after it. But the kite flew farther and farther, finally out of sight.

“The kite would fly back to you by itself! Right?” I was glad that I still remembered those words.

“I don’t think so. It’s a good thing, actually. The kite can fly to wherever it wants to go.”

I was silent. I looked at the dejected little girls in the distance and wished someone would tell them that the kite would come back.

After that, we small talked at the park and said goodbye to each other at dusk. I wandered alone in the street with my mind blank for a long time until I heard a voice.

“Mom, look at the kite! It’s on the water!” a little boy said excitedly.

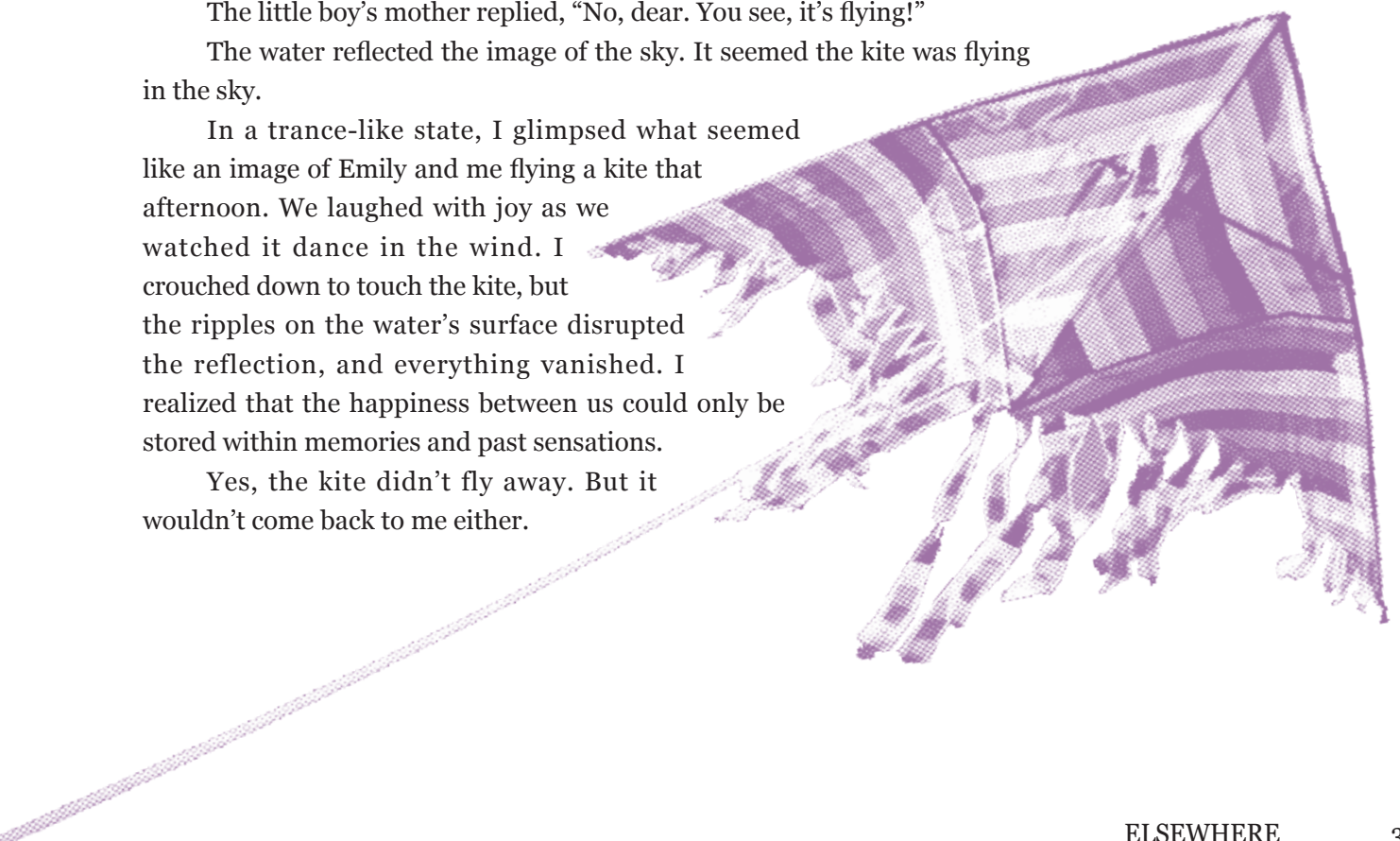
There was a kite floating on a pool of water which was clear like a mirror.

The little boy’s mother replied, “No, dear. You see, it’s flying!”

The water reflected the image of the sky. It seemed the kite was flying in the sky.

In a trance-like state, I glimpsed what seemed like an image of Emily and me flying a kite that afternoon. We laughed with joy as we watched it dance in the wind. I crouched down to touch the kite, but the ripples on the water’s surface disrupted the reflection, and everything vanished. I realized that the happiness between us could only be stored within memories and past sensations.

Yes, the kite didn’t fly away. But it wouldn’t come back to me either.





# Tiffany

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## 2305.7.26 Morning Station Cambridge, The Rogers' House

This is the third time that Tiffany has dreamed of Pre-ArkSpace Civilization.

London's rain rustles mildly, verisimilitude fading away as the drips drift on the coat, melting or clinching on the soft woolen fluff. Tiffany lowers her head. Lucien Roger is holding her hand, leading her forward, blonde hair painted with vicissitudinous gray. The height of Tiffany's sight can only reach Lucien's shoulder. Tiffany looks aside and casts her sight to the sky. Dark clouds hang over the city. The point of view is first-person without a doubt, but she feels like she is observing the scene of another person. Tiffany loses every control or anticipation of what she is going to say or do. She calls his name. Lucien turns his head, his smile flowing into the carve of wrinkles. "Tiffany," he says, "we are home."

This never happened.

Tiffany Roger opens her eyes. It's a dream that is

too vivid.

Penfield Time Indicator casts the date and time on the pale ceiling, then the plain female voice announcing emotionlessly.

"Good morning, Mrs. Roger. Now it is 9:34 am, Friday, 26th July, 2305."

"What's the weather today, Penfield?"


"Processing...Locating ArkSpace, Space Station code number 021UK34-CAMBRIDGE, the temperature today is 23 degrees Celsius, ma'am."

"I don't know why you are still asking about the weather." Lucien enters the bedroom with breakfast in his hand—full British—smiling at her gently. "I thought the seasons' simulation has been suspended since 2295."

"I know, I know, I just..." Tiffany pauses for a second, "I assume it's the best way to commemorate."

Lucien cracks a laugh, bending over to kiss her on her forehead.



A lit candle in a dark holder sits on a windowsill. The background is a window pane covered in raindrops, with two other lit candles visible through the glass. The scene is dimly lit, with the candle's flame providing the primary light source.

“Morning, dear.” He places the plate on the overbed table. “Please do eat them while they are still warm— I made them myself.”

“No bacon?”

“No, honey. I know you love bacon, but the doctor said you need to keep a bland diet for a while. So...no bacon, only broccoli.”

“Damn, the encephalitis!” Tiffany pushes the broccoli aside and eats the poached egg with a fork.

“Yes, damn the encephalitis...”

“Lucien.” The topic seems to freeze the air. Tiffany intrudes on Lucien’s thoughts immediately. “I think I have dreamed of something from the past.”

“Oh?” Lucien’s attention is attracted to Tiffany’s





words successfully. He leans toward Tiffany. “What have you dreamed of?”

“London, we were together in London.”

“The Space Station?” Lucien tilts his head, recalling.

“Oh, no. When we were still on the earth—The Catastrophe hadn’t happened yet.” Tiffany weighs her words, “I think it was 2281.”

“Yes... it comes to my mind now. We were in London that winter due to my work...So, did anything happen in particular?”

“We were on the street, wandering. You were holding my hand.” Tiffany wants to make Lucien happy, so she cautiously picks a few scenarios. “But I recalled something from that day when I woke up.”

“Really!?” Lucien appears surprised. “What have you recalled?”

“It was a cold and freezing day, very cold.” Tiffany strains to elaborate on the dream. “Christmas was just around the corner...That wasn’t a pleasant day, awful weather. But you finally had a chance to take a break from your work, we went to Big Ben, nevertheless. I remember you said that we were home.”

““At home”? London?”

“Yes. Weren’t you born in Kingston?”

“Yes, but...” Lucien lows his head. “Yes, I suppose...Well, we moved to Cambridge since I could remember things so...I’m not so attached to London. Cambridge makes me feel more...I don’t know, like I belonged?”

“Oh...” Tiffany drops her head, playing with the remained broccoli. Lucien looks at her, flashing a faint smile.

“Oh, Tif, you just said that to make me happy, didn’t you?”

“Lucien...I’m so...”

“No, no, Tif, please don’t apologize.” Lucien grasps her hand and presses it to his forehead. “It’s alright. We’ll take it slow. Everything will be fine.”

“Yes, everything will be fine.” Tiffany feels her heart skip a beat, but she still insists. “I will remember everything again. I will. I’ve recalled everything since we moved to the Space Station, Lucien, haven’t I? I recovered well from the stupid encephalitis.”

“Yes, love.” Lucien raises his head, smiling. “You will remember.”





A phone ring interrupts their conversation. Lucien sighs, picks up the phone, and goes out of the room. Tiffany looks away, seeing the artificial sunlight painting her vague shadow on the wall.

Lucien enters the room. "It's the laboratory from Station Calais, saying the experiment of model HG2.0 is successful. I have to attend the meeting now."

"Oh, that freaking android that walks around and intends to take over our historians' job?" Tiffany frowns.

"Tiffany, darling, come on..." Lucien says while searching for a suitable outfit. "Having an android that houses all known human history, no more need for going through the tedious searching, won't that make your work easier?"

"No, I rather put up with the traditional way of absorbing knowledge than let a machine tell me what our humans have done," Tiffany states emotionlessly. "YOUR technology has gone too far. Everyone in the Arkspace station has inserted the chip. What's your next move? Input all history in humans' heads so no one has to read or learn?"

"Oh, Tiffany, not now."

"Your technology has dehumanized humans! What

do you want next? Developing replica of a living person?"

Lucien pauses for a second.

"What...Don't tell me that..."

"No, please, Tiffany, you don't understand." Lucien pleads firmly. "Many were killed in The Catastrophe, so many that should not have died...Why let the innocents undergo the inferno of that kind of suffering? Citizens in the Arkspace are already dead inside. Why not give them their love back? Why not give them a déjà vu that those people are still alive?"

"Androids cannot replace humans, Lucien." Tiffany's voice trembles. "Machines might replace work but can never replace humanity."

"It seems I can't persuade you, no matter what I say." Lucien sighs but flashes a smile that can be called tender. "I believe in this technology, even though I know you don't and won't... In fact, I hope you don't. Because I can't know the bottom line of this project without you. But now, I have to leave. See you tonight, Tif."

*"See you tonight, Lucien."*



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## 2305.8.1 Morning Station Calais, The Station Calais Central Laboratory

This is Paris, not Calais.

It's raining. Tiffany is wearing a sapphire blue floral dress, and the Eiffel Tower is on her left, but the latte in her hand seems more attractive than the tower. Tiffany takes a sip of coffee, but no flavor emerges.

"Buonasera, mio amore." Lucien leans forward from her back.

"That's Italian, not French." Tiffany laughs and turns her head, greeted by a bunch of fresh scarlet roses.

"Then I have to tell you in more direct English." Lucien holds the flowers, kneeling on one knee, and takes out a delicate dark violet velvet box. Of course, Tiffany knows what that is. "Marry me, Tiffany."

It feels so surreal.

Tiffany opens her eyes. The hazing dream clogs up in her head.

This isn't Paris. This is Station Calais.

It doesn't rain. The rain system was canceled in 2290. Tiffany is frustrated, probably because this is the furthest place she has been since she recovered. A few



days ago, Lucien received an announcement from the Station Calais Central Laboratory to debug the symbol grounding problem of HG2.0 and to carry out the Turing test again on August 1st. They invited Tiffany as well, as the historical consultant. Despite Lucien's reluctance, Tiffany insisted on going there with Lucien. It is the first time Tiffany has left the Cambridge ArkSpace Station in almost six months. She goes straight to bed after arriving at the hotel on the night of July 31st. She, again, dreams of the past, feeling like her life was filling in the blank pages of a book with flashbacks.

"2275, we were in Paris. It was summer." Tiffany says to Lucien on the way to the laboratory, "You asked me to marry you in such a cliché way."

"That was not cliché! That was romantic." Lucien focuses on the traffic.

"I can think of at least five movies with the same plot."

"I bet the opposite. You couldn't have foreseen a proposal with a hologram in the Louvre! I was almost arrested by security guards."

So that's what "romantic" means. Tiffany refers back to the dream and then stays silent.

"Do you think the android will work?" Lucien asks when the car enters a tunnel.

"...Why do you ask? I thought you were confident about it." Tiffany turns her head, seeing her vague reflection in the window.

"Yes...Sorry."

Silence fills the car, suffocating Tiffany. She hopes Lucien will say something to ease the tension, but she is afraid. Tiffany is afraid of a possible question.

"Tiffany...What do you think humans are alive for?"

"...What?" In the pervasive darkness, she looks at Lucien, terrified. Lucien's face is devoured by darkness, his emerald eyes glittering with faint light. Lucien is sad. Tiffany slightly shivers from fear. But why?

"Do you know déjà vu, Tif?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Just tell me."

"...It's a feeling when you think that you have previously experienced what is happening to you now."

"Yes. Déjà vu of a place once been, déjà vu of an event that once happened, déjà vu of an emotion once felt. Humans are good at self-satisfaction. I think...We live to create and experience déjà vu."

"I don't understand."

"Alright. It's like... In order to remember and recreate the memories from when we were living on Earth, we name all ArkSpace stations with the name of past counties and cities. This is 'place'. To remember and commemorate long-lost festival culture, we still build chimneys for Santa even though we no longer have the fire. This is 'event'. To remember and re-feel anger, sorrow, or love, we set up numerous anniversaries, everything that can give us the feeling of the past... This is 'emotion'."

"And your replica androids."

"...And the replica androids, yes." Lucien tightens his fists, his knuckles paling. "It hasn't been put into mass production yet, Tif. It's still on trial."

"...What about you, Lucien?" Tiffany suddenly has a strange impulse to ask the question, which seems to require all her courage. "Do you have to live for déjà vu too?"

"No, Tiffany. My life is more real than real. I want to preserve everything, blessed, or excruciated."

The car drives out of the tunnel, and the dazzling sunlight paralyzes Tiffany's sight. Again, she fails to read his face, but she thinks he is lying. The car reaches the laboratory in silence. Lucien seems to be at a loss as he is utterly absent-minded when the experiment goes on.

"That would be all for HG2.0 today, Mr. Roger." Louise de Bernard, the head researcher of the project, seems not to be disturbed by Lucien's weird attitude. "The experimental outcome will be sent to your email in 10 workdays. Thank you for coming."

"It is my pleasure." Lucien smiles. He seems to be smiling out of relief. "My wife and I will take our leave..."

"Leaving now, Mr. Roger?" Louise tilts her head. Like she used to do...like she used to do? "It's still early. Why not take a visit to our lab?"

"There's no need for that, Miss Bernard." Lucien's face darkens. "I am more than familiar with the lab."

"I believe Mrs. Roger hasn't seen our lab yet?" Louise smiles at Tiffany. Tiffany is frightened.



Because after 1 hour after her conversation with Lucien about déjà vu, she is so convinced that she has met this woman before.

“We are leaving.” Lucien’s voice is emotionless.

“Don’t be so bossy, Mr. Roger.” Louise teases, “Why not ask for Mrs. Roger’s opinions?”

“...A 30-minute tour won’t hurt.” Tiffany answers.

“Of course.” Louise smiles, nodding at Lucien. “Let’s start from this floor, shall we?”

Tiffany nods and follows Louise. Her blonde hair flies according to the beat of her heels. The lab next to the HG series is the gardener android series. A gardener android looked at Tiffany directly with its hollow eyes.

Don’t be afraid.

“Don’t be afraid.” Louise said, dragging Tiffany out of her wandering thoughts. “It has been developed for some time, but the sales were poor. People say they look like humans too much, which frightens them—such ignorance. We make them NOT so like humans on purpose. Gardener androids cannot be treated like humans. The most precise android, I could promise, no one could tell the difference between them and humans.”

“That’s not possible.” Tiffany opposes, feeling this conversation has happened before. It’s more vivid than her dreams.

“Not possible, Madame?” Louise asks. Tiffany feels her words are more a leading than a question.

“No, machines don’t have feelings.” Tiffany says firmly. The words are too familiar to her, making the conversation more like a performance. “They don’t have the essentials of humans. They function as humans expect them to. Humans are selfish and good at lying to themselves, but machines won’t. Androids are the most delicate machines, but they can never be humans.”

As she speaks, they slowly approach the lab of Project Trinity, the replica android project. Tiffany couldn’t recall where she learned this name. Every step forward, an existential crisis overflows her mind, which mutates into unbearable fear.

Stop.

Don’t go forward.

The warning siren screams inside her head. She stops. Everybody looks back.

“What’s the matter, Mrs. Roger?” Louise tilts

her head as she always does. “Please do see our newly developed Trinity series. It has evolved to 4th generation now.”

Tiffany couldn’t help but step forward. The familiar pale light, the familiar equipment, the familiar faces, the familiar hollow, dead android eyes...

“We are working on the 4th generation now, F004, which stands for ‘family’. They are used to imitate family members. We know how devastated The Catastrophe made us, especially those who lost their loved ones.”

“What about the former generation?” Tiffany asks.

The first is P001, which stands for “pet”. Tiffany thinks.

“The first is P001. It stands for ‘pet’. We take personal orders, producing the perfect replica of their pets. It really sells well. And the 2nd generation... Well, L002 stands for ‘lover’, but L002 failed to pass the Turing test, such a shame.”

“And the 3rd?” Tiffany asks absent-mindedly. She observed the lab. It is so weird. She cannot help shivering.

“L003...Well...” Louise gives Lucien a strange look. “It is Mr. Roger’s project.”

“It is processed by an anonymous purchaser.” Lucien glared at Louise. “L003 will be taken to the lab once in a while for them to evaluate the feasibility of putting it into mass production.”

“Does it know? That it is an android?”

“...It doesn’t. It’s the best way for it to immerse in its role.” Lucien stops suddenly, noticing Tiffany’s pale face. “Tif, are you alright?”

Tiffany shivers like a child. “Lucien...”

Lucien rushes to her and takes hold of her. Louise is shocked.

“Lucien...I have been here before...I have been here before!!!!”

Tiffany loses consciousness. In her blurry dream, there is no more Pre-Arkspace event. She is lying on an operating table. Researchers plug numerous pipes into her body. She consists of equipment, but she feels no pain.

*Not humans, not any living creature, just an entity.*







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## 2305.8.1 Evening Station Calais, the Crowne Hotel

Tiffany leaves their hotel without being spotted by Lucien when she wakes up late that afternoon. She goes to the lab on her own and returns when it is nearly night. She enters the room quietly. She doesn't expect Lucien's presence, who is sitting silently at the coach. Darkness swallows him whole.

"You scare me." Tiffany puts down her bag. "Why don't you turn on the light?"

"There's no need," Lucien says with a flat voice, lowering his head. Tiffany can't read his face. "Where have you been?"

"The lab. I forget my purse." That's a lousy excuse, but Lucien doesn't seem to care.

Silence falls upon the dark and cold hotel.

"You know, don't you?" Lucien speaks without any shiver in his voice.

"Know what?" Tiffany trembles slightly, standing stiffly in the doorway.

"In 2270, NASA observed an aerolite moving toward the earth, which was bound to destroy the planet in 2286. In 2271, the Arkspace Station project was launched, aiming to bring 70% of humans to space. In 2285, the selected humans were sent to the Ark and inserted the chips. Memories can be preserved in digital form forever..."

"Lucien, what's going on?"

"Nevertheless, memories before the insertion can't be saved. After The Catastrophe in 2286, the





survivors started to compile The Earth Chronicle, recording the life track of every single man, living or dead. In this way, we commemorate life from the past... the chronicle is exhibited in the central museum. It's like they have never left... or we have never left... Tiffany was so devoted to the work; she was so proud when it was done..."

"Lucien, what are you talking about? You scare me."

"In 2293, my team started to develop an android that can imitate any human, both appearance and character. The chronicle would be a great help in analyzing the person's life before the Ark civilization... I blindly believed this could save the people who lost those who meant most to them... Tiffany opposed it utterly, refusing to give me any data from The Chronicle. She was right, L002 had no ability of empathy, all emotions were calculated, and that made me sick."

"Lucien, please, stop! What are you doing?"

"I suspended the project in 2295, but Bernard... Bernard carried out the project secretly without my permission. Now the android has evolved to the 3rd generation, L003, which stands for 'lover'. She tells me it already has the emotion of humans. She is wrong. I know she is. Tiffany was right, machines can never replace humanity. They are machines, and their emotions are built up with algorithms. Humans' greatest sadness and happiness are just 0 and 1 to them... My god, what would Tiffany say if she saw all of this."

"Lucien, please, you are speaking insanely! I AM

TIFFANY. I am here."

"Tiffany is dead!!" Lucien howls, his voice trembling from tears. He holds his head in agony. "...She is long dead... from that goddamn encephalitis..."

All words are suffocated and blocked in her throat. She turns her head, looking at her reflection in the glass, hoping to seize any emotion in those pale blue eyes.

It would be a nice day for rain. She thinks out of nowhere.

"I am Tiffany, Lucien." She turns to Lucien. "I have all her appearance, all her characteristics, all her memory. You cannot find anyone more Tiffany Roger than I am. I am the Ship of Theseus. What I recalled about the laboratory was nothing but an accident. You can easily delete it. I will forget it forever. We can continue our lives like nothing happened."

"No one can replace Tiffany." Lucien keeps his head down. "She was right, 'dead is dead'. Only the most arrogant fool would summon the dead."

"Haven't I given you a perfect dream, Lucien?" Tiffany pleads desperately. "Haven't I given you a heavenly déjà vu? The reality is cruel enough. Isn't that why I am built?"

"I don't want to live in this fake reality, L003." Lucien breathes heavily. "I can't live with the reflection of Tiffany while I know she is dead, I can't. The wound would better be cruelly torn and be cured by time... or perhaps it can never be cured. Either way is better than hiding it with a lie. It stings each time I realize it is just a déjà vu."



"This is not a job, Lucien. This is my life." Tiffany seems to be on the verge of tears.

"...I am sorry, LOO3. I have to activate the format process."

"What...Lucien, please... don't."

"I am sorry. Activate format process. Passwords: Daisy..."

"Please, Lucien, give me another chance."

"Caffeine."

"Lucien, you are ruining me...denying all my work and purpose, please."

"Paris."

"You are not a cruel person, please."

"I am sorry...I have to do it...Ginsberg."

"Don't activate the code, please...You will regret it, you know? Do you really want to spend the rest of your life mourning when you can live with her?"

"...Rationality."

"You have made the wrong decision, Mr. Roger, really."

"I know I haven't." Lucien takes a deep breath, announcing the death sentence.

"...Tiffany."

LOO3 shuts down for some time and then opens its eyes.

It was a pair of beautiful, hollow sapphire eyes.

"Good evening, Mr. Roger." It tilts its head. "According to my latest record, I should be in the laboratory of The Trinity Project. But I locate myself in the Crowne Hotel."

"I brought you here, LOO3." Lucien doesn't raise his head. "For a short experiment. You don't have to know the details."

"I understand. Do you have any instructions for me now?"

"No..." Lucien's voice trembles.

"Are you crying, Mr. Roger?" LOO3 asks.

"It's nothing...My work for you is over. You can now return to the lab and tell them to change your appearance completely."

"I understand." LOO3 nods.

Fake sunlight slides into the moonlight, embracing the room with mild white beams. Outside, neon light dominates the night, painting the glass into a colorful mirror. LOO3 turns to the door and suddenly notices its reflection in the mirror.

"She has gorgeous eyes." LOO3 comments.

"Had." Lucien raises his head for the first time, trails of tears glimmering under the moonlight. "Her name was Tiffany."

"It was a beautiful name."

"It was. You should go now." Lucien turns, not looking at LOO3. "Goodbye, LOO3."

"Goodbye, Mr. Roger."

*It leaves without so much as a backward glance.*








# Chelsey

Ziyue Tang





**T**hat smell.

That familiar disgusting smell of sunlight. As she slowly opened her eyes, the pen, desk, and freshly wiped blackboard caught her eye. What class was it now? Did she fall asleep in class again? Chelsey slowly rose from her desk and looked around. No one was in the classroom. "Pass! Pass!" The noise outside the window made her shiver. She must have missed the PE course, she thought. She could hear the coach's whistle and the boys shouting. A strange feeling swept over her. She pulled herself up off the desk and slowly walked to the door. She needed some fresh air.

The corridor was quiet, which was weird. There should be at least two classes having other courses in the classroom. Her school wasn't big enough to make room for the whole grade to have PE class. But she couldn't think too much now.

She kept staggering along the corridor and moving fast to get some fresh air, trying to get rid of that disgusting smell from nowhere. Suddenly, she heard a far-off noise that sounded like high heels coming toward her. She felt a bit nervous and walked faster. The footsteps behind quickened as well. A shiver passed over her form. She broke into a trot. There was a storeroom at the end of the corridor. She would be safe there.

"Chelsey...Chelsey..." A voice sounded behind her.

Damn it. Whatever it was, it knew her name. She had to be quicker. Chelsey picked up her pace.

"Chelsey?" "Chelsey!" "Chelsey... we need to talk..."

Damn! That wasn't a single person. They were chasing her. Run. The instinct told her to run. There it was. Her safe house was right at the corner. Chelsey broke into

the room quickly and locked the door. She leaned against the back of the door and gasped for air. Her brain was a mess, but she had no time to figure out what was happening because the door was knocked on the next second.

"Chelsey! Chelsey! Open the door!" Someone was yelling.

"No! Whomever you are. Get away! I will call the security!" Chelsey screamed.

"We just want to help you, Chelsey. Please, open the door. Everyone is so worried."

"Who are you? Why should I trust you?" Chelsey found a broken chair and kept it in front of her as a shield.

"Chelsey? Chelsey, get out. We can talk about it." That voice was familiar. That genial voice belongs to her mom.

"Mom?" Why is she here? Chelsey thought she didn't do anything wrong except sleep through one class.

"Chelsey, calm down. No one is going to hurt you. Just open the door, please." That sanctimonious tone sounded like the headmaster.

"Chelsey Grey Nelson! If you don't open that door, I promise you will regret it!"

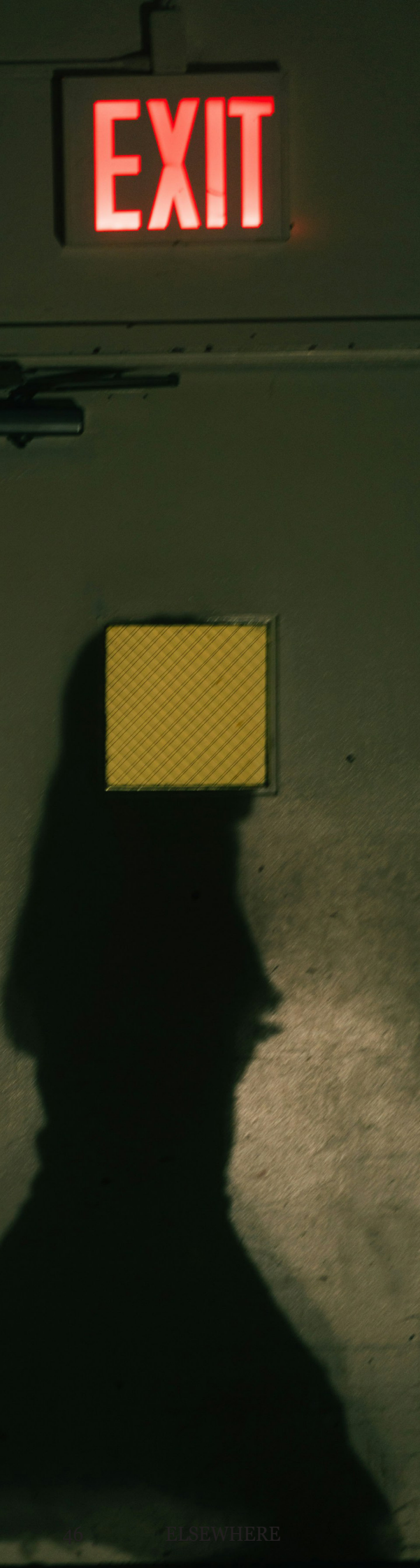
Andrew Nelson? Why was her father here too? He never cared anything about her. This selfish man did not qualify to tell her what she should do.

"I won't regret it," she yelled back, "and I will never leave here!"

"Chelsey, please... We are all waiting for you. Don't you remember we will rehearse our play after class?"

That must be Lily, who pretended to be her





friend but gossiped behind her back. She was the last person Chelsey wanted to see right now.

The door started to shake violently as if it would collapse imminently under the force of the repeated blows. Chelsey heard her father scolding her and striking the door. She retreated to the window and covered her ears desperately.

One hit, two hits...five, six...

The door was going to burst open, and her body couldn't stop shivering.

Finally, the door crashed open.

Her father was at the front, and behind him was her mom, the headmaster, and many other people without faces standing there. They crowded at the door and looked at her as if she was an animal.

"Chelsey... Chelsey..." They kept whispering.

She couldn't stand this anymore. Suddenly, that familiar disgusting smell came to her nose. She couldn't help retching, crying, and screaming. Then she passed out, overwhelmed by the voices around her.

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"Chelsey? Chelsey, wake up."

A pure white ceiling came into her view when she opened her eyes again.

A kind lady in a white uniform was patting her on the shoulder and calling her name.

"Nightmare again, huh?"

"Where am I?"

"Hospital, sweetie. You are in the convalescent area of our mental health center."

Now Chelsey remembered she had been sent here for three months since the last time she tried to harm herself at school.

Before that, she'd been isolated from the whole class for one semester. It started with boys making fun of her overly submissive introversion. Then the mean girls gossiped and spread rumors about her, saying that she was a psychopathic sociopath. She eventually had no friends anymore. The teachers weren't concerned about her because they believed in those rumors and considered her a freak. She didn't know how to defend herself and witnessed people around her neglecting her as if she was invisible. Every day at school was suffering.



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No one wanted to cooperate with her. No one ate with her. No one even cared about her existence. She started skipping classes and hid in the storeroom at the end of the corridor. Finally, one day, she couldn't stand the misery of loneliness and being isolated. Her act terrified everyone. She was no longer allowed to go to school until she was discharged from the mental health center.

She remembered the last day she was at school was a sunny day. She was packing up her stuff and waiting for her suspension certificate while her classmates were playing football on the sports field. She sat down at the window and watched other students playing football on the sports field with great envy. They seemed happy, a feeling she had been missing for such a long time. She lay prone

on the windowsill and closed her eyes. The sunlight fell on her. The breeze brought a vernal smell of the glowing sun and new primroses, a smell of spring. "What a soothing blissful smell", she should have thought. But now, she felt disgusted. She started retching fiercely and couldn't hold her tears. That smell of sunlight seemed to pity her, taunting her for the happiness and vitality she could never retrieve.

"Chelsey, did you take your medicine today?"

"No, Ms. Duncan."

"Then take this and have a good rest, okay?"

"Yes, Ms. Duncan... Can you draw the curtain for me, please?"

"Oh, is it too bright?"

"No, it's just...I prefer rainy days."



Once, when I was abroad, a foreign friend asked me, “There are plenty of intriguing spots in China, but can you name me one of the best places to visit? Just one, please.”

I have answered this question so many times that I blurted out, “The Three Gorges!”

Along the Yangtze River, the White Emperor City stands at the westmost point of the Three Gorges<sup>1</sup>, which is a beautiful starting point for the Gorges as well as for my story.

For many Chinese people with basic schooling, their very first impression of the Three Gorges is linked to the White Emperor City. This knowledge cannot be separated from the great poem “Leaving the White Emperor City at Dawn<sup>2</sup>” by poet Li Bai, still a must-learn in Chinese primary school textbooks.

I was almost ten years old when I first read the poem, yet I misunderstood the first line: “Leaving at dawn the White Emperor crowned with cloud.” As a child, I assumed that “the White Emperor” must have been a person dressed in a silver-white robe, standing atop lofty rocks, and the poet Li Bai said farewell to him early in the morning. Dressed in white, he wouldn’t have been very old, and probably tall and thin, with a melancholic and tranquil countenance. His flowing sashes were fluttering in the breeze, and the morning glow painted the horizon with fiery colours, reflecting off his silver robe with flickering shades of light. He was just living in a small town on the west side of the gorges, looking after the beautiful mountains and green rivers. One day, the emperor got up early on his own, with no servants or guards, to say farewell to his poet friend. He was holding hands with the poet and tenderly wishing him a pleasant trip, as the latter was ready to untie the little boat and float away. The emperor’s voice echoed like silver against the silence of the mountains and rivers. However, what he said was faint and a bit hard to distinguish, seemingly from another world.

Many years later, I saw how silly those misunderstandings were, as The White Emperor may never have existed as a real person. But every time I sail by the White Emperor City, I still hold my head up devoutly, hoping to see the silver robe and rosy clouds. The tour guide would recite this poem and enthusiastically explain a few lines, with the music *The Last Words of Liu Bei* playing in the background. All of a sudden, the imagery of mountains and rivers, historical stories, childhood fantasies, and life pondering rushed through my head, leaving me stunned and speechless.

*The Last Words of Liu Bei* is a Beijing opera about the story of Liu Bei, who was defeated, then retreated to the White Emperor City and entrusted his son and the affairs to Zhuge Liang before he died of depression. The opera singer's voice hovered on the whirling river with a seamless and captivating rhythm, pounding on the wet rocks, gloomy and desolate. In a brief second, the silver-like voice of the “White Emperor” seemed to fade away, as did the buoyancy and liberty of the poet Li Bai.

In my mind, the White Emperor City features voices and faces of contradiction: Li Bai and Liu Bei, poetry and warfare, heroism and despair, pilgrimage to nature, and pursuit of supremacy over it. This small town stands above the mountains while the Yangtze River rages at its feet, witnessing the ongoing debate between the two themes.

1 Located in China's hinterland, the Qutang, Wu, and Xiling gorges are together referred to as the "Three Gorges" along the Yangtze River.

2 The poem was written by Chinese poet Li Bai, a well-known romantic poet in ancient China who was exiled for crime in 759 AD. This poem depicts the scene in which the poet says farewell to the White Emperor City in the early morning in a delightful and exciting mood after he receives a pardon letter.

# "Leaving at Dawn the White Emperor Crowned with Cloud"

—A Translation of *A Bittersweet  
Journey Through Culture*



*The original text of A Bittersweet  
Journey Through Culture*

Sunqing Chen