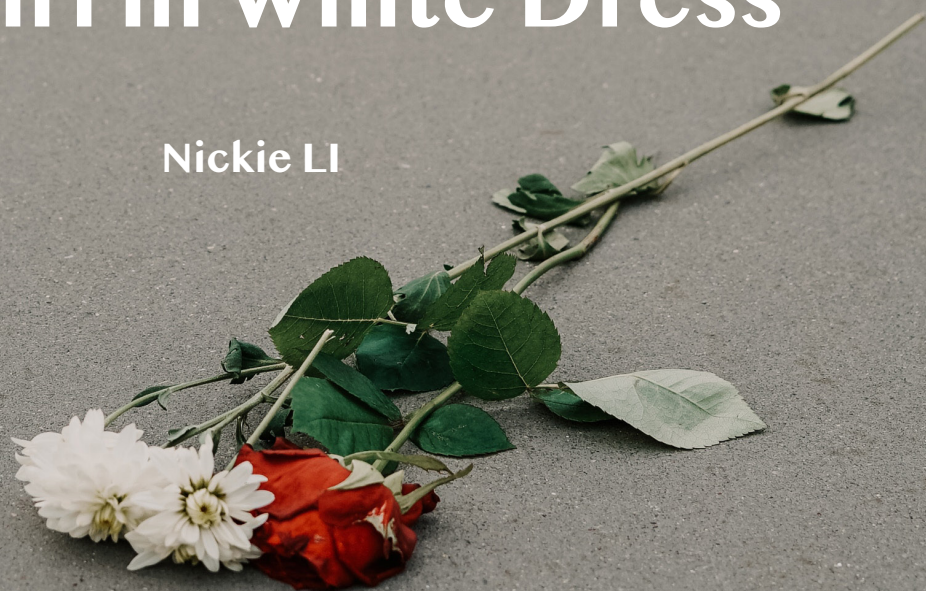


The Girl in White Dress

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When I was very little, my parents always reminded me to study hard to get a good grade, otherwise I would be looked down upon by others. I studied hard and joined as many off-campus programs as possible to develop myself. I became the only child who studied well in my big family, which made my parents feel so proud.

Probably because of my family's traditional background, I had been trained to become the type of students who always wants to win others' preference. Gradually I found that I didn't like making friends with those so-called "bad students" who hate school and always skip class to have fun. Kelly was one of them in my eyes.

Kelly was definitely one of the most popular students in my middle school as she was so beautiful and skinny that lots of boys and even girls were admiring her. I didn't know if she was one of those "bad students". But by looking through her posts on social media, which were all about shopping or having fun, most students would believe that she was. Meanwhile, Chinese parents and teachers would consider those students like her who cared a lot about their outlook, or anything unrelated to study to be paying less attention to their future.

I joined a summer program to go camping held by my school as my parents always wanted me to gain more experience and expand my social circle. I couldn't believe that Kelly did join the camping when I arrived at the bus pick-up point. I didn't attempt to say a word to her because I never thought I would step into her social circle—the "bad students" circle. Probably my parents would consider me as a rebellious girl if I had such a friend.

Surprisingly Kelly and I were assigned to the same group, which required us to finish all the tasks and share a tent. I started to feel depressed once I was told. There was no doubt that I would be the one who did everything as Kelly was likely to be the free-rider.

"Hi. I'm Kelly. Nice to meet you again." Kelly smiled and extended her hands.

"Hi. Nice to meet you. Hopefully we'll do a good job." I showed a "fake smile" and shook her hands.

It seemed that the huge ice was too thick to break as Kelly and I seldom talked about some-

thing related to ourselves. And I had never been good at breaking the ice and I didn't want to. What I expected was we would become strangers again after this camping.

After a long journey, we finally arrived at a village in a rural area. It was really hot in the midsummer that we were all sweating once got off the bus. The air was wet, mixed with the smell of soil, yet filled with the fragrance of jasmine, which relieved our tiredness and refreshed us.

As the sun went down, we were about to prepare for dinner; some were assigned for getting water, buying food, starting a fire, etc. Kelly and I were going to collect vegetables in the farm. At first, I was a bit afraid as I never went to a farmland where my hands and feet would get dirty if you may step into the river or even pick anything out of the soil by hands. I was actually surprised at Kelly's unusual behavior. She picked up the carrots and potatoes with soil; she didn't show any expressions of disgusting although her hands were both in black. Instead, I somehow became the bystander, standing next to her and wondering if I should ask someone to lend me a pair of gloves to protect my hands. When I was still figuring out whether I should make my hands dirty as Kelly did, the basket was full, and we were done.

"Hooray! I think these are enough for the dinner." Kelly held the basket with a relieved and satisfied smile.

"Oh my god. What else should I do now?" I felt embarrassed and my face and ears turned red since I did nothing at all.

"I think we're done. Come on. It's okay. Let's go and see what they've got."

To be honest, I was in great shock as Kelly could have frowned upon picking up things in the farmland. Because I always thought that those kinds of money squanderers were supposed to be unfamiliar with it. Holding the loads of vegetables, Kelly was so satisfied and seemed enjoyable. She even helped other peers to start fires, wash all the materials and put up tents, because most of us were not familiar with all these works, even some boys were afraid of fire.

My "unchangeable" perception of Kelly somehow started to change.

At that night, both Kelly and I felt difficult to fall asleep, probably because we had never slept in a tent before. We decided to drink a beer, which might help us fall asleep better.

"Have you ever got something stuck in your heart that makes you feel hard to say?" Kelly became flushed and turned towards me.

"Um. I don't know. Perhaps no."

I thought Kelly was a bit drunk since I could see her face blushed under the sparkling dim light.

"You know what. I was confirmed that ... I got a leukemia ... two years ago maybe." She sighed, "It's hard to believe, right?"

I suddenly felt something stuck in my throat that prevented a single word coming out of my mouth. I couldn't say a word at all. During that whole night, I was restless, tossing and turning. I couldn't help wondering whether she was lying to me; maybe it was easy for her to share something with a person not close to her. On the next day, I did change my attitude to her. Probably I started to sympathize her? Even though I still wondered if she was joking or not.

Three days passed so quickly, and things were not as what I had been expected. Kelly and I exchanged our contact information in order to keep in touch with each other. Though we didn't talk much, we always "liked" each other's posts and leaved comments.

I could not remember from when I started to believe that what Kelly told me that night was true. Her face was getting emaciated, though she still tried to smile the way as she did before in the photos. I didn't know she was pretend that she was fine until one day I saw her post, with a caption "Don't know how much I still need to suffer from but I'm still strong enough", that could only be viewed by a group of close friends.

I was perceived as her close friend. I was moved.

It was around a year later. I received a direct message by a stranger. I was told that

Kelly had gone, and I was invited to her funeral ceremony. I clicked into the stranger's page and found that he was Kelly's brother. I started to realize that everything was true.

I suddenly noticed that Kelly didn't update anything for a while, then I immediately went to check her page. The latest as well as the final post was Kelly in a clean, white, elegant wedding dress, with a "Kelly smile" on her face, along with a caption "Just wondering if anyone would marry me one day."

I felt my eyes were getting blurred until my tear dropped on Kelly's dress. I wiped it away immediately. I couldn't help starting blame on myself. I was pretty sure that if I didn't know this girl, the first reaction after seeing this caption would be looking her down. And probably I would consider she was one of those daydreamers who only dreamed about something divorced from reality instead of focusing on what they were supposed to do at their age. Perhaps some of her followers who had a same perception to her as I did in the past would exactly have this response. But at that moment, I suddenly wanted to tell those who misunderstood her about how brave and strong she was. I didn't know why. I just wanted to do so. But I couldn't --- there is no such opportunity for me to do it.

The day of Kelly's funeral had come. The weather was warm; the sun light went through the windows and spread on her, on her peaceful body, her white dress, and her emaciated face. I had to start to accept the fact that she was really gone. But I knew she had gone to a painless place without any sorrow but only laughter.



People like "Kelly", who seemed to take seeking for fun as their priority, were still easily found in every corner in my middle school. Perhaps they were as mentally strong as Kelly, or actually weak and childish as they looked. But I wouldn't dwell on the differences any more. No one can tell what a man had suffered by looking at how he eased himself, or what a woman had sacrificed by looking at what she owns now. Nobody knows the story behind a person until they really get to know them. Now I enjoy making friends from different backgrounds, different places, regardless of how they look like, and I could always learn something new and beneficial to my life by talking with them. I know Kelly was looking at me at somewhere else like a secret angel wearing a white, clean dress, and she may be pleased at how she changed a girl, a girl who used to live in her own world with a burden of constraints.