



PLOTLINERS: Cycle One

A collection of selected short stories written by Grade 10 students of the Affiliated High School of National Chengchi University (AHSNCCU) School Year 2019-2020

Foreword

Plotliners: Cycle One aims to encourage young students of the Affiliated High School of National Chengchi University to write short stories in English, and to showcase their emerging creative writing skills for appreciation and learning.

When my students this school year (thus, the “Cycle One” of the title) were told to write their short stories in English, they felt that it would be a huge challenge on their part. However, they will recognize sooner or later that it would also be a rewarding experience as they continue to explore further the application of the things they know about the beauty of the English language through story telling. Moreover, I believe that students’ work should be shared for others to appreciate as in this case where they get the chance to read the products of my students’ imagination albeit written by their own inexperienced hands.

For the purpose of learning, English teachers can use this collection of selected short stories to challenge the minds of their students on how to improve each short story by analysing its elements: theme, characters, conflict, twist, and plot. Further discussions on how the use of literary language, point of view, style, and even titling by my students provide an avenue for beginners like them to glean on their inspirations. Certainly, my students’ short stories are far from being impeccable; nevertheless, they represent hard work considering that we get to meet only once a week for in-class consultation. Apologies for any errors that you might find in my students’ work.

The short stories that you are about to read are categorized according to the themes of melodramatic teenage love and relationships, real-life inspired narration of friendships, traditions, and aspirations, dark and adventurous twists of characters that you may or may not be already familiar with, and futuristic lifestyle and wonders that capture your hopes and fears. I included a short story that I wrote which is inspired from a real life event that captures the theme of making life decisions in a funambulism-like circumstance where one either skilfully surpasses it or naturally falls due to his own frailties. Enjoy!

Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author’s imagination used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Credits: Some illustrations found in this collection are lifted online.

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Unseen Light

My eyelids were heavy. Only a distant sound of rustling could be heard. When did I fall asleep?

When I finally managed to open my eyes, the first thing I saw was the ceiling, pale as mist. I tried to turn my head. Something was wrong. I moved my hand to my face, feeling the bandages on it. Memories flooded back to me like waves, and I could recall what happened. That day. Sunlight, sweat. Cheering, running, shouting. Then... blood. Pain. Darkness.

I fainted again.

Sunlight shone through the window of the room, chasing the darkness away, but I sat on the bed lonelier than ever. As only an 18-year-old high school student, the unfamiliar feeling somewhat made me uneasy. The doctor had just left, leaving just the message lingering in my mind: my eye would never recover. My muscles still ached from throwing that last ball, but I didn't mind. I wouldn't be able to do the same thing for a long time after all. I took a deep breath, inhaling the fresh air as well as devastation, both swelling up in my heart. I lifted my right eye, the only one left, to look beside me. The culprit was lying silently on the table: a baseball whose surface was now smeared with dried red liquid. The exact same one which had once given me hope to live, and now destroying it also.



“Are you new here?” A voice like an angel’s interrupted my dark thoughts. “I haven’t seen you before.” I looked up, only to see a girl with a curious look on her face standing beside the hospital bed. She looked just like Emma Watson, but with eyes that were the most dazzling I had ever seen. “Hi. My name’s Esther.” She flashed me a radiant smile. “What’s yours?” “Daniel.” Then I turned away. My voice a bit cold; I didn’t want to talk to anyone at that time, not just after I heard the devastating news. Esther might have sensed the uneasiness in the tone, for she went silent for a moment.

After long, I heard her again. “I overheard your conversation with the doctor just now.” She paused to peek at me, then, noticing that there was no sense of emotional reaction, she took a deep breath. “To be honest. I’m jealous of you, Daniel.” I looked at her. She smiled. A smile so full of sorrow. Adding a bit of mystery to her gorgeousness. “For 16 years of this miserable life, I could have never known the feeling of having at least a little bit of hope. To me, those are just so, so far away.” Esther cast an eye on the warmth shining through the window, then lowered her glance. “I miss the days which I could be myself, do anything I want to, and fight for my dreams. Most importantly, I could look forward to every day, every ray of sunshine.” Her voice was somewhat full of loneliness. I listened silently as her thoughts drifted back, knowing that her story was much longer than mine.

“How did you make it?” my words came out before I could stop them. Esther giggled when she heard me. “There was nothing I could do, was there? Life always finds a way, I guess. I’m here, and there’s nothing I can do about it. So why struggle?” She had gone back to her optimistic old self, not a bit of negativity to be found. Leaning forward to pat me on the shoulder, Esther gave me a brilliant smile that gripped my gaze. “I’m happy to be alive, and so should you.” She then turned away.

My eye still hurt, but the pain had mysteriously been reduced. Staring at Esther as she went back to her bed, I smiled for the first time in days.

After that day, I stopped thinking about my wound and felt much happier. Esther came to me every day, and I started to chat with her after I found out that she wasn't like the others; she always had a nice smile on her beautiful face, and that made me comfortable when talking to her. Day by day, we somehow became friends. I could always complain to her about the nurse who gave me a grumpy face every day, and sometimes we tell jokes which could make her laugh for half a day. Once in a while, we would lie on our beds, and I would tell her about my dreams to be the greatest baseball player ever, then Esther would laugh and tease me about it. We shared our thoughts and feelings with each other, and I sometimes felt that maybe the accident that happened to me wasn't so bad after all.

I lay on the hospital bed. Darkness surrounded me, and I turned over, facing the window. I closed my eye, with not a bit of sleepiness in my head. I opened my eye and stared at the stars shining above in the night sky. "Twinkle, twinkle little star." I wondered how long they could remain dazzling up in that lonely place. I squinted my eye. One of the stars looked odd; it grew bigger and bigger rapidly. No, closer and closer...and when it finally got near enough to let me make out its round shape and red stitching, faster than I could react, the familiar feeling that I would have never wanted to experience again sent a chill up my spine. I could almost see Satan reaching his bony hands towards me with severe pain shrieking as the background music.

I woke up screaming. Warm hands gently took my shivering ones in theirs. I panted hardly, grasping them as if they were the only hope to allay the horror that happened in that dream so real. Esther waited for me to calm down in silence, and upon sensing that I wasn't stopping, embraced me tightly. "It's all right, Daniel. There's nothing to be afraid of." She patted me on the back with a soft rhythm, and at that rate my eye couldn't hold back the tears anymore. "Shh...Don't cry, that'll just make the wound worse." Esther loosened her grip, then wiped off the tears that started to roll down my cheeks tenderly. We stayed in the same position for a while silently, except for the sound of me sniffing, until I was tired and with no tears left to cry.

When my heart finally stopped racing, I looked up. She looked at me also, then we both let go of each other at the same time. We were aware of the awkward situation. I coughed, and Esther lowered her head.

"Are you OK?" It was Esther who first brought an end to the silence. "Me? I'm fine now." I swore I stuttered a bit. "You're lucky I'm here to accompany you, or else you would be so lonely," she joked with a cunning grin. "Don't be a scaredy-cat. The worst is already over. Nothing bad will happen; just tend to the wound with care, and everything will be fine." I stared into her eyes that sparkled with hope even in the dark. My voice was shaking. "The doctor said it would never recover." Esther's smile went bigger when hearing the words. "Who cares about what the doctor says? The things I've been through aren't more painless than yours, but I know when to give up, and when to have hope." "Have hope?" I asked. Then she nodded. "Have hope for miracles."

I stared at Esther. Since the accident happened, many people visited me, relatives, friends, doctors, nurses...even the other patients told me to look forward, to not to focus on my eye. I was only 18, and even without baseball, there were still so many things to do, and I shouldn't let this kind of small accident affect my future. But who knew? A life without baseball, the only thing I could fight for with. And with all the enthusiasm in the world, my life was completely meaningless.

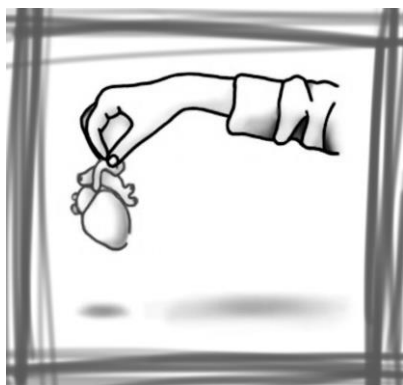
I leaned forward. The stars shone brilliantly above, with not a piece of cloud in the sky.

Days passed, and we lived on. The doctor would come to my bed every other day, observing my encrusted eye, then giving me a reassuring smile and walking away shaking his head. Day by day, the scene turned out to be numb to me. Esther would sit by my bed to chat, and I could always feel warmth and happiness when I was with her. Sometimes, I even hoped that time could stop at the moment.

Until that day.

I woke up, with rays of sunshine shining on my bed. Just like any other day. I looked for Esther, but there was no sight of her. Her hospital bed was tidy. Too tidy. I recalled her dull face and unhappy mood yesterday when she was talking to me. There was clearly something on her mind, for she didn't laugh or roll her eyes as usual when I told jokes. There was this bad feeling deep down, very, very bad.

I ran out of the room, and whirled the first nurse I saw around. "Have you seen Esther?" The shocked woman managed to shake her head. I went on asking everyone in sight, only to hear the same answer again and again. Hope faded away little by little after running through the corridors like a maniac, half stumbling, and after having needed to be taken back to the room that was once the place that made me happiest. The light in my eyes gradually turned dull. The thing that I had feared the most happened after all. I knew that Esther wasn't coming back.



I suddenly felt a strong feeling of rage and betrayal rising in me. She had put herself in my life, then just disappeared from it without a sound, as if we never met. Just like the thing that led me to the darkest path, she was once the light at the very end, luring me to get close to it as it shone brighter and brighter, only to went out at the moment I touched it.

Severe pain struck like warm sticky liquid trickled down my face, but I couldn't feel anything except for the beating of my heart, aware of the loss in it.

I picked up the fruit knife left on the side table. I didn't know what I was doing; my mind was totally blank. All I could think of was her dazzling smile. Her twinkling brown eyes. Her angelic voice when she told me that everything would be alright. Would it? A wry smile formed on my face.

I raised the knife with madness then blood dripped on the marble floor.

Weeks passed.

I lay on the bed, listening to my stomach protesting. It had been days since I had last eaten or said anything. Looking at my arms that were now near skinny, I tried to imagine if this was the form I would last be. Eye closed, I let myself wander into my memories. Suddenly, someone opened the door. The doctor walked in, stopping beside my bed. I didn't have the strength to open my eye, but on realizing that he wasn't leaving, I managed to take a peek. The doctor smiled, then handed me a

piece of paper. I stared at it with an involuntary grin growing on my pale face. Hands shaking, I managed to sign it. Finally.

The operation was over. I sat beside the window. The scenery outside was so familiar to me that I should've been bored of it long ago, but somehow it seemed more charming at the time. The sun stung my eyes. I turned my head to shift my glance away, only to stop on my wrist which was wrapped with heavy bandages. It had been weeks since she left, and the cut should've healed long before. So why did it still hurt so much when I thought of her?

I reached towards the table for my medicine, only to touch a paper-like thing. I brought it closer. It was a letter. Maybe it was a card from some distant relative. I opened it, but only to see a handwriting that was so distant in my memories, yet so familiar at the time. I could smell her rosy scent from the paper.

Then a drop of liquid fell at the edge of the letter, then I hugged it tight like the way she hugged me.



This short story was written by 林華盈 Evelyn on July 1, 2020 at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan. Credits to Zoey and Jassie for the illustrations.

Perfect Detour

It's drizzling. Adam zips up his jacket and walks out of the school gate. Walking through the same old path, his broken heart isn't able to beat with warmth anymore. The abandoned parking lot filled with debris nearby is the place he likes the best. Picking up the bottles and liquoring up, Adam and his friends go there every night.

"Maybe it's time for you to move on, Adam!" said one of his friends with dreadlock.

A devastated heart with struggle can't find the best answer for itself. To do or not to do, that's the question. All he can do now is immerse himself in alcohol. He recalls the way she smiles, the hair which falls perfectly without her trying, and the warmth from the bottom of her heart. When Adam dropped into abysses, she would always reach out to him. Adam raises his head and looks around frustratingly. However, he can't find that familiar face. The sky is still dark with a few stars shining. Adam doesn't get used to live without her. She said she loved him, but she just turned around and left without looking back. There was even not any "goodbye" from her. His friends don't know what to do but get a drink with him.

The sky of LA in summer is always clear. Walking leisurely on the street, Madison decides to grab some lunch for herself. Her blonde hair is sleeker with the sunshine. Men passing by all catch a glimpse of Madison and the empty seat beside. She thinks the sandwich is short of something. Nevertheless, she can't tell what it is. Madison isn't tied down anymore. She doesn't have a boy that reminds her of every little thing. There is no notification of her messages. Ambling by the bank, it's physically free without any restraints. However, Watching the limpid river flowing, her heart seems to float uncomfortably. It's spitting. Madison opens her arms, but the only thing that drops on her is endless loneliness. She has done so many things she wanted to achieve by herself, such as working holiday in a farm, being a volunteer in Africa. After pursuing these goals that she wasn't willing to give up, did Madison miss something more important? She sits, not uttering a single word. Madison always tends to step out of her comfort zone and chase a bigger dream. Staring straight ahead, she has no idea whether the choices she made were right or not.



Smoking in the restroom of school, Adam does not believe in anyone. He stares at the crumpled text papers, the wet photos for a while, and then he hesitantly burns down all of them and the last persistence of her. There are always a lot of people in the corridor after school. Madison opens her locker to get some stuff. Suddenly, a shadow she can't be more familiar with passes her by. It's the first time she saw him after the breakup. She turns around urgently and does nothing but looking at him disappearing at the corner. What just happened takes Madison back to that part of her memories. Dialing with trembling, they had a heart breaking fight and a compromise in tears. Madison's heart appears to be tightened. She used to force herself to end this relationship for pursuing her own goals. Was it really worth ending up like this? Does she still have feelings for him? Closing her locker, Madison passes through the corridor and walks towards that corner.

The campus after class is filled with exciting noises. Nevertheless, it's totally different in this small room. Arms crossing over the chest, Adam sits with no expression. In front of him is a big desk, and a stern face staring at him. He can even hear his own breath and heartbeats.

“Let’s cut straight to the point,” the principal said seriously.

Accusations are fired at Adam like bullets. There is nothing but confusion in his mind. He didn’t steal the money from the office! Adam tries his best to defend himself. However, the principal keeps condemning him loudly instead.

The continuous and extreme misunderstanding riles Adam up. The argument in office can be heard in the whole campus. When the fight comes to the climax, the door is opened suddenly. The world becomes so quiet as they both turn around. Adam can’t believe in what he sees at all.

“Mr. Principal, that’s enough, huh? Why do you always force people to confess something they didn’t even do? There’s no need for him to admit this offense even if you don’t like him.”

It’s the face he can’t be more familiar with.

“Madison, don’t be rude. You cannot enter the office just like this. Please leave.”

Then another round of argument starts accidentally. Adam sits on the chair and awkwardly watches this drama in front of him. The principal seems to be shocked by Madison’s impetuosity. Isn’t she a quiet and well-behaved girl before? He tried hard to argue her down, but he failed. After intense debating, the principal finally can’t stand her anymore and agrees to let them go.

They walk side by side in silence. Walking out of the school gate, Madison’s heart beats faster with nervousness.

“Hey, Adam. Umm...I know I’m the one who parted from you. But I found that I’m still love you afterwards. Can we just make up? Please trust me. I think I can’t live without you.”

Adam looks down to the ground with no expression.

“I don’t get it. Do you know how much I was hurt after you walked out on me just like that? You would never know how torn I was, won’t you? Have you ever thought about me? Every day was so rough for me, but I moved on, right?

“Adam...”

“Maybe I’m just not suitable for love inborn. And please don’t meddle in my affairs anymore. It’s none of your businesses, ok? I have nothing to say. Just get away from me. We can’t go back to where we used to be.”

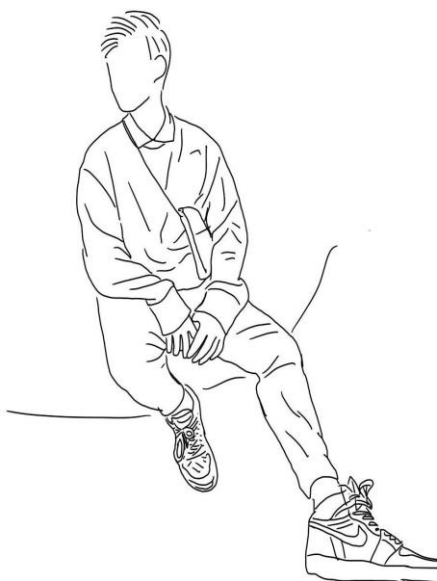
It’s done. Everything is done. Staying up all night, Madison has to move on, but it hurts to try. Tears from her heart are not able to stop. She has never been so in pain before. After crying her heart out, Madison is convinced to hang out with her best friend.

The streets in downtown are still bustling with noise and neon lights at midnight. As soon as they walk into the nightclub, Madison rushes to the counter and orders a shot of whiskey. Sitting beside the bar, they chat with the bartender happily instead of feeling sorry. With the music getting louder, she almost forgets about her sadness. Madison is a captivating blonde with a great shape. Every man who passes by is attracted by her. There are a few people buying her a drink. She even gets several offers to dance.

“See, there are so many men flirting with you! I’m gonna be envious. I’ll be there if you need me, so go get some men and hit the dance floor!” said by her energetic friend.

Madison is about to order one more for some drinks when someone nudges her slightly. He’s a ripped guy. Extremely aware of his gorgeous, crystalline eyes, she brings the glass to her lips to hide her blush and shyly accepts. Without a doubt, they become the center of attention in the club. Everyone enjoys dancing with the jazzy music. Mr. gorgeous holds her hands and dances slowly. Madison’s heart is beating so fast. Her lips are glossy and her eyes shine like stars. They are both infatuated with each other. It’s so different from the relationship she has ever had before.

However, there is a man sitting at the corner of the club with several empty bottles. He sits still with a long face even though many chicks hit on him. It’s Adam. He starts to think about the words he has said to her. The only thing in his mind is endless regret. He shouldn’t treat her that way. Looking around the whole club, Adam gulps down the shot. There is nothing more painful than seeing your ex dancing with a random handsome guy. He knows that this is all he deserves. Just admit it. Adam can’t forget about her easily. Madison changed his life when she walked into his heart and stole it. He misses the path they used to take a stroll and the sunshine on her face. Adam was a gangster until he fell in love with her. Then he started to try his best on everything because Madison trusted him. He always remembers how hard she tried to protect him when he got into trouble. Adam feels so sorry about everything he’s done. This night seems to be longer than any other nights.



It’s Monday again. Adam walks into the classroom with heavy steps. The bell rings, but that seat is still empty.

“...next, Madison Garcia! Madison Garcia? ...Is Madison absent today?”

No one knows where she is. Even her best friend doesn’t know, either. She has never been absent even if she is sick. Every call is forwarded to the voicemail box. Adam can’t pay attention to the lectures all day. After school, he rushes to Madison’s home. The door is slowly opened by her mom.

“...Umm excuse me, is Madison at home now?”

“She went to school, didn’t she?”

Adam’s gets pale. He knows that something must be wrong. He runs away from her without looking back. Crossing through the city, he comes to the place he used to go every night. It’s the abandoned parking lot. It looks much darker without his friends. Adam sadly sits on the hood of a discarded car. He really doesn’t know what to do. Though they broke up, he still can’t accept that she is missing for any reason just like that. What if she won’t be back anymore? Realizing that he can’t live without Madison, Adam bursts into tears and completely regrets that he didn’t treat her with happiness. Suddenly, from just beside Adam, he hears a husky but weak voice.

“Adam...”

There's a hopeful light flashing in his eyes. Adam looks around him, but he can't find where the voice is coming from. Jumping down the hood, he frowns and runs towards the grass. Only to see a girl with tears, bruises and wounds sitting helplessly on the ground. It's Madison. Adam reaches out his arms and hugs her without hesitation. And then, she faints in his warm chest.

There is a smell of disinfectant water in the air. Lying on the hospital bed, Madison finally opens her eyes with a coy smile. In front of her are Adam and her mom holding her hands.

"Oh Maddie, I was worried about you so much! I thought I would lose you. There's nothing better than seeing you being all right!"

"I'm sorry, mom. I went on a date with a man I met in the nightclub. I was in his house, which was so far away from the center of the city. However, the only thing he wanted was sex! He just became another person. And I escaped the house while he was outside. I ran as fast as I could. I didn't realize that I ended up on the same place where Adam and I usually go to."

Madison's mom is sobbing while hugging her.

"Umm...I should go," Adam stands up from the chair.

"Wait, Adam. Mom, can you just wait outside for a while? I have something to say to Adam."

"Thank you so much for saving me. And I'm really, really sorry. After all of these, I realize that I shouldn't have abandoned you because of some stupid goals I want to achieve on my own..."

Suddenly, Adam cups her face and brings his lips to hers. Madison's arms are around his neck. This is the most passionate kiss they ever had.

"You don't have to feel sorry or guilty. It's me, being such a jerk. I tried to be cool and pretended that I couldn't care less about our relationship, only to find that I can't live without you. I'm sorry about everything I've done and every word that hurt you so deeply. Will you forgive me? "

Madison doesn't say a word. She cuddles him tightly with a smile. Adam won't let her slip away from him anymore. Embracing each other, they both know they are meant to be. The darkness in their hearts is nowhere to be found.

"The world is not perfect, but it will be definitely prettier with you," Adam whispered to her ears.



This short story was written by 呂瑜軒 Claire on June 30, 2020 at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan.



A World with Love?

Walking on the empty street in Taipei, it's already nine o'clock at night, a brown haired girl named Dolores who has that typical girl-next-door look to her feels something seems off. She's average in both height and weight, in fact nothing in particular stands out. She's got average looks, everything about her says "I'm average." Although the moon is glowing up high in the sky, but it still not able to light up the dark side in Dolores' heart. She feels lonely and deeply hurt.

" Why does everyone hate me? Why does everyone shun me away?" she thought. It's not the first time she wants to end everything. It's not the first time she wants to escape from this cold-hearted city. Unfortunately, she couldn't do anything like someone is strangling her; it feels hard to breathe.

She finally gets back to her own place. She lies on the bed, closes her eyes slowly and starts to think about the things that happened recently. She always works hard on doing her own job as she's afraid not doing well would ruin things for everyone else. Afraid of making some tiny mistakes would make everyone hate her.

" Seems like I failed...I'm always the one who everybody hates in the end." Thinking all of these things with her sharp nails scratching her skinny arms, they quickly turned red and about to bleed. But she didn't notice that. Just like she never noticed that there's someone else who cares about her in the world. Perhaps if she could only take a little step to be positive, she'd not get stuck in the melancholy of her own emotion. If only she could...the ending would not be like this.

Like any other day while going to school alone as usual, sad Dolores sees the principal standing in front of the school gate. She tried to avoid him, but he noticed her.

" Good morning Dolores," with a slight smile on his face.

To most people, it's just a casual greet. But to Dolores, it's the energy source of her day. She quickly answered him, "Good morning Mr. Smith!"

She hops happily to her classroom. She feels delirious all day, and shockingly treats her classmates with frantic passion. She can't help but smile every time she thinks of the greeting.

"Dolores, can I ask some of your tissue?" a student asked. "Sure! take the whole thing." Even while it's class time, she still beats her fingers on the desk and even hums cheerful tunes.

When it's break time, Matthew is chatting around with their classmates in the classroom. He bumps into Dolores' desk.

Dolores suddenly becomes furious.

She yells angrily at Matthew. "Hey! Can't you see there's a desk here?" Not long after, Dolores' emotion fell down like a cart heading down on a roller coaster. "Stay away from me forever! Stay the hell away and leave me alone!" Her mind is shattered by the murmuring.

"Shut up! Listen! Stay away from my desk! And stay away from me!" The moment she stops shouting; she aggressively wipes her desk with some alcohol disinfectant.

Her classmates surrounding her were quick to discuss her mood swing. She can still them chatting. Then all of them leave in fear of getting caught in the crossfire. She is alone at the corner of the classroom. Then she hears a gentle voice.

"Are you okay?" his voice is soft. A sense of warmth and familiarity followed. Dolores knows the voice for a long time. It's Alvin. He is good looking if you squint, and his slightly crooked chin is noticeable but not disastrously bad. He has a small amount of facial hair which Dolores hates so much. He looks at Dolores, worried.

What followed are Dolores' mean words.

"Why are you still here? Are you here to make a joke of me? You all hate me! I always know that!" Then she walks away from him.

It has been days. Dolores' classmates didn't bat an eye at her. But Alvin is unlike anyone else. He wonders why Dolores' emotion always swings extremely high and low in a moment. He wants to help her with all his power and spirit. It may be because of love. Alvin likes Dolores.

Everyone else avoids Dolores, but not him. He believes that one day she'll get over her emotional barrier. Someday she'll accept him. But Alvin thought it's good to be true. It's not that simple. He can't change her so easily. Right after history class, Alvin gathers his courage to talk to her.

"Dolores, let's partner up for today's history report! It'll be easier with two people working on it."

"Thank you but I think I can handle it on my own," she sounds polite, but she is expressionless.

"But it'll be easier with two people, right?" Alvin asks her again. He doesn't want to give up that easily.

"I really don't need you! I said I can handle it on my own!" Dolores starts to feel irritated.

"But... really? It'll..." Alvin is persistent while keeping his voice calm. His gentleness matches his angelic face. His black curly hair partly covers his large deep brown eyes.

"I say no! How many times do you want me to say that I can do it by myself? Can't you just leave me alone and don't bother me?" Dolores yells at Alvin while her eyes are looking at her desk. Realizing that Dolores is not in a good mood, Alvin walks slowly away from her.

Day after day, Alvin seizes every opportunity to get close to Dolores. He always asks her to be his partner. He is always trying hard to get to close to her in his own way. But as expected, he always gets a loud “no” in the end. Alvin feels worried and sad of not being able to help Dolores. But there really is nothing he can do.

The school’s spring ball will be next month, Alvin invites Dolores again.

“Dolores, so you’ll go to the spring ball right? Can I take you to the ball?” Alvin asks Dolores timidly. His voice is a little bit trembling, but he keeps his best smile.

“I will go to the ball, but I want to go alone,” Dolores replied without hesitation.

Now Alvin has lost all hope in Dolores. He is helplessly tired of Dolores turning him down again and again. He thought he could get Dolores notice the way he treats her sincerely. However, it always turns out a failure. From that day, Alvin totally loses his hope doing the same effort. He realizes that Dolores would never accept his friendship. Alvin stops talking to her and they both became like strangers.

It’s the second day of the midterm exam. After the test, students have to clean their classrooms.

“Well...Dolores, can you help fill the bucket with water?” the teacher asks Dolores. She didn’t answer. She just nods her head, and follows the teacher’s directions. Matthew and other students are playing with the mops in the classroom. Accidentally, the dirty water splashed out from the mop while the boys are shaking them. Just as Dolores is about to move away from them, the water from the mop splashes on to Dolores, making her wet all over. She slowly raises her head and stares furiously at Matthew.

“What are you doing? You hate me, don't you? You bumped into my desk, and now you want to embarrass me. Since you hate me so much, you won’t have to see me forever.” Dolores runs out from the classroom without carrying anything with her.

Alvin wants to stop her, but he suddenly thought of Dolores' refusal. He didn't do anything. He watches her disappear.

It's been two days since Dolores didn't go to school. Alvin overheard some students gossiping about her.

"Hey! I heard from Dolores' mom that she has a personality disorder!"

"What disorder? She's just a lunatic...a spoiled self-centered brat!"

Alvin listens to each word, and it is scraping his ears like razors.

"So Dolores isn't neglecting me..." Alvin, unable to finish his thoughts, drops all his stuff and rushes to Dolores' apartment. He tries knocking on her door, but no one is opening it. He knows something is wrong. He breaks the door and runs to the bathroom as he sees a lot of water seeping out from door. But the only thing he sees is the girl he's ever hoped to love floating in the tub with pills splattered all over the wet floor. Alvin can't help the tears falling down from his shattered face. He cries out so loud as holds her in his arms.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he has been whispering the same words on her ears.

What is lost may never come back, no matter how hard you try just like Dolores' precious yet fragile life, some people always get lost in their lives. They oftentimes never realize that they are losing their own.

Just like Dolores, a girl in her youth that sadly lost herself to herself.

This short story was written by Sarah on June 30, 2020 at AHSNCCU. Credits to Marceline for the illustration.

Dancing in the Dark



In the 1980's at a small village in southern France, there were two teen girls, Teresa and Grace. Teresa was a nice-looking girl; she had long and straight blond hair, two bright eyes and a beautiful smile on her face. She was definitely a kind and optimistic girl, thus, everyone loved her. By contrast, Grace was just an ordinary girl without any specialties. In addition, Grace was not as lucky as Teresa because of her over weight stature.

On a hot summer day, the first day of senior high school was the first time when the two girls met each other. They weren't friends yet until Teresa came to her rescue.

Grace was a sophomore in senior high school, but sadly she didn't have a wonderful school life. At that time, she was bullied by some cool kids in their school. They made fun of her body shape; they threw paper balls at her in class; they called her "the chubby girl" instead of calling her real name.

"If I were you, I would rather die," said one despicable boy. Grace would only avoid them.

No one knew that there was a little secret hidden in the depths of Grace's heart for a long time — she wanted to be a ballet dancer. Grace showed a lot of passion on how much she wanted to be a ballet dancer. It became her dream since she watched those dancers on the TV when she was just a child. Even though she was not slim and was out of the aesthetic standards, she still never gave up her dreams. But as years passed by, she was afraid of telling it to anybody. To be honest, she was so envious of Teresa who was considered the most gorgeous girl in their school, and also a great dancer in her hometown. Grace wanted to be like her, but she had neither courage nor even a little drop of confidence.

Once, Grace went up to the roof wanting to end her damn life because she couldn't put up with the treatment she's receiving. She thought that there was nothing valuable enough for her to stay alive, what's worse, she even gave up her dream. She was in pain. She was hurting.

"Fat people can't have their dreams in this society, after I die, then everything I've been through would be just a horrific nightmare." Grace said to herself with tears in her eyes. Just then, a loud voice yelled her name. It was Teresa.

"Hey! I've noticed you for a long time. Please don't mind what other people have said. You are a wonderful girl just like your name. Grace, you are beautiful and courageous. I know you want to be a dancer, and you will truly be a great dancer one day if you conquer your fears. If you end your life now, you'll never achieve your dreams. I can help you and I really want to make friends with you," Teresa said comfortingly.



"How do you know that I want to be a dancer?" Grace was so surprised with her mouth wide open.

"Once I went back to the classroom after school then I saw you dancing lightly in the empty classroom. I can see the desire to ballet in your eyes, and it was gorgeous. Though you are not confident with yourself, I need to tell you that you are amazing and you are the best dancer I have ever seen!"

"You truly want to be friends with me?" asked Grace doubtfully.

"I will never do what other people do to you. And it doesn't matter what they think about you, for me, you are just kind and beautiful...and we have the same interest, don't we? I need to tell you Grace, when no one thinks it's possible, then you make it possible," answered Teresa.

Grace was moved by Teresa. She thanked her wholeheartedly because she saved her life and prevented her from hurting herself. Since then, Teresa and Grace did everything together and they counted on each other. Although other students still whispered ill about Grace as they just couldn't understand why Teresa wanted to make friends with her. The bullying never stopped, but at that time Grace knew that there would always be a true friend who stood beside her no matter what. Days gone by, the

encouragement from Teresa made Grace become more confident and she danced even better than before.

"I may not stay with you forever but please remember that I will always support you no matter what," said Teresa.

"Don't worry, we will be together forever! Thank you my best friend," Grace replied joyfully. Teresa gave Grace a warm smile without saying any more words.

There was a dancing competition held in their school on November 24th. The first place would win a huge price and a chance to enter a prestigious dancing school in Paris. At first, Grace had no confidence to participate in this competition because she was still afraid of others would say about her.

"There's no reason to be afraid. All you have to do is to prove yourself to others," Teresa encouraged her. Teresa and Grace were competitors, yet they still practiced together and helped each other.

Things didn't always go well. There was something that Teresa had never told Grace before. On the day of the competition, Grace stood in front of a mirror. She saw a pretty and confident girl dressed in a fancy white dress with a dazzling makeup. She was actually surprised by herself.

"I can do this... just do my best and relax," Grace encourages herself. Then, she noticed that she hadn't seen Teresa that morning, and it was almost time for the competition. It was weird. She called Teresa on her cellphone, but no one answered. She was so tense and nervous looking for her. At that moment, a letter was given to her. It was from Teresa.

Grace I have something important to tell to you. I have a cancer. I know I won't live long, so on the day on the roof, I didn't want to see you end your life easily. I want you to cherish your life something that I wanted to but only in a short span of time. I promised you that I will always be there for you, but I'm so sorry that I can no longer fulfil that promise. You truly are a kind person and you are beautiful. Don't let anyone discouraged you. It has been my pleasure to be friends with you and that's also the happiest thing I've done in my life. I also want to tell you that although I know I couldn't participate in the dancing competition, I signed up just for you because I know you wouldn't take part in it if I didn't either.

Believe in yourself and do your best in the competition. Don't mind what others say to you or even think of you...you're perfect in your own way. I believe you will win the first place!

No matter what happens to me, I hope that you will always keep me in your heart.

Love,
Teresa

After reading the letter, Grace cried out loud as if her heart was torn up. It was her turn to dance on the stage. She walked on the stage with her pale and sad face. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The music was on then she danced with the rhythm gracefully. All of the judges and students were shocked. Her elegant movement with the dazzling spotlight set up a magnificent picture. However, it was messy in Grace's mind. She just couldn't stop thinking about Teresa. She knew that this dancing competition meant a lot to her, but Teresa was definitely more important. Suddenly, she stopped dancing. The audience confused. She looked at all the audience with her sad and worried eyes. Then she went down the stage and ran out of the theater. She wanted to see Teresa.

Grace ran on the street with her ballet dress and shoes on. It was the first time that she completely didn't care about others. She didn't care any less. She ran all the way to the hospital like she was a marathon runner. Her white ballet dress was soaked with her own sweat. Her makeup was washed away with her tears. Her bun hair that was beautifully braided was looking like an electrified animal fur.

When she finally got to the hospital, she saw Teresa's family were all in tears. She was already too late. She just walked slowly back away from the hospital. She was breathing so heavily and she was trying not to let a drop of tear fall from her shocked eyes. Her hands and legs were trembling.

On her way home, Grace saw a photo of two young girls smiling wide and carefree on the back of a bus then she busted into tears. The memories with Teresa reminded her the good old days, and in the blink of an eye, everything was all gone. She knelt down on the pavement and for first time in her life screamed so loud while some passers-by were looking at her.

On the next day, Grace wrote a letter to Teresa.

Teresa, I'm so sorry I couldn't help you or even see you till the last moment. I'm so sorry that I failed you for not winning the competition. Thank you for all the things you've done for me. I appreciate all of those things with all my heart. You make me a better person. You saved my life, and I will treasure this life for both of us. I love you and miss you with all my heart.

Love,

Grace

PS: I will join the competition next school year.

That night, Grace re-read her diary with her tears wetting it.

This story was written by 張詠筑 Juliana on June 30, 2020 at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan. Credits to Pinterest for the illustrations.



It was September seventh, Milena's eighteenth birthday. She was wearing her favorite blue-black dress and the necklace given by her dad, which is exactly the same as the one her stepmother owns and her stepmother would never take off. The sun was scorching hot. She tied her hair into a bun, the kind of hairstyle her stepmother likes. She thought it was tidy and elegant and so she was told to tie her hair like that since she was little. The shadow on the ground was long as if it's reaching the end of the street. She strode slowly but ponderously to the bus stop.

It was supposed to be a happy day, but she and her stepmother kept arguing about who to invite to her birthday party. She wanted to invite her friends, but those are the kind of people her stepmother considers unnecessary to her future. Her stepmother never cared about how she feels. She only seemed to be a pawn of her enterprise. She was tired of everything, tired of wearing a mask every day. She couldn't even really express her true emotions that sometimes lead her into a dark mood. And this incident was the last straw that broke the camel's back. Her stepmother got to control all her decisions since she was young. She couldn't live the life she really wanted.



Her stepmom kept ringing her phone, but she silenced her phone. She put on her headphones, and the melody of the Beatles played. The view outside the bus window was constantly changing. An idea occurred to her: she wanted a new life. Maybe she would do something different. She decided to travel all along to the terminal station, a place she used to go when she's depressed. She felt a breeze on her face as she got off the bus. She looked around, and there's nothing but the sea. Far out in the sea, the water was as blue as sapphire. It was so beautiful and comfortable unlike her family. She started walking towards the sea. The hemline of her dress started getting soaked, but she was not stopping.



She thought the only way to escape from reality is death. She started to run. All she could hear was the sounds of the wind and the waves. Her feet got hurt from stepping on the shells, the water around her has reached her waist, but she didn't stop. Suddenly, a light wave hit her on the face. All those good memories with her friends and her dad all rushed into her head. She could barely hear her dad say,

"Melina, my girl. Be happy and be yourself! You are young and a bright future is waiting for you." She fell to her knees and cried. This world still has so many beautiful things that she can't just let go.



She sat on the sandy beach until the sun went down. She realized that she should create more memories that belong to her, and to her only. She decided to visit some places where she belongs to.

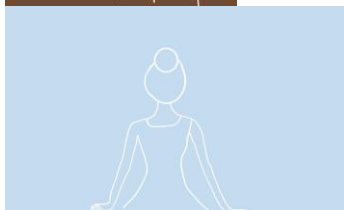
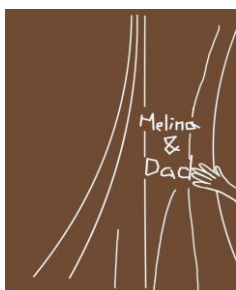


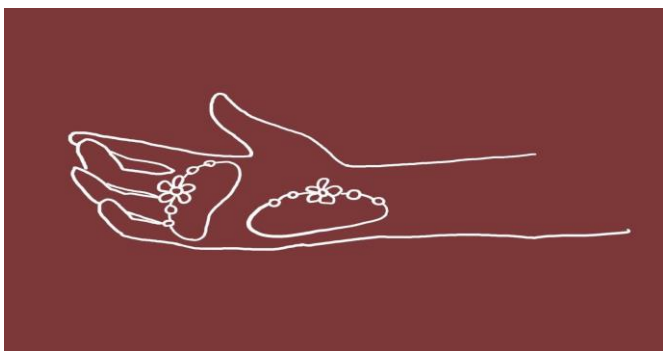
She went to an amusement park, where she had never been before. This was not a place her stepmother considered decent. She got on every ride. She never screamed this loud and felt this happy. She tried colorful ice cream and cupcakes filled with icing topping. It was a whole new experience and she seemed to have found the piece of a puzzle she left behind in her childhood. Melina won a doll with a crying face in a game. She propped up the corner of its mouth and

made it a smiling face. "This is the way you should look like," said Melina then she gave it to a little girl she saw crying near the booth.



Then she went to a mountain she and her dad used to go to. Since her dad passed away, she had never gone there again. Maybe she was afraid that she would think of her father, maybe she had never faced her true feelings, or maybe she was not allowed to express them. Melina found the tree she used to climb up. It was on the branches where she used to sit and chat with her dad. She gently stroked the mark where she and her dad carved together. All these years, she really missed her dad, but she was used to covering all her emotions up. However, this time, she couldn't pretend anymore. "I miss you, daddy, I really do..." she shouted, and her shouts became a cry. All she could hear was her echo from the valley.





She put on her headphones. The Beatles sang again. This time, she was calmer. Once again, she went back to the beach, but this time, it was peaceful and pleasant. She slowly walked on the sand and sat down. She enjoyed the warmth of the sunset on her face. That was the first time she had her own life. Melina smiled

and laid down on the beach while holding two necklaces in her hand.

This short story was written by Chen Mina on June 30, 2020 at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan.

Into The Light

“Why is this keeps on happening to me?” Alan screamed to no one in particular as he was walking down on a deserted alley. He was on his way home in the dead of night after having a couple beers at the bar on the corner of the street where his office is.

Well, was his office.

His tyrannical supervisor fired him earlier that day for insubordination, but all he did was refuse to help the corrupted bastard commit tax fraud. That jerk just walked over and yelled at him for some shitty reason and got rid of him. No one in the office stood up for him since they barely knew him. This was his fifth job in two years, and none of those jobs stuck. The longest he had was two months, then he was fired for sleeping on the job after working a 24-hour shift on a weekend. All of his employers gave him horrid jobs and impossible deadlines, and was blamed for everything that went wrong in the office. None of the job interviewers seemed to look past his criminal record for possession of controlled substances, which was a prank his so-called, “friends” in college pulled on him. Even though he was proven not guilty, most people didn’t give him the benefit of doubt. His parents cut all their ties the moment they heard the news and hadn’t got back to him even after the whole ordeal.

It started raining heavily soaking him from head to toe. He looked towards a shattered mirror lying on the side of the street, and he saw a man staring right back at him with dull black eyes. His jet black hair was dripping wet from the rain with a miserable look on his face, a look of a man that the world turned its back upon. He looked away, unable to withstand how pathetic he was. He looked at his clothes, a black suit and red tie, a pair of black pants and shoes, completely soaked from the rain. It was a brand new suit, a requirement from his old job. Another waste of his hard earned money. Now he’s left with no means to provide for himself, and he would be left with nowhere to go if he couldn’t pay this month’s rent. Alan didn’t want to be in this never ending loop of torture anymore. He wanted to be free of pain and pressure of this world, a world that no one knows or cares about him. There is nothing left in this place for him to experience other than pain and sorrow.

Right at this moment, he is feeling exhausted. All he can think of is the sweet release of death. As he is on his way back to his apartment building, all he wants is to go to the top of it and leave this world behind him forever.

Just as he rounds a street, he sees some black smoke and red light coming from a building further down the road. He thought that his apartment is the one that is on fire, and wonders if it is God telling him to hurry up and die, but it turns out it was just a nearby building. The fire brigade hasn't arrived yet, people keep rushing out of the building, tripping over each other. Some people who got out are calling out to their friends and family who are still stuck inside the building. Without thinking, he rushes to the doorway of the building and starts guiding the people out in order to stop them from hurting themselves. The fire keeps burning fiercely, shattering windows like rain from above, the heat is unbearable, yet all he can think of is to help the distressed people to escape the building. He immediately helps an old man who is wobbling on his way out from the entrance. Then he helps carry a child away from the building.

By the time the firefighters arrive at the scene, everyone has already left the building. They hurriedly douse the flames, which are dispersed in a matter of minutes. Alan is sitting on a bench across the street, trying to remember what just happened. He recalls seeing the billowing black smoke and seeing the flaming building up close, but after that everything gets hazy. Some of the people who escaped from the building walk towards him. Their faces are showing appreciation and gratitude. He is surprised by how grateful they are of his help when he doesn't really know what he did.

"You saved my life!" the old man exclaimed.

"You're a hero!" said a woman with a child whose eyes are shining with gratitude and admiration.

"You're a firefighter, aren't you?" "one of the members of the fire brigade said.

"Nah. I'm just a passer-by," Alan replied.

"I saw how you helped the people here and figured you were one of us. Say, have you ever thought of joining the fire department? It takes talent and courage to help people in danger. You can help save lives," said the fireman.

"Huh. I'll think about it," was the only thing Alan said after hearing all that.

He has never been complimented for having a talent of any kind, so to hear that from a firefighter whom people refer to as heroes that he has the ability to become one of them caught him completely off guard.

After that short talk, Alan gets on his feet and heads home. Along the way, the fireman's words kept repeating in his head.

"Maybe this is my true calling," Alan mutters to himself. And for the first time in a while, he is sporting a cheerful smile on his face.

This short story was written by 葛承翰, Sean Grubb at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan on July 01, 2020.

Oppressive Chastity

The light coming from the ceiling is too bright. Pain, all I can feel right now is pain. I'm dizzy and cold. It makes me want to puke.

There's a lot of people out there. I can hear them clearly. I hear my grandmother talking to someone. "It's a success. I never fail." I am too scared to move. And I am exhausted. All I want to do right now is rest. Take a deep sleep. And never wake up.

But I can't. I have to run. My home is not safe anymore.

I hear grandma calling me for dinner. But I also can't forget she compelled me to do this. Something that can make me stay "pure". She said, "Nura, you have to protect your chastity. All you have to do is retain the only valuable thing you have."

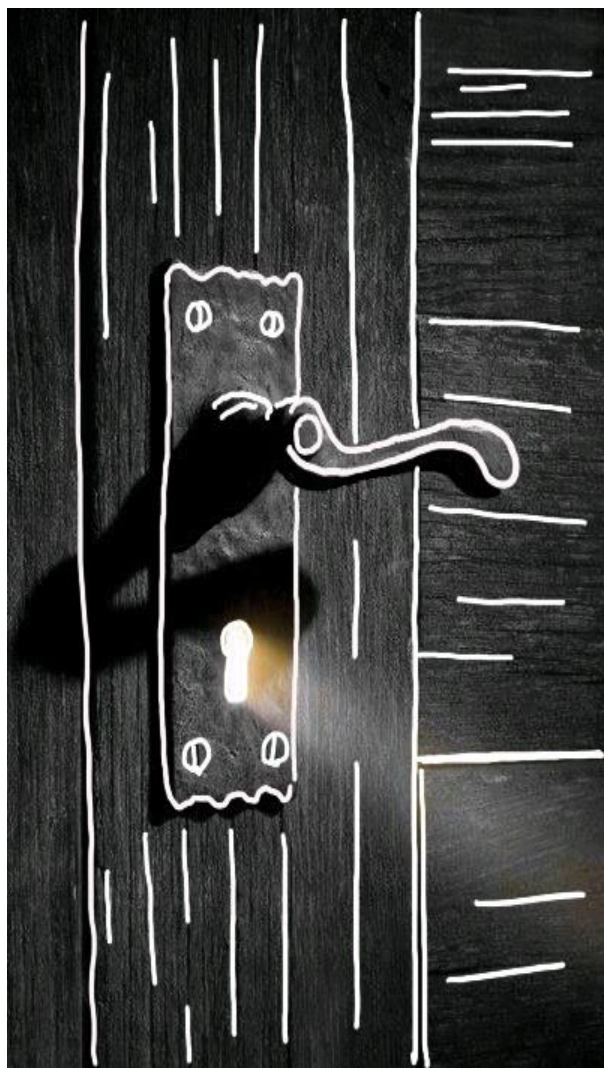
The voice inside my head is telling me that it is wrong to do this. Staying pure isn't a woman's duty. What is the standard of being pure? Who made all these rules? But fear and pressure daunted me. I was too scared to question it. It was, after all, my fault.

There's blood everywhere. I can't tell if it's mine or other girls'. The ghastly bedroom makes me feel dizzy again. Then, I see something horrible.

It's Blanche. My best friend lying dead in a pool of blood.

I want to scream. Why is she here? I remember that she ran away already. I want to ask her. But she could never answer me.

My legs are trembling. But I choose to be brave. The only thing I have to do is run away. Get away from here to a place where the sun doesn't shine.



It's dark outside. The gloomy night seems to engulf me. The bone-chilling wind crossed my face. This cold weather is nothing compared to my frozen heart.



I'm always scared of the dark. It conceals too many things which confuses me all the time. But now, I'm glad that the dark helps me hide from my deepest nightmare.

I hear a sound. It is coming from my back. It sounds like someone is sneaking behind me. My heart is pounding my chest heavily. I'm too scared to turn to see what is behind me. I'm afraid if I turn around, I will see my grandmother standing right there, looking straight in my eyes.

The sound of footsteps is getting closer. But I can't even move my legs. I try to deceive myself that everything is fine. But the footsteps are too near. I take a deep breath and turn around.

It is just our dog that always played with me in olden days. I am relieved. The dog tries to follow me. But I can't take him with me. Tears rolling down my cheeks. What else do I have to give up? My families, my friends, my home, my old memories. My tears are too hot that they burn my cheeks like knives that cut my heart incessantly.

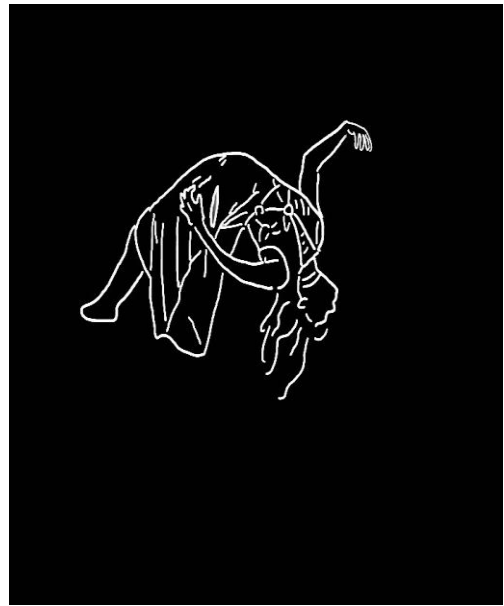
Unexpectedly, I feel something running down my legs. It is too dark to see. Pain spreads through my body. I forgot I still have a wound which makes me remember what grandma did to me. It makes me stay conscious, but I feel dizzy and cold. The wound is consuming my determination.

I try to focus on the problem. I can't comprehend my grandmother's purpose of hurting me. Men have better status in our society. They can decide who to marry. But the situation of women is different from men. If no one marries a woman, she will have to bear the vituperation of other people. Why has society become so dark? Why do we have to have status between genders? Why do I need to endure the darkness of this kind of conventional tradition? Was I wrong in allowing myself treated like this?

These questions make me dizzier. I don't have answers. But I will find them. Not just for myself but for my friends who endure the sacrifice.

I am like sitting on a small boat floating on the ocean. I'm trying to fight the big waves but I'm too weak to even keep myself afloat. I feel like trapped in a small cage. No matter how I try, I just can't run away. No matter how I scream, nobody will hear me crying for help.

Suddenly, a beam of light shines on my face. Different from the light of the horrible room where I got mutilated. It's the sun shining up the sky. The sun is out and I can finally see things clear. I see someone walking towards me with a big surprise on his face. I think he is a soldier. I don't understand what he is saying. All I can hear is myself whispering:



“My name is Nura. I was circumcised by my grandmother. But I never doubt myself of being a woman.”

This short story was written by 顧芸曦, Greency Ku on July 01, 2020 at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan.

It was a foggy day.

I was called to investigate a crime scene. The roads were wet and the air was cold. Droplets of rain splattered against my long trench coat.

The body laid limp on the cold, wet ground. Blood was everywhere. A white cloth covered the corpse.

"What happened here?" I asked. The officer shook his head.

"We don't know. We heard a scream, and we found him like... this" the officer took the cloth off the corpse. He had been stabbed in the eye. A wave of nausea coursed through me. So disgusting, so twisted...

I started to inspect the body. I had known the man. We used to serve in the army together. We had been good friends. We fought together in the war. It was a brutal battle, thousands killed missing or wounded, it was... a massacre.

At the end of the war, things had turned in our favour. We had charged into the enemy base together and taken it. I saw his face filled with satisfaction. The face I had always looked up to. I smiled, too. Because of the incident, he was promoted to colonel. I was forgotten, but it had never bothered me. I was leaving the army, might as well let him have the credit, although he didn't exactly have the best of personalities. He was harsh, a bit short sighted, and loud, but despite all that he made no enemies. It was hard to imagine someone would wish ill of him, not to say murder him.

Then it hit me. I remembered. It was a cloudy afternoon, our troops were moving in on the enemy, war was merciless. I couldn't recall how much people we killed in the gunfire, but one memory was clear, him killing a group of enemy soldiers who were helpless and injured with a surprise grenade. It was a low blow, but such is war.

Could someone have survived? Were they seeking revenge? Could it be...the one from back then? I had to know. I frantically continued searching the people who lived in the area, and to my horror, I heard from a landlord that a mysterious traveller just moved near the crime scene. I had to finish this, but then a voice echoed in my head. "Is this truly justice?" "He slaughtered so many...Is this ... what they call retribution? Has "justice" finally been served?"

Justice, the reason why I became a detective in the first place after solving many cases than I could remember. I had finally made a name for myself in the industry, from serial killers to psychotic criminals, none had prevailed to pull the wool over my eyes. Justice always prevails. That was my belief and had been my whole life, which made this case harder. Different thoughts went across my mind, but none of them made much sense. It was an odd situation like never before. Was it paranoia? Or was it just infinite thinking clogging my mind? The case would be closed. I would receive praise, money and gain fame as usual. As usual...how odd as if "usual" wasn't there anymore, but I didn't give it further thought. I started to get at the case, from the evidence, the motive, all possible scenarios, then the full story started piecing together in my mind. Just when I had reached a breaking point in the mystery, I stopped. My mind had gone blank. For the moment I had seen the truth. Then it was nowhere to be found in my mind. " Did I really forget? Or was I just too afraid to remember..." Suddenly, countless voices started to scream and grabbed my head desperately. I nearly passed out from the pain. Then, it was gone. Just as sudden as it had come, the voices, the thoughts were gone. I got up, and walked away.

I started my walk home thinking of the voices that had rang in my head. What were they? Who were they? And most importantly why? The thought went on and on and on in my head. Before I noticed, I had reached a dead end. I heard the voices again, but louder this time. At that time, I knew. I finally reached my home. The voices were now reduced to a throbbing at the back of my head, too light to bother me, too less to ignore. I decided to give myself a much needed rest. I walked into the dark house, and closed the door.

In a dim lit room, a man brandished a small long needle like a knife. He toyed with it by spinning it on his hand. It was a light weapon perfectly to take out for sake...someone's eye...justice? Righteous? “To hell with that...” he muttered to himself.

"Case closed... this is how justice ends."

It was a foggy day.

This short story was written by James on June30, 2020 at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan.

Distortion of Beauty

It is a generation where everybody possesses perfect beauty.

The technology of medical science in this era has grown superlative. People can become beautiful without having cosmetic surgeries. Words such as make up, aesthetic medicine, no longer exist anymore. And this generation is where Cheryl lives.

Hundreds of years ago, scientists invented a magic pill called, “Aquinais.” Women just need to take them every day while they’re pregnant, and then they choose their children’s appearance. Golden hair, blue eyes, fair skin, there are numerous options for people to choose from and this pill can be bought in any regular drugstores. It has become common and cheap, and it’s essential for pregnant women. But not every infant can be affected by the pill. Sometimes, the unborn child has a natural immunity to the pill which causes it to be ineffective. Yet, the possibility is lower than being struck by thunder. Oftentimes, parents resort to euthanasia when their newly born children are not as what they expect them to be.



Unfortunately, Cheryl is that accident. But her parents kept her.

From the first day of school, Cheryl then realized that everyone in the class had clear facial features, big eyes, straight nose, and smooth skin. They all looked like angels that she saw on the ads. It’s only her, who got small eyes and flat nose. Her appearance is the most special. It made her feel worried and helpless for being special. She wanted to be like everybody else, however, she knew it’s impossible for her to have cosmetic surgeries, which people did in “olden times.” Many times she wished to travel back hundred years ago

to meet a “plastic surgeon.” Someone who is unknown among her generation.

One day at noon, a girl with long hair stopped Cheryl when she was on her way to the school cafeteria. She said that she wanted to have lunch with her. The girl's name is Katherine. She has a pair of bright green eyes, beautiful brown hair, fair and smooth skin. Compared with other girls in school, Katherine is the most gorgeous. Her bright jade-green eyes are rare.

That day, she was gazing at Cheryl with a mysterious look, and she wanted to ask her something in secret.

"Cheryl, which kind of 'Aquanais' did your mom take while she was pregnant?" asked Katherine.

"Why do you ask?"

"Well...", said Katherine bashfully, "because I want to look like you."

"What? Are you insane?" said Cheryl unbelievably. "You are not only pretty, but you also have a pair of beautiful green eyes. Why do you want to be like me?"

"Because everybody looks the same. We all got big eyes, fair skin, and straight nose. It's really boring. Though my parents said that I am 'beautiful', and it's 'normal' to be beautiful. But I don't want to be normal! I think it isn't special at all," said Katherine with a wild spark in her eyes. "Cheryl, you know how cool you are? There's a lot of girls who want to be like you!"

"You're lying!" Cheryl yelled. She couldn't believe what Katherine just said.

"I'm serious, Cheryl. You are not only clever but also got a special appearance. I really admire you! Look, when you're walking in school, everyone notices you at first sight, besides, there's only a few people in the world who have got that special appearance. Don't you think this is the coolest thing ever?"

Cheryl knew the word 'special' which Katherine said which meant she's 'ugly.' It seemed like she didn't know this word. It actually contains negativity. After all people seldom used it now, so Cheryl didn't blame her for this, but when she looked at Katherine's beautiful face, she inevitably got angry. She thought Katherine was just



living in plenty without appreciating it. Suddenly , Cheryl wanted to play a prank on this light-headed girl, and wanted to retaliate to this unfair world.

“Well, the Aquanais my mom took are hard to get. They aren’t sold anymore,” said Cheryl. She deliberately covered up the truth that the pill didn’t actually work on her.

“Oh...” said Katherine, it was hard for her to hide her disappointment. “I think so, too. Otherwise, a face like yours would not be so rare....”

“But, there’s another way that can make you become cool, too!”

“Really?!” said Katherine with her eyes wide open.

“Yes, from now on you have to make yourself not beautiful. It’s simple. All you have to do is just not sleep at night, don’t do exercises and eat greasy food every day,” said Cheryl bluntly.

“But why?” asked Katherine.

“This way, you can make your appearance different from others, and then you can have these things on my face, too.” Cheryl pointed at those acnes and freckles on her face. Born with beauty and elegance, not only has Katherine never seen acnes before, but she didn’t even know they exist.

“Really? That’s great! In fact, I always think those little things on your face are so cute! But my skin is too smooth to grow them..., but if I do what you say then I can have them, right?”

“I can’t promise, but I heard that people in the past did this everyday so they easily get these things. Perhaps you can try for a week first?”

“Okay, I’ll try it. Thank you Cheryl, you really are so nice!” said Katherine.

"You're welcome," Cheryl said, but she was laughing inside. "And the show is about to begin," she thought maliciously.

The next whole week, Cheryl secretly observed Katherine to see if her appearance really changed. Few days had passed, and Katherine's face was still beautiful, but she was visibly tired, not only speaking weakly, but even a smile made her feel exhausted.

On the seventh day, she had become unconscious and dizzy. It seemed like she would faint at any time. When the experience went into the third week, Katherine's fair and clear skin finally appeared dim. Plus, she had eaten lots of greasy food which made her skin getting worse and worse. Her body had become fatter and fatter, too.

Afterwards, when Cheryl and Katherine met alone, she excitedly shared her discovery. "Cheryl, look!" she pointed at her forehead. "There's my big acne. 'When I looked into the mirror this morning, I found this cutie on my face! Isn't it the same as yours?'"

"Wow! Katherine you're so amazing. You really did it!" said Cheryl, acting happily.

"Yeah, and recently I've noticed that more and more people are staring at my face. They are starting to notice me. I'm starting to become like you. These are all thanks to you!" Katherine was in a really cheerful mood.

That day after school, the two girls walked home together. On their way, they found a kitten lying next to a garbage can. "It looks so sad. Let's go find a box and build a home for her," said Katherine. However, Cheryl stopped her, "No, you can't be this nice to it."

"Why?"

"Haven't you heard 'a beautiful mind reflects a beautiful appearance?'" Since you don't want to be a beauty and want to become cooler, you can't be this nice. You should let the kitten starve to death or freeze to death, so others wouldn't think you are beautiful," said Cheryl seriously. "If you save it, it means you got a beautiful heart, and that's not cool at all!"

Upon hearing what Cheryl said, Katherine panicked. She started kicking the kitten. Seeing Katherine seemed to be getting crazy, Cheryl was totally overjoyed. At that moment, she thought it's time to end the prank, so she stopped paying attention to her.

A month had passed.

Later in the afternoon at school, an ear-piercing sound suddenly alarmed the students. It's school's emergency siren. The students thought the school was on fire and when everybody was running out from their classrooms, Cheryl saw a familiar figure standing on the hallway. It's Katherine.

She was standing next to the siren with a baseball bat in her hand. She was fat and full of acne on her face. Her brown hair was messy, and her bright green eyes were no longer shining.



Suddenly, Katherine looked up and saw Cheryl, too. She lifted up her hands and waved hard to her. "Cheryl! Cheryl!" yelled Katherine with her hoarse voice which was no longer angelic. "Look! Look! You're right! If I stop being nice and keep doing bad things, then I can become as cool as you, now no one thinks that I'm beautiful anymore!" She screamed ecstatically, "Now I have more acne than you. I'm cooler than you now! Look at me! Quick! Look!"

Cheryl was so petrified with fear that she couldn't move.

Teachers came and tried to take Katherine away but she ran and disappeared at the end of the hallway. Cheryl could still hear her shouting madly.

"Everyone is looking at me! Look Cheryl, now everyone is noticing me! Hahahaha! I'm so cool. I'm the coolest now! I'm the coolest..."

This story was written by 陳家瑤 Doreen on June 30, 2020 at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan. Credits to Pinterest for the illustrations.

Hallucinate

Greg suddenly wakes up in the hospital. He looks pale and gentle, but he is so confused.

"Oh! My dear Greg, you finally woke up!"

"Where am I? What time is it? Why am I here?" Greg asks his mother.

"You were hit by a baseball. I'm going to call the doctor!"

Greg wants to check his phone, but he found an iPhone 15 on the table. "Where's my phone?" He looked around to find it, and he caught a glimpse of the calendar.

"What? 2025? What happened to the girl?" The stunning scene and the miserable shouting still lingering in his head made him feel like the accident just newly happened.

"What's your name?" the doctor asked.

"G... Greg?"

"Do you remember what happened to you?"

"The... the school bus slipped..."

Greg's mother can't stand it anymore.

"School bus? That happened five years ago! Doctor, is he OK?"

"Maybe he's tired. He needs to take more rest."

Since Greg recovers very well, his mother decides to let him go back to school. As he is walking on his way to school, he hears a loud sound.

"BOOM!" A sharp screaming with some cars honking go straight into his ears. Then he sees the school bus slips down the mountain. It's raining. Greg breaks into a gallop toward the bus, and finds a girl, who looks so elegant, lying on the side of the road close to the cliff. As soon as he touches the girl, Greg hangs his head in sorrow; he cries in pain until he settles into a coma.

"Wake up Greg! Wake up! Please wake up!"

Greg opens his eyes and finds out that his mother is crying beside his bed. He looks around and notices that he's in the hospital. He glimpses at the calendar and it's year 2020. He looks at the table, and there is no iPhone 15. There are two other people in the room.

"What's happening? A dream? Have I gone to back to the past?" He opens his eyes widely, and to his great surprise, the girl who is standing with her mom was the girl who died in his "dream." It quickly reminded Greg of the horrible scene. He then hugs the girl tightly while uttering an endless "no" constantly. Then he passes out again.

Days after, Greg wakes up with the disastrous scene engraved in his mind. Jumping off from the bed, he soon notices that he really is in 2020. He hopes he can get to 2025 and save the girl.

New semester begins, Greg is now an eighth grader. He goes back to school, and starts to pay attention to the girl. Her name is Alice; she is the class leader and the school patrol. She also did very well on the last exam. She is ranked number two in school, and she is nearly the epitome of the word "refinement." They start getting to know each other and take the school bus together every morning. They soon become friends.

It looks poetic today! The sun shines bright and dazzling, the sky is clear, and the wind blows comfortably. While Greg and Alice are walking in front of the school entrance, suddenly, a baseball flies towards them, and the furious baseball knocks Greg's head. Alice is too stupefied to do anything; the only thing she does is looking at Greg helplessly. With the principal's help, Greg is sent to the hospital. Several hours later, Greg wakes up in the hospital, but he feels dizzy.

"Oh! My dear Greg, you finally woke up!" said Greg's mom.

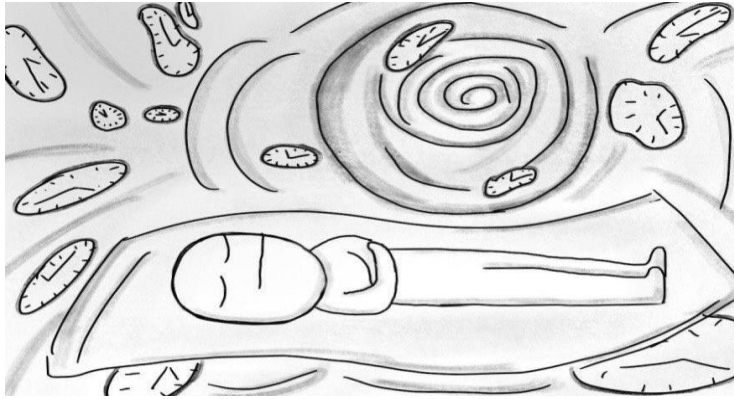
"Where am I? What time is it? Why am I here?" Greg asks his mother.

He has a familiar feeling.

"Are you OK? You were found near the school bus that slipped. I'm going to call the doctor!"

That time, Greg immediately looks at the calendar then looks on the table. He doesn't find iPhone 10, but finds iPhone 15.

"What? 2025?" Not being so surprised, Greg quickly thinks of Alice's death.



. He immediately runs to the same place where the accident occurred. It is raining. He sees the bus slips down the mountain. He can hear some people screaming, and car honking. He runs even faster towards Alice. She is lying on the road close to the cliff. Just the same, he is compelled to

touch her. But as soon as his fingertips reach her shoulders, he passes out.

Greg wakes up from a coma. He sees his iPhone 10 on the table, and just as he suspected, he is back in 2020. He now understands what is happening to him, but he has no idea on how to end it. He has a lot of “what ifs” in his mind.

“What if the accident happened because I befriended Alice? What if I’d ignore Alice and pretend that I don’t know her? Will she survive the accident? What if I’d try to dodge the baseball? Will it change things? What if I’d delay the school bus? Will it save Alice?” he wonders.

This short story was written by 蘇芍榛, Jenny on June 30, 2020 at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan. Credits to Claire for the illustration.

Never Gonna End



It has been a month since we landed on this deserted island, with our ship wrecked and most of the sailors dead. The three of us are the only survivors left- Tom Tommy, the sailor, Isaac Yamamoto, the sailor and me, Colin Baker, the cook. All three of us felt the

cold waves splashing on our shivering bodies. All of us were all tired and we all wondered if we have a chance to live on or not since there are no edible food on this island: no animals, no fish, neither a sign of a single bug. We've been living in drinking water for four weeks. Three of us are weak, each of us won't ever know when the rescue team will come to save us. For now, we can only cross our hearts, praise God and hope to live. I've recorded everything inside this notebook, just in case someone will ever come to get my last words.

It's the 32nd Day on this island, 1677. Isaac Yamamoto starts to show symptoms of a strange illness, and we are afraid that this unknown disease may be contagious but we still try our best to help him, hoping he could be better.

It's Day 36th. Our only entertainment is to watch the sunset, but somehow there's a storm coming, so sadly those gray clouds and rain cover our only consolation to our minds.

It's Day 40th. Isaac's health condition has worsened and Tom Tommy starts to have a nervous breakdown. I pray to the Lord and hope all conditions could be better tomorrow.

It's Day 44th. Nothing could be worse than this day. Tom has gone mad, screaming all day for help. With Isaac's moaning for his sickness, two combined together like death himself has sung us a harmony for the funeral, for the three of us.

It's Day 48th. Tom and I said our last prayers to Isaac. He died with a smile on his face. With a piece of cloth covered on his white-pale face, his body laid peacefully on the white sand. "Rest in Peace." Both of us say our last hope to our partner. Isaac, we'll always remember you.

It's Day 50th. Tom and I are famished. Our humanity is being challenged. We've been starving for months so we crazily decided to use Isaac for better use. We gobble some raw flesh with our tears rolling down on our faces.

It's Day 51st. Oh! Such a horrible dream! I dreamed of Isaac becoming death himself and wanted to kill me to repay him for what we did.

It's Day 53rd. Tom can't face the fact that he devoured Isaac. I see his body hanging with a frightened face. He must felt guilty with his skeleton-like body swinging with the wind, those yellow skin of his just like a dried banana. The dark yellow face facing the floor showed no sign at all. And the most terrifying of all, his eyes are full of loneliness, shows no emotion, like a hollow hole showing nothing at all. Perhaps, I should follow Tom's path and hang myself up just to let Isaac's soul to forgive me.

It's Day 55th. I'm the only survivor left. Who knows how long I can bear this scary loneliness, but I'll still follow my fate and live on.

It's Day 60th. Oh! I can't bear this silence anymore, praying to the Lord is the only way that can comfort my mind. I'll think up my last words.

It's Day 78th. My time is near. I'm full of sorrow. I'm sorry Isaac and Tom. I hope and pray for a reunion with them.

It's Day 81st. Still no sign of a helicopter or a boat. With my white skin getting paler and paler, it reminds me of Isaac. This time, I might meet Isaac in heaven, or in hell. Who can forgive me for the cruel thing I did?

It's Day 86th. Watching the yellow-mellow meadow, watching a man full of sorrow. All the sadness he wept, and all the years he'd shed. Watching the chances of living fading little by little.....

It's Day 90th. I have given up any thoughts that I can live or get rescued. I'm starting to build a tomb which writes "Three men with no luck- Colin Baker, Isaac Yamamoto, and Tom Tommy."

It's Day 92nd. After carving names on our tombs, I'm starting to think which way to die is the best. Either hanging myself up, getting thirst to death, or drowning myself. Which way shall I choose?

It's Day 93rd. I'm starting to see things! I've seen Isaac and Tom talking to me and we're having a good time picnicking and playing Frisbee! Oh, my mind is all tangled up!

It's Day 94th. Finally, the time has come. I've chosen to...WAIT! There's a white cruise coming towards here! Isaac and Tom are on the ship. I'm waving my hands at them.

Finally, I can live.

This short story was written by 明員稼 Jim Ming on June 30, 2020 at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan.



PARTY POOPERS

"Want me to tell you a story?" I asked.

"No. Please tell the jury the event of your victims' demise," the

prosecutor said.

"I had a terrible childhood. My only friend in junior high school transferred to another school. My senior high school life was a disaster, too. Bob and his friends bullied me all day and night. I almost couldn't hold it before graduation. My parents didn't care about me, so I moved out. They hadn't bothered to call me for a long time," I narrated despite the objection of the lawyer.

"This morning, Bob went to my place. He told me he and his friends missed me, and asked if I could join their party tonight. It felt strange that he suddenly popped out and invited me, but free food and drink, why not?" I was grinning as if talking to a friend.

"While I was looking at them standing on my doorstep, they looked like they were going to beat me. They didn't. But, they beat the crap out of me when I was at the back of the school though. Maybe they've changed. I was wondering what I should wear, formal wear or go easy. As the time went by, I started to think whether I did something wrong to them. They hated me, I really wanted them to die, and now he invited me to a party tonight? How did they know where I live? I accepted the invitation and couldn't turn it down. I knew this was a ticket to hell," I was looking at the ceiling not minding the judge and the jury.

"Why didn't you turn down the invitation?"

"You didn't pay attention to my story? They bullied me before, they might beat me to death if I refused."

"And so you murdered them."

"So? I don't care."

"That night, I went there and knocked on Bob's door. I saw them chatting in the corner of the room. There was plenty of food on the table. Bob greeted me and told me to help myself to the food. We started to talk about our past. I mentioned what they did to me, and they started to laugh. I didn't feel funny at all. They continued the topic and made fun of how coward I was and my inability to fight back. I was getting angry, but they didn't stop laughing. In the end, all I wanted was an apology. It's impossible for them to say it easily. Now they couldn't, ever again."

"After a while, Bob told me to follow him to the kitchen. He gave me a cup of liquid, it smelled like beer. I didn't know what he wanted. He told me that we need to talk so I followed him. I drank the whole thing in the cup. I was really thirsty, then he started talking."

"Few minutes later, I started to feel dizzy. Maybe it was the drink, or maybe I was too pissed. I saw Bob went into the basement and came out with a blanket and a rope. I remembered this was the game I used to play with them. Human piñata, that's what they called it. I was being tied and covered by the blanket. I felt nothing. In fact, it felt good even I was hung and beaten by them. Magically, after a few more minutes, my pain was released. I felt like Superman. Endless power and energy came out of my body."

"Hold on, we want you to tell us the incident, not a fairy tale."

"Shut up and let me finish my story!"

"So I broke the rope and dropped down. I saw them holding bats and looking at me frightened. I felt no pain, not even angry. Just nothing. It's my turn now. I rushed into the kitchen then grabbed a knife. Bob couldn't do anything except being slashed by my eye laser beam. One by one. You should see the emotions written on their faces. It was impressive. Bob tried to counterattack me with a knife. Guess what? He lost. Everything went quiet after a few minutes. I felt happy and I had no regrets. They, too, had no regrets. They were just sitting on the couch and on the floor like little kittens. Very obedient. I helped Bob sat down on the chair. I began eating again, playing cards with Bob, then talking to them. I turned the volume of the music louder. I was having fun with Bob. I was screaming with ecstasy. Everything was so great until you guys arrived. You party poopers!"

"So you killed him for no reason?" the judged finally asked.

"Bob was too weak to defend himself. That wasn't my fault," I answered back.

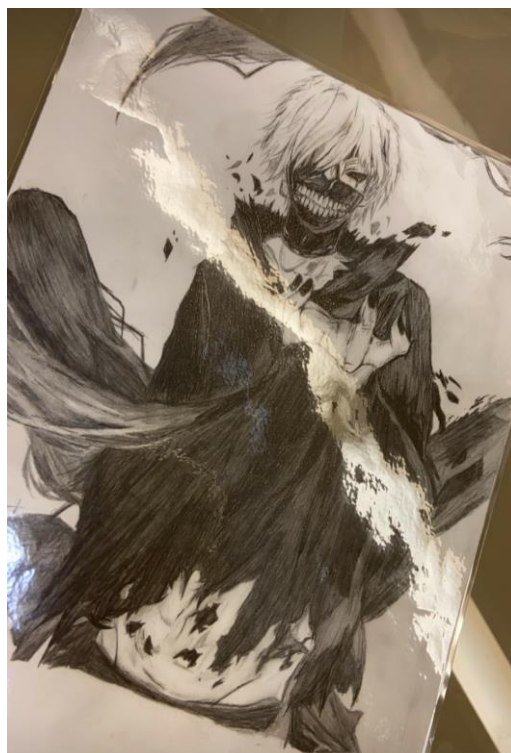
"That's it. Do you got anything else to say Mr. Jeff?"

"Nope. That's the story."

This short story was written by Wilson on June 30, 2020 at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan.

Destined to Fall

The question Ken wonders the most these days is whether being kind works well for him, considering he's a ghoul. It feels so unrealistic that a few months ago he's just a regular college student. Unlike humans, ghouls have super strength, fast regeneration, unique powers and yeah, they feast on human flesh, but still, "good" ghouls exist like the organization that gave shelter to Ken, Antique. It's his home. They maintain the order between ghouls and humans in the area around the coffee shop, "Antique." It serves as their base. But with Ken adding in, Antique faces many strong foes that don't even belong to the district it belongs.



It's all because of Lisa, a mysterious and ghoul who came out of nowhere and had them injured together under a falling building. Turns out she was so important that she even had gold bounty for her head. The worst part? Ken inherited everything after the accident, including her organs. A few days ago, Jason, a formidable ghoul, ran down Antique and kidnapped Ken to this creepy cell. He seemed to hold a grudge against Lisa, and he's a complete metamorphosis, which made him extra terrifying to Ken.

"Your body's regeneration is just so satisfying that torturing you makes me more and more excited," laughed Jason.

Despite Jason's pitiful experience with his mentor, torturing people pleases him after tearing down his maniac mentor into pieces. In the past few days, he had been toying Ken with all sorts of nasty tools, including his favorite spanner. He uses it to rip the weak boy's toes off one by one then his limbs. He is assured that Ken is definitely going to become his best toy. The ghoul inside Ken is in a class by his own. He feels desperate to torture him. It's a calling from his nature.

"You know, Ken, I prepared a special gift for you," Despite Ken trying to bear the fear and pain Jason brings to him, it just seems in vain. The pain he had gone through for the past couple days was just inhuman, thankfully he's a ghoul. Specifically, a ghoul with one ghoulish eye. Normally, ghouls should have two. Perhaps that's why he can bear the pain.

"Imagine a centipede crawling in your head. Never gone through it? First try I guess," Ken shuddered from hearing Jason's cackle. He really wants to get the hell out of there, but on the other hand, he's relieved that he's the only one caught. He kinda ignored the fact that he is the biggest and only target.

"Did they get away in the end?" he wondered as Jason stuffed the living centipede into his ear. He didn't even have the chance to feel the pain before he totally blacked out.

"Ken!" The sudden croaky voice of Jason brought him back to reality.

Damn, he went unconscious. Not only did he go unconscious, he got lost in his memories. He had been recalling his childhood for god knows how long. It's hard to keep track of time under this bloody circumstance. He had no memory about his father. His mother died due to overworking because she never rejected her sister's demand for more money. She worked so hard. She must've loved him and his aunt so much. After all, she's such a kind person. The instigation from his kind-hearted mother is what makes him such a nice and kind person, too.

Even under this terrible situation, he still hears her voice swaying in his head, but now somehow he finds the voice irritating. He hates the fact that kindness is so useless for ghouls. He can't protect anyone from anything. The ghoul Lisa in him is top notch, plus he becomes the one-eyed ghoul, which caught the whole world's attention. However, he is weak. That is why Antique is in danger, why his friends are in danger. All he needs is power, the power to slay the bastard in front of him and anyone who dares to hurt the ones he loves.

Meanwhile, Jason seems to have disappeared for quite a while. Perhaps he returns to the encirclement against Antique and left him there. He immediately realizes that's some fancy imaginary he got when the muscular appearance of Jason returns with two humans strangled in his firm arms. Apparently Ken is what Jason only cares for now. Jason tosses them in front of him, and a wide grin spread across his face.

"I suppose you got quite bored of having all the "fun" alone, at least I am. So I went searching for a young couple, just to add some spice."

"Mmph!!Mmph!!!" the boy struggles. They struggle hard, but with their whole body taped together, it's just useless. Before Ken can process what is up to Jason's mind, he grabs the couple's heads with each of his hands and said "Ken, you're too human. Your heart is weak. Now, you choose who lives, the boy or the girl. You better hurry up and decide, or I'll kill them both."

At that moment, Ken feels cold. Jason knows exactly what Ken's weakness is. His kindness will never let him choose between the two people. Jason knows it so well. A surge of rage began to boil in Ken's veins. He had already burdened so many lives, so he cannot let the innocent couple die in front of him. Not this time. Ken breaks free from the handcuffs and charges at Jason as his right eye begins to darken. A glistle of blood sways between the darkness. Yes, he is hurt a lot, but the damage is kept only to himself.

Just like his mother's instigation, he felt relieved whenever he knew he is the one who got hurt rather than the others. He would rather be the one in pain.

Ken rapidly closes the gap between Jason and thrusts his fist on his stomach with all of his might. But Jason seems to be expecting this already. His back splits open and a huge hand covered with blood springs out. It smashes the two human skulls to smithereens then impales Ken through his heart.

"That'll do it," murmured Jason leaving Ken lying on the icy ground.

Ken's pretty sure he's dead when he literally felt his heart disintegrate. The scene around him is so peaceful that it seems like he's in heaven. He's sitting on a wooden chair in the center of a pure lake that has no boundary. And there stands Lisa with her gorgeous hair swaying in the wind.

"Am I dead?"

Lisa walks to his side slowly and lowers her head.

"It's up to you, Ken."

"But I never get to control what happens next," Ken says in distressed. No matter who he is, a ghoul or a human, he didn't save anyone he wanted to. It's the way he chose to live, the way his mother chose to live.

"That's your mother right?" asked Lisa. Ken followed where she pointed and found an image of his mother working at home. Little Ken stood right beside her.

"That's the strongest image in your brain, Ken."

"Yeah, I loved my mother so much. She taught me a lot, and she's so kind and sweet," Ken said smiling.

Then the image altered and now a woman is talking to his mother. Ken felt himself filled with hatred immediately when seeing his aunt.

"Why is your mother handing money to the woman?"

"It's my aunt. She has been doing this since eons. She led my mother to die because my mother is so nice. She never rejected my aunt's demands," snarled Ken.

"But what about Little Ken?" said Lisa.

She seemed to smile a bit just now. Before Ken could answer her, the image shifted again. This time it's his mother lying on her bed with white flowers scattered everywhere. Little Ken is still standing beside his mother without any facial expressions.

Lisa's smile grows as Ken's mouth trembles.

"Such a stupid mother isn't she?"

Tears began to stroll down his cheeks.

"If your mother loved you she could have just abandon her pesky sister, couldn't she?"

"Shut up! Please, just shut up!" cried Ken. He cannot bear it anymore.

"Mother... my beloved mother...why did you leave me alone? I was so lonely! I wished you chose me instead mom!" Ken yelled.

"I just wanted you to live for me, mom, live for me!"

Lisa's smile can't be more obvious that she's satisfied.

"Even if it means deserting your aunt?"

"Just leave her to die!"

"Even if it means hurting others?"

"At any cost!"

Upon hearing Ken's roars, Lisa hugs him gently.

"Good kid. Sometimes you need to abandon one to protect the other one. Your mother failed to do this. That's not kindness, that's being coward. Now, after finishing you off, Jason will then do the same to your friends, your Antique. Will you allow him to hurt you? Can he be forgiven?"

"Never! Those who wreck my home cannot be forgiven."

"But do you have the power?" Lisa asked almost excitedly.

"...Of course"

"Then embrace me, Ken!"

Ken leaps from the chair and throws down Lisa. "Don't get me wrong, Lisa. There will always be only one Ken. From now on, there will be no more Lisa. This time, I'm the ghoul. I'm the one that kills."

"Even if it's wrong?"

Ken lets out a contemptuous laugh. "It's not me who's wrong. It's the world."

Then the lake turns red after Ken devoured Lisa.

Ken opens his eyes, which felt weird because his eyes are always open. His right eye bursts with darkness yet bright as ever. The lake, Lisa, they're all inside him. He feels superior. Meanwhile, Jason is lying on the ground in his pool of blood. He has been expecting something like this, but still, he fails to gain any ground. One stare from Ken got him to his knees. His back is torn apart and the hand is eaten to nothing. The awakening of Ken made him god.

Something is wrong, he shouldn't be this invincible. Still, unexpected as him, he's nowhere near afraid. After all, the stronger Ken is, the better.

"Lisa, I fulfilled our promise," gasped Jason with his last breath.

"All hail to the new king."

This story was written by Travis Lin on June 30, 2020 at AHSNCCU.

Escape Velocity

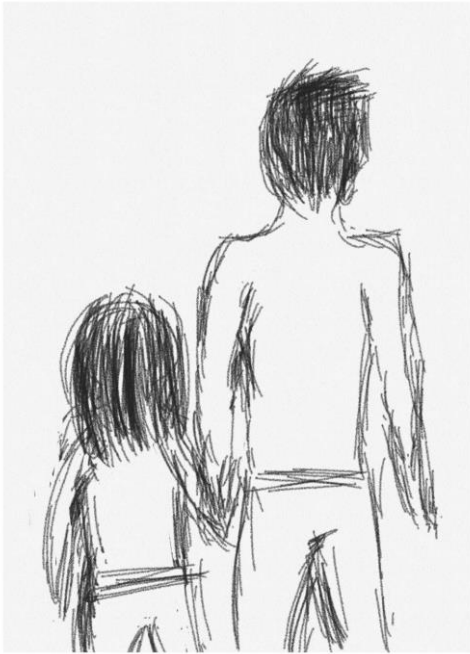
August 10, 2040:

Aliens from Mercury destroyed everything.

A week ago, an invisible spaceship suddenly appeared in the sky and killed most of the people on Earth in three days with massive lasers from their ships. We knew nothing about them. No one survived after seeing the aliens' terrifying real appearance. People who looked at them got burned and turned into ashes. Just like that. I don't know how many people are alive now, and I haven't seen one for three days. My dear daughter looks nervous all the time. I can't imagine what she had experienced before I found her. What we can do now is seek for water and try to survive. Having some water is difficult for us because it hasn't rained for years. No one knows why.

September 21, 2043:

Still hiding under the subway. It's pitch dark. We've been staying silent and still. I don't know if we can survive any longer. It's been three years. We're running out of water. I heard that a group of people in Keelung will leave Earth in three days -- with the only spaceship that was fixed by a few survivors. On our way to Keelung, we will have to cross a wide desert. We will probably die in the middle of the desert, but I think we can get there on time. My eleven-year old child is getting weaker and weaker. I am, too. We both look like a walking corpse. I'm not sure if we can do this or not. We're so hungry that we ate most of the paper in this diary yesterday. If anyone can find this, please travel to the desert. A spaceship is waiting for you.



“This place used to be the most bustling area in Taipei,” I whispered. We were passing damaged buildings, and craters. Concrete blocks were falling down from skyscrapers.

“That smell!” Some dead bodies with some body parts missing come into sight. They didn’t have arms or legs, and some even lost more like their heads. I covered my daughter’s eyes. It’s too much for her to see this cruelty. Death could have been painless for them if they willingly stared at

those giant aliens’ eyes. I hadn’t seen any of those bastards. We’ve been walking for hours now.

We were silent and careful and kept moving towards the desert. On the road, skulls and bones could be seen everywhere. It seemed like they were leftovers after a feast. Did these aliens eat human flesh? I won’t let us get captured and get eaten. But I guess, they’d let us go, after all, my daughter and I looked like skulls and bones.

Some cactuses grew as tall as a tree. When we were tired, we would find a huge cactus and sat under it or made a hole on it to escape from the attack of sunlight. If we won’t die from those ugly hands of those aliens, we might die from the whips of the sun. It’s bad. We were having a difficulty breathing. We’ve got one day left to get to the spaceship. But when we were approaching the end of the desert, the sky was filled with heavy clouds. It’s weird. I haven’t seen clouds for about 20 years! My daughter was clearly entertained with those cloud formations. I was glad that I saw her smile and elated after so many years. We arrived at the drained Tamsui river at 3 in the afternoon, I guessed but due to the black clouds, it’s almost as dark as midnight. It’s hard to navigate through the Tamsui river.

It used to always have a lot of water. But all we saw were dust. The river was nowhere to be found. We crossed the "river" with high speed. And then, on the other side of the river bank, we didn't notice the monster. It was hiding on the dusty and sandy ground. My daughter screamed.

It had a huge porcupine like hair protecting its rocky like face. It had four huge dark dry eyes, four scaly and pointed arms, and one of its left arms was holding a round laser-like weapon. It was very huge. Maybe four feet taller than me. I closed my eyes and covered my daughter's. I could hear it walking towards us. I felt my body was frozen. It comes closer and closer, there is nothing I could do. It stood in front of me. I could smell the stinky flesh out from its mouth. It screamed, and it lifted me up. My scared eyes were still shut. I was holding my daughter with my right arm while the other was tightly covering her eyes. I could hear her cries. It was choking me. It was so painful, and I couldn't move. I couldn't punch him in the face and escape. That was it. All we could do was to wait for our death. I didn't want me and my daughter to be eaten alive. The best thing that we could do was to open our eyes and die painlessly.

I could feel that I was about to pass out. Before I opened my eyes and let my daughter go, a raindrop dropped on my face. The mighty sound of the thunder shook me that I accidentally open my eyes wide open and freed my daughter from my weak arms. It started to rain heavily. Suddenly, I felt my neck released. I fell on the ground and found that there was a pool of yellow liquid right next to my feet. I took my daughter away from the alien. Its screams were full of pain. The rain was dissolving the alien's hideous body!

My daughter gave me a huge hug. For the first time, my daughter spoke cheerfully.

"Daddy, look! The monster is dying! I was so afraid that we could get killed by that alien," she cried with a relief.

"We're alive! The rain saves our lives!" I shouted happily. Tears started to roll down from my eyes.

"Daddy, is this rain?" my daughter asked curiously while she was looking at the sky.

"Yes, my dear. It's rain," I yelled out loud.

This short story was written by 潘柏宇, Eason Pan on June30, 2020 at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan.



Prophecy of the Sands

It is a normal day for Temmet. He's getting ready for his warrior training and is strapping on his boots. His sister, Emmera gets up and yawns.

"I'm a warrior. A warrior is always ready to strike," he says to himself while looking at Emmera who is slowly climbing out of bed.

Walking down the stairs of his home, a run of the mill two-storey house in the mid-section of the city of Akhamaet, Temmet scrounges for breakfast, a stick of his favorite, scarab bits.

"I'm leaving for training. Good byes can wait," Temmet says to himself. He has a long day of training ahead of him.

Temmet walks down the lanes of his neighborhood, a boring town where nothing happens. He wants to become a soldier because of his town. He wants to see the world outside, not stuck in the same town like his father and his father before him. He hears some dwellers arguing which is odd for a small quiet town like his. Two shadowy figures around the corner, one of tall muscular stature, and the other bears a robe.

"We are ready for de ritual, de time has come, we have da girl from the prophecy."

"Wait, we must. Ordered us to wait the pharaoh has. Obey his orders we must."

"Bah. I'm sick and tired of all dis waitin, I want to knock on some skulls."

"Sense someone I have. Around the corner he is."

"That will do just fine."

Temmet knows he's in trouble. He attempts to make a run for it, but he sees the "girl from the prophecy" they speak of. His very own sister, Emmera.

"Why is she here? Where's mom and dad?" So many questions so little answers.

"Rampage time!" the troll yelled as he smashes the carts on the sides of the road.

"Seen too much he was, let him escape we mustn't," the elf begins to conjure a spell.

A stream of frost energy blasts through Temmet's ear. Freezing bits of his hair, he has no time for cleaning up. He dodges to the left and a shockwave wizzes pass him. He turns to the dark alleys. He was never brave enough to go in alone but this is 'do or die.' He stumbles a bit and eventually settles down next to a barrel of wheat.

"We lost da boy, you sensin' him!?"

"Shrouded in closed spaces, my magic is too little room."

"Bah, that can wait, where's da girl?"

"Have her do you not?"

"So we also lost da girl? Bah, can dis get any worse."

Emmera is about five feet away from Temmet. She has a few scratches and bruises but she'd manage. Temmet's head races with thought how he and Emmera can get out of there.

He tosses a rope atop the houses, lucky for him he never misses arm day. He pulls himself up. Upon getting on top, he is tired like a dog. Maybe he missed a few days after all.

"What is happening?" cries Emmera to her brother.

"Those are some bad looking people, or whatever they are."

"Enaf waitin around, unleash da beast!" the big troll yells.

What followed truly struck fear in Temmet's soul. A monstrous being with a croc's head and lion's body crashes through the city walls, swiping its scorpion tail through buildings like they're made of clay. Every step it took, a tremor.

"What is that thing?!?!?" Temmet exclaims.

"Whatever it is, it's very hungry, hungry for human flesh. Let's get to high ground," Emmera starts to lead.

Climbing atop a water tower, the creature's swipes have shaken the foundations of the town to such an extent that every building in a two-mile radius has sunk.

"That's an "Ammit," a creature fabled to eat people's hearts once they're dead, the judges of the afterlife," Emmera explains.

"Is that why it wants us so bad? It seems famished, doesn't it?" says Temmet who is trying to lighten the mood.

"You're always suck at jokes," Emmera protests.

"It's kinda hard trying to lift the mood when there's a giant croc thing trying to get to ya heart, isn't it? Now shush so I can come up with a plan."

Temmet glances at his surroundings, a barrel of ropes, a hammer and a few buckets. Exactly the tools needed to kill a mythical creature that eats hearts for breakfast. He has always been a “creative” thinker, but this is crazy even for him, but crazy might just be what they need right now. He grabs the rope and ties one end to a bucket, used the hammer to crack the water tower, and filled the bucket with water.

“What are you doing?” Emmera asks with visible concern on her face.

“This thing is part croc you said, the only thing I remember from school is crocs live by water. In a desert town like this? It must be thirsty,” Temmet shouts as he lowers the rope.

The “Ammit” approaches the bucket, with no hesitation, the beast starts drinking. With such haste, the bucket is almost torn off. A few minutes passed and the beast stares at them with deep hunger, but the beast fell to the ground. The tremble shook the tower almost tipping it over.

“How did you do that?” Emmera asks surprisingly. Then Temmet takes out an empty vial.

“Army rule number one: Always have the right tool for the right prey.”

“You were trying to poison the neighbors’ dogs, right?”

“The whole neighborhood's pets to be exact.”

“You’re the worst.”

“I saved the day.”

“You still suck.”

“Let’s just go home.”

The two run the fastest they could towards home. They are two blocks away.

“So what are we gonna say?” Emmera calls out to Temmet who is a few feet ahead of her.

“Considering the neighborhood is entirely destroyed, maybe that should not be your priority.”

“I’m just worried. What if they’re not there?”

“Don’t say that. They’re fine.”

“I know, but I’m just so worried.”

“Just run!”

Their house is now a shattered ruin.

“Mom?? Dad!?!?” cries out Temmet.

“Ya parents be gone mon, da ammits took dem, ate dair hearts,” the troll screams with a slight smirk on its face.

“Lovely they were, loving they were, very dead they are,” the elven sorcerer said with dark mists surrounding its hand.

“You will pay for this!” yells Emmera angrily while pointing to the sorcerer.

“Ohh, da girl be angry, miss’in ya ma an pa are ya, ya will bathe in da pharaoh's light and forget ya pitiful parents,” the troll says as he throws a punch at Emmera.

“Nooooooooo,” yelled Emmera with her hand reaching out.

Then a stream of light blasts down from the sky, smiting the troll. He collapsed.

“Revealed your talent you have, not good this is,” the elven sorcerer said as he begins to cast a spell. He throws a bolt of shadow energy at Emmera.

“You will hurt my family no more,” she raises a shield of light that deflects the attack.

The bolt hits the sorcerer, draining the life from areas around the impact zone. He falls to the ground.

“Silly girl, fate is sealed, serve the pharaoh you will.”

“I’ve had enough of your words,” Emmera says as she raises her hand to call down the light to smite the sorcerer.

Nothing happened.

“Ha, have full control over your power you think, silly girl, this isn’t over.”

The sorcerer opened a portal and slipped through. Temmet makes an attempt to grab his leg. He misses.

“Now what do we do?” Emmera is worried.

“Since when did you have those... powers?” Temmet is curious.

“Don’t know, but I think that’s why they came after me in the first place.”

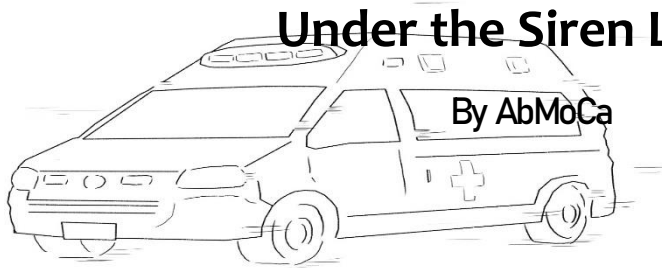
“And when were you planning on telling me about your superpower???”

“There hasn’t been exactly a time to stop and talk, has it? Here’s a recap of what we did today. I got captured by two very bad men. You killed a mythical creature that eats hearts, and I literally burned a man to death. All these weren’t what I had in mind to do today.”

Silence follows as night falls. The two siblings stand side by side as they look into three shining moons. They are on their own from now on. All they have is each other, their trust in each other and their faith in each other.

This short story was written by Alan on June 30, 2020 at AHSNCCU, Taipei, Taiwan.

Under the Siren Lights



I heard someone was gently tapping on the glass window of our cramped office while I was busy figuring out how to cut some of my expenses this month. I quickly glanced at the entrance, and a young female nurse was standing in the slightly opened wooden door. She simply nodded without saying a word, and I knew right away that it was time to go to work. I slipped my small notepad on my blue shirt's pocket and lifted my heavy body from the old reclining office chair covered with synthetic leather. When I was very young, I swayed my body towards the sky while sitting on a swing and as soon as my bare feet reached the ground, I pushed my body forward so I could land perfectly on the withered grass. I could feel the body wave that shook my abdomen up to my chest. Those were my simple joys. But now that I reached a retiring age after working at a public hospital right in the city of Taipei for decades, my huge beer belly won't even budge. But lifting myself up from my seat woke the brassy sound of a bunch of keys resting on my jean's belt loop which somehow became literally a music to my ear like a pleasant tinkling of a Mark tree. Just as I about to walk towards the door, Lee, one of the paramedics shouted indiscriminately, "Ping-go, move it!" As usual, he was then imitating a penguin as he exited out from the office. Ever since we became close buddies, he never called me in my real name instead he teased me with aliases like "Fat-so," "Hippo" or "Xiǎo pàng."

"I swear I'm gonna steal one of your girls," I yelled back at him, then I heard echoes of his sinister laughs on the corridor lightened up by the afternoon sun.

"Wait 'til you reach my age," I whispered. Lee continued frolicking as he was fully aware that I was walking behind him. But he was not giving justice to that penguin walk though as he looked so fit like a gym instructor. I used to have that built when I was younger, but after the appalling divorce many years ago, I resorted to more merry-making and eating sprees with friends in low places. I left my 8-year old son with my ex-wife back in our small tea farm in the hilly district of Pinglin in New Taipei. I heard that she remarried and had been living a comfy life. I left my hometown to work in the city when my son turned 10, and I 'd been working hard to provide for him and his studies until he finished college. Two years ago, he got engaged with someone from a well-to-do family.

Working in the city wasn't as hard as working in the farm. Life in the field was never been easy. My family owned a small family tea orchard, and I helped a lot in harvesting those herbs. With four other tea pickers, I woke up early in the morning with a rattan-made basket on my back, then with a short hand and back stretching, tea leaf picking was sure did a work with extensive patience. We didn't use any modern machines in snipping off those tiny and delicate green leaves. They were better plucked by hands leaving the stems with budding tops undamaged. I guessed human lives were similar to that of the twigs. We always end a chapter in our life to start a new one. My life had changed, but not my dreams. In a flash, I looked at my heavy arms and plump fingers, and although they're now good at steering the wheel and levering the gear, I would certainly go back to growing my own Oolong tea plantation no matter how small it was. I could use all my early retirement benefits to start a new life back in my hometown or wait until the mandatory retirement so I could save up more money. I was still undecided.

The young female nurse was surprisingly waiting for us at the parking lot. Lee was conversing with her but I could tell that there's something more from their coquettish smiles. But I really didn't care. I was delighted to see my baby Benz Sprinter beautifully outshining the other ambulance cars beside her. Her sleek and tall white body accentuated by those red cross and lines on her waist like an expensive stylish belt made her stood out from the rest. I'd been taking care of her for two years, and not a single dent and scratch spoiled her perfection. I switched on the engine and just the same, she sounded smooth and sexy. I unlocked the back door then I hurriedly walked to the back of the car.

"The same place, but different patient!" the female nurse sounded friendly. It was the second time that I worked with her this week. She was standing with her knees slightly bent inside the vehicle closely adjacent to Lee who was almost brushing his broad right shoulder to hers. I could tell that she was blushing while the charismatic Lee was whispering something to her. They started checking all the machines and gadgets then suddenly Lee bellowed, "Lesss go Ping-go! Put your..." I shut the door before he could even finish his goading.

I ran to the front seat and already, I was breathing heavily. I swore that the fast beating of my heart was loud enough like I was beating the gigantic tàigǔ drum for an opening act. I took a short deep breath and in one pushed while holding the grab handle, I lifted my body up and it fitted well on my leathery seat. I turned on the siren then I stepped on the pedal. I drove fast past the busy intersections of Taipei and we arrived at the shelter for the aged. I noticed the patient lying on the collapsible wheeled bed stretcher with a nurse and a caregiver standing close to him. As soon as I stopped the car in front of the lobby entrance, I saw Lee with his jump bag and the female nurse with her clipboard sprinting towards them. I silenced the siren then jumped out from my seat, ran to the backdoor, and adjusted the lift. Lee and the female nurse wheeled the stretcher into the vehicle then counted in unison before moving the old man on the cot. Lee was securing the nylon restraint straps while the female nurse placed an oxygen mask on the patient. The pale and frail man whose eyes were watery and half-closed were gazing at the ceiling lights. Funny that it wasn't my first time to witness these dreadful scenes, but for the first time I wondered what they were thinking about. Or were they dreaming at all? If they were, then what were they dreaming about? Suddenly, the old man's droopy eyes drop a tear or two as if he was cleansing his soul.



"We're good," the calm female nurse gestured a thumb up sign, and I gently closed the doors.

Once again, my pulse was also running fast as I quickly darted to the front seat. I shifted the neutral gear to the lowest gear then drove immediately away from the shelter while the siren was squealing. I knew the curves of the streets and alleys of the city even blindfolded so it didn't take us long to reach the intersection where I slowed down a bit before taking a right turn. Ambulance traffic accidents with motorcycles was quite high in Taiwan. One time on my way back home from work while driving my own car, there was a fatal rollover accident in the middle of the road. The ambulance turned over on its roof and the motorcycle was totally wrecked. I heard the reckless biker died instantly. In an emergency situation, racing against time was the name of the game. I stepped on it but I knew how to quickly respond in cases of potential risks. The safety of the people at the back was also my responsibility. Thank God, I was never in any unfortunate incidents while on the job. A few more kilometers away and we reached the hospital.

The back of the car was busy. I could hear some murmuring and metal clanking. Away from the side of the car, Lee was pushing the stretcher and the female nurse was clasping the IV pole.

“Bam!” Irritated by the loud banging of my baby’s door, I lowered the glass window then roared, “Hǒu yòu!”

“Bàoqiàn, Bàoqiàn!” the young security guard was very apologetic so I calmed myself down then drove straight to the parking area. I was back in the office, wrote my daily report, clocked out, and left the office door opened. As usual, I drove myself to an alley near Wuchang Street, parked my second-hand 2016 Toyota black Camry, and waved at the local owner of a small noodle shop. As I was walking from the alley to the not-so-busy street of Ximending, I was greeted by a faint stench of city slickers. It was almost six in the evening and soon the entire street would get crowded by cars and people in all walks of life. I enjoyed doing my short afternoon walk where I could let the soles of my feet pushed the uneven concrete roads. A little more sauntering, and I reached the 7-Eleven at the corner of the road. The air conditioner was such a great relief as it helped dry my sweat that started to roll down on my thin sideburns and chubby cheeks. I stayed inside longer than the usual while my both arms were holding my two tuna sandwiches, a bag of Lays, a box of iced coffee latte, a box of orange juice, and a bottle of tea like a baby’s head pushed against the crook of my tubby elbow.



“Xiè Xiè,” the young male cashier uttered as he gestured the other customer for his turn. I walked towards the outdoor City Café seating area just feet away from the store. I was at my favorite spot closely adjacent to the entrance of the subway. My afternoon refreshments were on the circular glass top of the table while I was seated on the black steel chair. I took my old mobile phone out from my tight jean’s pocket, and browsed some news update. Nothing was interesting. I rested my phone on my lap as I tilted my

head up and down then slowly rolled my head up to both sides of my shoulders. I closed my eyes then pressed the icy bottle on them then wiped them dry with my right arm. I slowly opened up my eyes but all I could see were blurry images in motion.

The temperature felt higher than 36 degrees Celsius as those tiny beads of dew were gushing out from my forehead. I tried drying them up with tissue napkins when suddenly I felt an excruciating stabbing pain in my chest. I tightly rubbed my chest but I felt like I was being suffocated. It was happening again, but this time the pain was unbearable. I reached for my mobile phone to call Lee, but my hands were numb and shaking like crazy. I tried to slide the heavy chair with my back and legs so I could stand up to call for help, but my enervated body flattened down on the floor.

“Eddie...Eddie!” I heard someone calling my name aloud. I tried opening my eyes, but I couldn’t ascertain whose silhouette was on top of my face. But the faint voice was similar to that person who called me by my real name once then named me “Ping-go” ever since. Ahhh right. I could feel my own tear drops slid down to my earlobe.

“Oh, Lee. So this is how it feels like under the siren lights.”

This short story was written by Dr. Abel M. Cadias at AHSNCUU, Taipei, Taiwan and was completed on June 16, 2020. Credits to Ms. Liting Wei and her student for the illustrations, and to Yenchun Lin for the Mandarin translations.

