

Blossom Season and Rainy Days

Xu Jiajia was standing in front of a mirror in the washroom, staring blankly.

That day, it started as an ordinary bright summer morning, but quickly everything changed. Life and weather were like twins — both keen on changing without a break, good and bad, bad and good. The rain was pouring down, sparing no effort to scour the earth clean; the wind was roaring like a rogue beast. In Xiamen, a coastal city, such rainy days often fell in the typhoon season. Despite dense rain, the fury in the girl's heart was burning like a raging fire.

Xu Jiajia wanted to roam in the rain, to let it wash away her tears and extinguish the fire in her heart. However, fear of showing her tear-stained face to others held her back. She hated sympathy and didn't want to appear a weak, wimpy ninny.

Her feet were planted on the grounds of No.1 Middle School. The best one in the city. It had been featured in countless students' dreams. The school was famous for its brilliant students and enviable programs. *It should have been an ideal place for me*, Xu Jiajia thought, *but where is the sense of pride, of happiness?*

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter...

Tears welled up in her eyes, blurred her vision, and flowed down her rosy cheeks. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror — and her loose-fitting, apple-green trousers and the vermilion T-shirt. “Aah!” She tried really hard to give herself a smile, but instead it ended with a deep sigh.

Why would somebody say that I have charming eyes? To me, they are just a tool to see the endless weariness and sorrow in this world... She looked into her eyes in the mirror. Like others said, they were truly captivating like deep, deep blue oceans containing thousands of unknown mysteries and complications, but always concealed behind her thick lenses. Xu Jiajia was not very tall. Being humped over the desk all day made her look a little stiff. She was not that beautiful either, yet giving a spark of energy.

“Xu Jiajia—” She muttered her own name, looking annoyed. *I'm utterly ashamed of you! How you let yourself down!* She remembered her parents constantly telling her that “Jia” meant “excellence”. Her name represented the whole family's expectations — she was born to be outstanding, to be the best. “Do you know how fierce the competition is in society? Study is the only passport to success! You MUST study hard and be better than others,” they had emphasized. “ONLY THEN can you be admitted to the best middle school, and have a chance to be accepted to a famous secondary school; ONLY THEN can you pass the college examination and enter a top-ranking university; ONLY THEN are you able to have a promising future...”

Since she was little, she had been a typical “daddy's girl” and buried herself in piles of books. Her life was far away from excitement, adventure. It was very uneventful — everyday rotating from school to home and from home to school. Perhaps because of this, she seemed a bit unsociable. Her closest friend was a considerate but timid girl, Li Yu. In the kindergarten they had promised to be friends forever. They were always together, inseparable like shadows.

As she grew up, the world around Xu Jiajia's had changed gradually. At fifteen, the blossoming season, adolescents were diving themselves into fashion. It was totally a male-hairstyles exhibition in Xu Jiajia's class. You could see Undercut, Quiff, Aaron Kwok Hairstyle, Jimmy Lin Hairstyle... For those boys, reeling off a heap of sneaker brands was much, much easier than reciting Tang-Song verses. As for girls,

no doubt that one day soon they would throw aside their homework and go to concerts to meet their “gods or goddesses”. They always had secret room in their bags to contain hair bands, hair barrettes, hair clips or even oil-based moisturizers, lipsticks, concealer...Being mature was not an easy thing.

These young people were successors of the century. On the way uphill, it was time for them to struggle through the quagmire of confusion and find their identity. They were energetic and dared to challenge everything. Even parents sometimes had to yield to their glib tongue. But it was also a time of change, like erratic rainy days.

But at sweet fifteen, Xu Jiajia was still the same. No makeup. No dressing-up. Like a round peg in a square hole. Everyone had admired her remarkable academic achievements before. They had even worshiped her as a walking study machine. But now, some of them just considered her to be a silent stone and bookworm.

In this morning, stepping into the classroom, Xu Jiajia heard a familiar voice. To her, it sounded shrill, as if finger nails were scratching the blackboard.

“Oh — Jiajia! Look at you —” Zhong Xiao, the “dress model”, leant back on the desk grinning derisively in the middle of the classroom. Her pink velvet skirt trimmed with lace was dazzling under the bright beam of sunlight.

Xu Jiajia’s face suddenly grew red. “Well. What? I’m—” She moved her lips but at a loss what to say.

“Guys, guys, look at her! Why are you wearin’ a red T-shirt with green trousers? You wanna dress like a rose? Or meat with vegetables?” Chan Li, the typical naughty puppy in Xu Jiajia’s class, put on his joking tone, laughing and making faces. He was often sticking his tongue out at those “good students”. Catching others’ eyes always made him feel proud.

“Hahaha!” Suddenly, the classroom was filled with laughter.

“All right, all right! Please stop!” pleaded Xu Jiajia.

At the same time, Li Yu was standing in the corner of the classroom. She was hesitating whether to help. *Scold them? She thought, Oh, no. No! I will be laughed at too. It is better for me to keep silent...*

“Well, is it really funny? What’s wrong?” Xu Jiajia stared desperately across the classroom at Li Yu as if asking for help. She tried to catch the black eyes. But Li Yu turned round hurriedly, pretending nothing was happening.

More and more students joined in and began gossiping...

The bell for class was ringing. Xu Jiajia hastened to rub her eyes and wipe tears away. Next class was a revision lesson for the final exam — she shouldn’t be late.

Xu Jiajia ran to her desk. Sat down. Opened the book but read nothing. The sneering words were still echoing in her mind. *Am I wrong— is it ridiculous? Why can’t I wear something like that? She bent herself over the desk. Her mind was wandering away from the teacher’s voice. Take a deep breath. Let it go. You should forget it. You must study now! But... Is it really funny? Why didn’t Li Yu help me? Maybe she didn’t notice what was happening... But so many people were laughing, how couldn’t she know? We are friends, aren’t we? Oh, yeah, definitely she thinks it’s funny too. But, at least she can tell me what she thinks!* She raised her head and looked up. It was now a hard slanting rain outside. *I hate the rain! I hate those people! They are insane!* Xu Jiajia seethed with rage. *Zhong Xiao wears those strange clothes swaggering around here and there. Isn’t it disgusting? She has no right to laugh at me!* “I hate her. I hate her. I HATE HER!” The sound of her whisper startled her. Xu Jiajia hurriedly looked around to see whether anyone had been listening.

Nothing. Just a blue flash of lightning through the sky. The teacher was still talking. Xu Jiajia couldn't help wondering again, *But, but — she's beautiful...not only beautiful, but she also does very well in school. Sometimes even exceeds me. I have nothing better than her. She's a star while I'm just an ugly duckling. An ugly duckling which can't turn into a white swan...*

"Xu Jiajia! What is the answer to this question?" Suddenly, she was drawn from her thought. The teacher was glowering at her.

She stood up slowly. It was a time of quiet and of waiting. The air was static. "Ur, ur... Which question?" Her voice trembled. Sweat stood in beads on her forehead. Her heart was pounding.

"Do you think you understand everything so there is no need to listen?" The teacher said seriously, "I know there are many activities these days. However, they are not excuses! Sit down and concentrate!"

Some students chuckled. Li Yu wanted to catch Xu Jiajia's eyes. But since her desk was behind Xu Jiajia's, what Li Yu could only see was a dispirited, slightly stooped back.

Xu Jiajia sat down limply. *I'm scolded... I'm a loser... What shame! I'd never been criticized by a teacher. No one likes me. Even the teacher doesn't like me. I gave so much effort to get a good mark! But, it's useless!* Xu Jiajia crumpled the textbook in her hand harder and harder. Bitterness spread over her mind. She tried to hold her tears. To her, school seemed like a cage that trapped her and closed her in.

The class was over.

"Please remember! All of you need to hand in your posters. It is a part of your assessment. We need to vote after completing the final tests. The best one will represent our class to participate in the school second-round contest. Last but not least, remember the topic, '*The Chinese Dream*'!" The teacher rapped on the three words on the blackboard.

It was either dull or drizzly day after day. Wind and cold clouded over the sky. "Dampness everywhere. What a mess!" Xu Jiajia murmured distractedly, "So many things to do! Exams — competitions, and —" She stood still in front of the wardrobe in her bedroom, "even what to wear..." She was recalling passing by the crowd after the red-and-green incident. They were judging her clothes, her appearance, and perhaps sneering at her.

How lonely I am! Xu Jiajia thought helplessly. She was not able to focus on her studies. *What should I do? No one can tell me...* Her eyesight blurred.

Drumming, drumming. The rain was splashing against the window; the wind was blowing a gale. Meanwhile, in another place of the city, a girl's heart was torn with worry. *I should have stood up that morning! Why didn't I do that! I'm so cowardly. Did they think it was just kidding? What they did was going too far. I should have stood up! I should have scolded them! Jiajia is such a sensitive girl. She has never daydreamed during lectures. She must be really sad. She helps me with my homework all the time. But when it's time for me to help her, what did I do? She'll never forgive me.* Li Yu fidgeted in her seat, "I — I need to call her up!"

Ring-ring-ring.

"Hello? Hello? Jiajia, it's me." Li Yu said in a hurry.

"Hi." She heard a sullen, tired voice.

"Are you Okay?" questioned Li Yu quiveringly, a little abashed. *Please say "yes"!*

"Fine." The sound was still faint and sick. *Not sounding fine*, Li Yu thought.

Li Yu took a deep breath and scratched her head. She could hear the sound from her thumping heart. “Jiajia...I’m, I’m sorry...Sorry that morning, I...I didn’t — mean to do that...”

“I know, I know. I’m fine. It’s not your fault.” Xu Jiajia lowered her voice, containing her tears.

“Actually, I think that outfit is OK, really! There is nothing wrong in dressing like that. It’s also a kind of fashion! Not a big deal. And — and, I think the T-shirt is beautiful! It really suits you. So cute!”

“Thank you, Yu.” Xu Jiajia said.

“Cheer up! See you at school tomorrow.”

“OK. See you.”

Xu Jiajia couldn’t help crying now. She felt something was melting in her heart. *In this world, perhaps, there are still some people who love you.* A voice from the bottom of her heart called out. *It would be better if you finish what you can do first.* Suddenly, three words— *The Chinese Dream* popped into her mind. *Why not do it now? Give it a try.* Her eyes blinked. The rain was starting to ease off. The winds were starting to play chase, outside the windows, out of doors, blowing everything away. How quiet it seemed after the afternoon. She felt lighter. There was always a way out. A glint of sunbeam was passing through the pale sky, with a haze of light gold, as it was sometimes in early summer. Xu Jiajia cast a glimpse at the windows. They were brilliant with strings of little drops. *How beautiful. Like beads.* A subtle smile crept across her mouth.

Time flew with the intermittent rainy days.

The final tests came to an end. The results were released — without question, Xu Jiajia took the first place again. Her total marks were more than the second one by fifty points.

Then, the poster vote followed closely. Works were posted anonymously. The whole class was clamoring with bits and pieces of voices.

“Look a’ that! Whose work?” Chan Li nudged his friend and giggled. “Must be Zhong Xiao’s!” His friend answered surely. “The colors match so well.” “Yep, look at the Great Wall. It’s gorgeous! But — I don’t understand why it’s under the heavy sky, it seems that there’s going to be a terrible rainstorm.” Chan Li frowned. “Or probably just after the storm. Do you see the looming rainbow?” Answered his friend.

“Here, here, Jiajia. Come here. This one is great!” Meanwhile, Li Yu pointed at the same poster, “What do you think? Rich content and nice handwriting! Soooo impressive, especially the idea to add the special weather! Nearly in all the pictures, the Great Wall is bathed in the sunshine. But it can hardly be sunny every day, right? I bet it’s the best one for *The Chinese Dream*. Wonderful!”

“Hi, everybody! Time for the result!” The teacher said loudly. The class lapped about the platform. Everyone leant forward, holding their breath. “The winner is —”

Raining outside again. Despite the summer downpour, something mysterious in Xu Jiajia’s heart was beginning to blossom.