

December 21st, 2012

On December 21st, 2012, absolutely nothing happened. We arrived at school promptly at 7:00, an hour before the start of classes, for our daily morning run (the school values our health as much as cultivating our minds). When we stepped outside, the first breath we took smelled of smoke and dust, but after a few more intakes, our nostrils got used to it and we couldn't smell anything anymore. We were required to run four laps around the four-hundred meters *cao chang*, in preparation for the athletic tests of *gao kao*, the exam of our lives, the exam determining our lives. The *cao chang* was only four-hundred meters in circumference, and every time we rounded the corner, we saw the engravings on the front of the school's wall, the gold characters dull under the grayblack sky.

After our morning run, the entire school was assembled in the *cao chang*, where we held our flag-raising ceremonies every Monday. Of the few people who wore masks when we ran, we were forced to take them off for the singing of the national anthem. Our mouths moved of their own accord while we thought of other things, the song ingrained in our body:

*Stand up, those who don't want to be slaves.*

*With our flesh and blood, let's build our newest Great Wall.*

*The Chinese Nation is at its greatest peril. Each one is forced to let out one last roar.*

*Stand up, stand up, stand up. March on. March on. March on, on.*

When we got back to the classroom, our *ban hua*, the "class flower," wrote the day's schedule prettily on the blackboard. We knew her to be the girl who rolled her eyes whenever a guy made some remark about her or to her. She was beautiful in a way that differed from the girls who sat in

the back and put their hair down and wore makeup. She was beautiful because she knew she was beautiful and could afford not to care about it.

Jiayi, someone called from the back, but our *ban hua* kept facing the blackboard. Jiayi, you got English and Math switched.

Jiayi stopped writing, looked at her neat handwriting and then looked down at the sheet of paper in her hands, quickly realizing that it had been a prank.

Shut up, Jiayi said, and continued to write.

We laughed and imagined her blushing.

On December 21st, 2012, the world was supposed to end according to some conquered civilization. During the first period, we couldn't pay attention to what Teacher Geng was talking about Schrodinger's equation. Instead, we looked out the window, back at the flat dangling lights, trying to detect some kind of apocalyptic movement to indicate the end.

On December 21st, 2012, the student behaved exactly as he has always done. We all knew him as the athletic kid who sat at the back of the classroom, differentiated from the rest of us by his consistent refusal to properly wear the school uniform. He wore expensive shoes that probably cost thousands of yuan, and we learned from our parents who went to the parent-teacher conferences that his father always made sure to roll up his sleeves, revealing a fine gold watch.

We knew him to sit in the back of the class and talk loudly to the girls who wore eyeshadow and lipstick and let their hair down (he had a reputation). We knew him to wear a pair of glasses with a gold circular lens, though he was rumored to have perfect vision. We knew him to always smirk, and to exaggeratingly bow his head whenever the *ban zhu ren*, the teacher in charge of the class, entered the room. We knew his name to always be at the bottom of the test scores

posted monthly at the back of the classroom. We were the *huo jian ban*, the “rocket class”, the smartest ones, after all. The only subject he passed in was surprisingly English. He had no reason to worry; his scores weren't the thing that was going to get him into college.

On December 21st, 2012, we had our first (and last) Chemistry lab of the year after lunch, our excitement adding to the constant gnawing anticipation that there would be an earthquake that symmetrically splits the classroom we were standing in, that the students are going to be on one side and our teacher, stout, angry, will be on the other.

Don't move, she'd say, Move or you're dead, and she would try everything to save us, even if it meant sacrificing herself. Even though having always acted as if she hated us, we knew it was only because our youth reminded her of what she had lost.

Teacher Li, we'd shout, panicked and elated. We'd be trapped on the other side of the classroom, trapped during the end of the world, yet we were going to be saved, yes, we would be saved, and our faces would smile, scared but victorious, in the front page of tomorrow's news. The headline would read: STRANDED STUDENTS SAVED BY CHEMISTRY TEACHER.

But now, Teacher Li shouted at the front of the classroom for everyone to quiet down.

Quiet, she demanded, but her voice was drowned out by the cacophony from the students in the back. He was a part of that group, that group who hung out with the girls who wore makeup and dyed their hair even though it wasn't allowed, that group who were always laughing from some joke.

Teacher Li had never liked him. Whenever she shouted at him to stand up from being too loud, he sauntered to the front of the class, towering over her stout figure, making her small, insignificant.

That afternoon, he was being obnoxiously loud. Playing with the glass instruments that we weren't supposed to play with, showing off, no doubt, to the girls who watched and giggled and never got into trouble themselves.

Huang Yifan, Teacher Li tried to shout from the front of the classroom, but his laughter was booming. Huang Yifan, if I have to tell you one more time to shut up.

He pretended not to hear her. The rest of the class grew quiet while he raised his voice louder and louder, joying in the echo it made.

Huang Yifan! She screamed. Shut your stupid mouth.

He finally did, and despite being at the very back of the classroom, we somehow still felt his condescending presence permeate every corner. Teacher Li must've felt it too.

Come over here, she demanded.

He rolled his eyes almost too notably, earning a giggle from the girl to his right. We watched him walk slowly across the classroom, and we marveled at how, even now, he wasn't wearing his lab suit or goggles properly. We knew he must be doing it to infuriate Teacher Li even further, to impress the rest of us, to test the limits of exactly what he could do.

The days leading up to December 21st, 2012, there were people selling tickets to Noah's Arc on Taobao. We all laughed about the absurdity of this (religion is the opium of the people) while secretly wishing that our parents would buy tickets just in case. We heard of people who stocked up on candles to prepare for the oncoming darkness. Many self-proclaimed Buddhists took to the streets, mumbling their prayers and omms and a mi tuo fo and blasting their music that woke us up at five in the morning. We didn't understand then, but people would do anything to be saved.

When he finally got up to the front of the classroom, we clearly remember him looking bored. We didn't know if he was actually bored, or simply faking it to look cool. Teacher Li noticed as well.

Get that expression off your face, she said.

And when he didn't, when he turned to look down at her even though she was standing on top of the elevated stage, she started to scream. About him being disrespectful towards her. About him being a spoiled child who will never achieve anything in his life. About his shoes, his grades, his appearance, his parents. And suddenly he was yelling back, and we could barely tell his voice from hers, and then she was hitting him across the face with her textbook, and he was pushing her back, and his voice rising to finally overthrow hers, and we looked at the lights above us, which we could've sworn had begun to shake, and she was reaching sideways, for something else, for the glass, for the acid.

In the Bible, Noah was the one person that God decided to save. It was Noah and his family and the animals. The world had become too crowded, too noisy, too loud, the people too corrupt, so God sent a flood to cleanse it.

We are a people without religion. Religion is the opium of the people. The light of Communism and Chairman Mao will lead us forwards.

What had been an hour later, the head of school came into the lab, his posture unimaginably straight.

We experienced a great loss today, he said, his tone so rigid we expected it to break.

He paused, as if processing that it was the appropriate thing to do. His shoulders tenser than usual.

The school is contacting the parents of this student, he said.

This student. We repeated the phrase in our minds. This student.

The school wants you to know that we are here for you, he paused, and then: I'm sure you all know what you think you saw, but as we all know, senses are deceiving.

None of us moved. None of us breathed.

You are at an age where the things you hear and the things you see blend together, leaving you confused. Trust me, he forced out a dry laugh, I've been there. I know.

You have to make a choice today, he continued, to either trust in your own senses, or to trust the authorities.

What happened to him? someone asked, and we all turned around to look. Jiayi was still in her lab suit, her goggles on top of her hair, the seat next to her empty. She looked pale and alien, and for a second, we wondered why we had thought her the prettiest girl in class. We remembered the times where Huang Yifan would suddenly tap her shoulder and then pretend as if he hadn't, after she had turned around. We remembered that she would roll her eyes and get on with collecting the English homework. Some of us swore that they had been seen walking together after school.

The principal looked at her, and for the first time, his gaze was clear, direct, as if curtains had been lifted.

Li Jiayi, right? He said, I've heard a lot of good things about you.

When Jiayi didn't respond, he continued, English representative, member of the *Gong Qing Tuan*, consistently scoring in the top 5% out of one thousand two hundred students, the top 3% even. I've heard a lot about you.

For the first time, Teacher Li shuffled in the corner, startling us. Her figure smaller and benter than usual, her loud presence deflated, making her look older, frailer.

You're on track for getting into Peking University, the principal said. I hope that you don't let anything get in your way.

His words hung in the air like bullets hitting a dead body.

Class five,, the principle said, you are the smartest and brightest class. Having said everything, we encourage you, *all* of you, to not go around and spread rumors about this deeply unfortunate incident. The principal then gestured for Teacher Li to come to the center with him, which she slowly did. The pair stood in front of all of us, almost comical in their complete difference. Our principal, tall, heavy-browed, with his arm around Teacher Li, whose gaze never left the floor.

Teacher Li here, he said, witnessed the entire thing. She tried to do her best to stop him from jumping as best as she could. As I'm sure you all know, the teachers here care deeply for you.

We all wanted to turn towards each other, desperate to make eye contact with someone, to confirm what we were going to do.

Some time passed, during which we were ushered back into our classroom to sit in silence. The sun had come out, but the sky was still gray but there were no clouds. The principal had left us as soon as he had delivered his speech, and now, only Teacher Li was with us.

We remembered that joke he had made with Teacher Li, that one time when she had seemed momentarily endeared to him. He had asked her about her age after class, and she had answered what age do I look like? And he had said thirty-eight with a completely straight face while those of us who listened snickered, shooting him appreciative looks. Unknowing, Teacher Li's mouth twitched slightly upwards, and said a quick Shut up. Ever since then, we would bring up the number thirty-eight as often as possible in her presence, and she would blissfully, stupidly, return to an age where she had perhaps been beautiful.

She wasn't beautiful now. Unlike the principal, she stood slumped over, which made her seem shorter than usual. The classroom felt too big and too empty, and even though none of us dared look, we felt his absence.

And then, a horrid scream coming from somewhere outside. A woman. Her voice like sirens.

We were dismissed early from school that day, sent back to the comfort of our homes and our bodies. We ate the food our parents cooked us w, chewing each bite with a care that we've never experienced. We showered, to get rid of the smell of chemicals, and wiped the fogged mirrors with our hands. We looked into them and touched our faces and touched our eyes to make sure they're still there, remembering what his face had looked like, remembering his screams, and the silence after. We remembered the whispers from the hallway, what must've been more than half a dozen adults. Faintly, we remember hearing someone sobbing in the back. After showering, we went straight to bed (the teachers, for the first time, had pushed the assignments one day back), but lay awake for hours, listening to the never-ending construction outside our apartments, listening for the tickings of a clock, anything but the silence of sleep.

On December 22st, 2012, we arrived at school at 7:00 for our morning run. Outside the front gates, his parents suddenly stood up when we neared. Tell us what happened, his mother screamed. Why won't they let us see his body? And when the security guards came out to restrain her and her husband while we were ushered into the gates, she started kicking and biting him. My son is dead, we heard her wailing, my son is dead.

In between our crammed bodies and theirs, we saw the glint of his father's golden watch.

Because we were the *hongjian ban*, the smartest students in our grade, our classroom is on the very first floor, looking out onto the *cao chang*. Throughout the day, we were constantly questioned. Even though the school has told the student body to not bother us, many still managed to rush to our doors the moment after our classes ended.

We answered no questions. We were shocked, saddened by the incident. We had a right to remain silent.

We also heard rumors that Huang Yifan's parents had stayed in front of the school gates the entire night, demanding to see his body, demanding to see security tapes.

There were no security cameras around the school. There were no security cameras on the roof where he had jumped off. There were no security cameras in the Chemistry lab, or any classroom. There were no security cameras outside the bathrooms, in the library. No cameras in the teachers' workspace. None in the principal's office. We have never seen cameras around the school. The school did not surveil us.

That afternoon, we saw construction workers march across our grounds, up our stairs, and onto the balcony. When Teacher Geng told us to pay attention, we reluctantly turned back to the blackboard to the mathematical proofs, now meaningless. After the class bell rang, we were kept late by Teacher Geng, who had to finish her lecture, so when we finally bowed to her and were dismissed, dozens of students from other classes had already blocked our windows. When we went outside the classroom, we had to push our way through the crowd, all of them pointing, looking, towards the top of the building. We followed their gaze, landing on the construction workers atop the building. They were assembling what seemed like bars along the edges of the roof. We couldn't

bear to look any longer, so instead we lowered our eyes to the front of the building, where the engraved Twelve Values of Socialism glistened under the sunlight.

富强 民主 文明 和谐

Prosperity Democracy Civility Harmony

自由 平等 公正 法制

Freedom Equality Justice Rule of Law

爱国 敬业 诚信 友善

Patriotism Dedication Integrity Friendship

There were news articles written, and overnight, our school became the number two trend in Baidu, right after a recent celebrity scandal.

### **TRAGEDY! 17-YEAR-OLD STUDENT JUMPS OFF THE BUILDING: WHAT'S WITH OUR YOUTH TODAY?**

On December 21st, 2021, high school senior Huang Yifan, took his life and jumped off the school's highest building.

Why do more and more youth decide to commit suicide?

In recent years, there's been an increase in teenagers' suicidal rates, especially in middle and high schoolers, and estimates show that approximately 800,000 people lose their lives to suicide every year.

Teenagers nowadays inhabit a rebellious mentality. From ages 12 - 18, their minds are confused, lost, yearning for both independence and reliance.

Perhaps it is because of their lack of understanding for death, not knowing the gravity of taking their own life. A small thing in their minds can become incredibly inflated, and push them to be overly impulsive.

According to Huang Yifan's Chemistry teacher, who had tried to stop him from jumping, Huang Yifan had been a troubled student, never paying attention in class, never submitting his assignments on time. Records show that Huang Yifan's grades have consistently been at the bottom of the class' ranking, residing in the bottom 5% of his entire grade.

While he didn't leave a suicide note, he most likely falls into the group of students who has committed suicide in fear of failing Gao Kao, and thus not getting into a good college. His death follows a series of suicides that we've seen in the past few months: an eleven-year-old jumped off a building because she couldn't finish her school assignment, a college student jumped off a building after being caught cheating in a test.

We have to ask ourselves why our teenagers' abilities to take hardship have fallen so short. Is it the student's fault? Is it the parents? The teachers?

Listen, nothing really happened, not really. We know his parents and you and god knows who else wants answers that make sense, but if you really think about it, nothing ever makes sense.