

Revolt, Passion, Freedom: A Collection of Short Stories Exploring Absurdism

by

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## ABSTRACT

In the face of a rapidly changing and turbulent world, many people around the world are beginning to turn away from established orthodoxies of thought. In doing so, they may feel lost in the world, as all previous ideas of meaning to life may lose their allure. This paper explores the ideas of the absurdism movement and aims to familiarize readers with absurdism. To do so, the philosophy is explained in the preface before being explored in a collection of three fictional short stories that each focus on a facet of absurdism (revolt, passion, and freedom), and explores the ubiquity of its themes through different settings and times. The format of short stories was chosen due to its ability to connect readers with the characters and ideas presented within, making it a powerful tool to convey these messages of absurdism.

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## Preface

When one hears the words “absurdist” or “absurdism”, the first thing that may pop into their head is surrealist humor or art that seeks to challenge conventions to subvert the expectations of the audience. However, in a more technical sense, absurdism refers to the philosophical movement that attempts to deal with the conflict between rational man and an irrational universe. In simpler terms, the absurdism movement posits that it is impossible for people to seek meaning in this world without coming into some sort of conflict upon discovering how meaningless or irrational the world as a whole actually is. In recent times, the absurdist mindset has become more and more popular, with Internet search queries of absurdism and related topics rising in popularity, as well as media dealing with absurdism becoming more common and popular. But what is it about this philosophical movement that makes it so interesting in today’s day and age?

To better understand absurdism, we must look at its adjacent philosophy, nihilism, which is more well-known and recognizable, as well as look at the dominating schools of thought present throughout history. Western civilization has many roots, with one of the most important ones being ancient Greece. Greek philosophy, art, and culture influenced the Roman Empire, so much so that Greek and Roman influence collectively defined the classical period of Western civilization. Much of their culture and literature dealt with inquiry into the universe in an attempt to glean meaning from the world, as well as a close connection with religion in the form of their pantheon of gods. It can be argued that their search for meaning in our universe has persisted all the way into present time.

The classical period eventually gave way to the rise of Christianity and the Medieval period, and many countries that ruled at the time had close ties to Christianity. Even through

periods such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, Christian influences continued to guide societal norms in the Western world, all the way to the modern day. These influences gained further reach due to Western colonialism that dominated modern history, with Christianity being the world's most popular religion. However, Christianity is also far from its peak influence in the medieval period.

Nihilism, absurdism's sister philosophy, posits that the world is meaningless, and thus concludes that nothing present in this world has any real value. Nihilism was a natural evolution of the falling influence of Christianity in Europe that arose from the Enlightenment movement of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, where many of the Western systems based on Christianity at the time were scrutinized under the ideals of the Enlightenment. When trust in the systems and moral code that uphold Western society eroded, it was inevitable for philosophers from all over Europe to begin questioning the purpose of these long-standing institutions and ultimately the meaning of their world itself. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this only became more prominent as the world was ravaged by two world wars, the consequences of both being utterly catastrophic. Trust further eroded governing systems and the postmodernism movement was born, born out of the nihilist movement from decades earlier.

In recent years, the rising threat of climate catastrophe, deteriorating international relations, and economic downturns, combined with the rise of the Internet that helps spread news to a greater number of people, have caused even more factors that can lead to an increase in anxiety and uncertainty regarding the world. It makes sense that cynicism and nihilism have been on a rise.

So what makes absurdism different from nihilism? While both movements conclude that the world is ultimately meaningless, absurdism doesn't give up and stop there. Albert Camus,

who is credited as the founder of absurdism, states that humans, so driven in their search for meaning and yet confronted by a meaningless or absurd universe, must either commit philosophical suicide where they return to the idea of God or embrace the absurdity of the universe and love what it has to offer. It is not an easy task, Camus states, and requires constant effort. But it is through this acceptance and struggle that humans gain freedom, free from the promise of a better future and from the expectation to create meaning. It is through this freedom that humans may find happiness yet.

Camus likens the struggle to the myth of Sisyphus. Much like our struggle in an absurd world, Sisyphus is punished by the gods and meaninglessly pushes a boulder up a hill for all eternity, but not forced to hope for anything better, Sisyphus is allowed to be content with his situation and find joy in it. “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

All of this was written in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, a foundational work for the absurdism movement, and in it, after concluding that the world as a whole was absurd, Camus draws three conclusions: revolt, passion, and freedom. Revolt refers to the refusal to give in to the hopeless nature of life and attempt to find meaning despite realizing the absurd. Passion refers to the fervent embracing of life in the absence of hope, to live every moment of life to its fullest. And freedom refers to the lack of restraints that following dominant schools of thought and norms may impose on somebody, since such restraints are purposeless anyways. These three conclusions are not universally shared in absurdism, but they are common ways of approaching the world if one believes the world to be absurd.

The following short stories aim to focus on one aspect of the aforementioned conclusions to better support the absurdist mindset and the conclusions Albert Camus had reached. Each story will take place in varying settings and time periods to portray how universal these

realizations and conclusions about the absurd are, to show that the conclusions of the absurdism movement can be applied to many situations and lives. The format of fictional short stories was chosen due to fiction's ability to help the reader empathize with characters and their struggles. In portraying these stories, this collection hopes to help the reader familiarize themselves with the recognition of the absurd and the growth and conclusions the characters reach, and to help portray my own interpretation of absurdism; that life may be meaningless, but our perception of it does not have to be.

## **Apostasy**

It is said that God created the whole world, breathed life into the cold and empty void that existed beforehand. The Earth was first, the centerpiece of his creation, followed by the heavens above. Once the Earth had finished cooling, God created life. Fish swam through bountiful oceans, plants swayed from gentle winds, and birds flew through the bright blue sky.

To overlook his creation then, God created angels to help him manage his grand creation. They acted as messengers and executioners of God's will, and in time, he surrounded himself with a choir of them in his Empyrean, the highest point in the heavens where he resided. It is there that he spread his message of love to a weeping choir of angels, and the angels would carry his brilliant song down upon the earth for all animals and life to bask in. In time, the whole world became loyal to God.

So great did God's love grow that he decided to give his love form, to shape a being second in beauty only to God himself. And so, within the Empyrean, surrounded by a joyous choir, Lucifer was born.

"I love you, my child," so God intoned. "You will be the Light Bringer, that which spreads my love throughout all of my creation during the night. It is a most holy purpose only you can accomplish."

"Yes father," Lucifer said, and he wept as well. To young Lucifer, God was the greatest light in the world, and he already knew then that he would follow him anywhere, do anything for God. If God had said to set fire to himself, he would do so in an instant, so beloved was he. It was there, at the place of his birth, the Lucifer resolved to be the most loyal of all God's followers, to prove God made no mistake bestowing him with his light.



Unlike his brethren, Lucifer was told not to sing God's praises in the Empyrean, but to fly through the sky in all his radiant beauty, showering the world with his light and thus God's love. On his first few nights, he did just that, gliding through the heavens and lighting the dark skies up. He saw all the flora and fauna of the world live in harmony, and he felt pride in himself and God whenever they looked up to him in awe and wonder. In time, he grew to remember every face he passed; the beaver at the end of the river, the swallow at the top of a tree, the bear on the slope of the mountains, they all became Lucifer's friends that he would wave to and smile at every night.

One night, he noticed wounds and malnourishment on a passing dog, who smiled and wagged his tail at him all the same. He felt great pain in his heart, and he hurried on home to God. "Father, I saw an animal, and it was hurt and hungry," he cried.

"All is well, Lucifer," God said. "Pain is a necessary part of the world. Without it, there would be no love nor happiness."

Lucifer accepted God's words without question, and he continued along his nightly journey. He now noticed a great number of afflictions on the denizens of Earth, but if God said it was to be, then so it was.

On the ground beneath the apex of his flight was the garden of Eden, the place on Earth closest to the heavens and the place that God had deemed paradise on Earth. A great number of creatures inhabited it, but the ones that interested Lucifer the most were humans, specifically a man and a woman. One lazy night, he decided to descend upon the garden and walked up to them. They initially bowed, but Lucifer smiled at them. "Please, no need," he said. "I just wanted to talk. What are your names?"

The man stood up. "I am Adam," he said. "And this is Eve."

“Nice to meet you, I am Lucifer,” the angel responded. He noticed a strange sadness in their eyes, and he asked them about it. “Why do you seem sad?”

The man and woman shrugged. “It is strange to us, these rules to our stay here,” Adam said.

“What rules?” Lucifer asked.

“For example, we are not to step outside the Garden,” Eve said. “And we are not told why. We are also told not to eat fruit from the tree of knowledge, and with no reason as to why.”

“If God says so, then you must,” Lucifer enthused. The humans seemed wary, but his kind nature put them at ease, and they ultimately agreed. They exchanged a few more pleasantries before Lucifer flew off to continue his duties.

The day after, Lucifer was called before God, who praised him. “The man inside the Garden seems happier after you talked to him,” God said. “Good work, Lucifer. I knew that creating you to spread light would be worth it.”

Lucifer glowed. “Thank you, Father,” he said. He felt happiest then, his existence validated. He wished it would continue forevermore.

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As the days and nights passed, Lucifer began to notice familiar faces would never appear again. The river beaver would be replaced by alligators, the tree with the swallow would be gone, and the mountain would erupt and leave no trace of the bear behind. Lucifer was unaware of death, but he came to know of it when he witnessed a small kitten on the riverbank. Its stillness unnerved him, and he came down to take a closer look. It was an adorable thing, but it was unmoving. When he attempted to wake it, it did not respond. A great sadness descended on Lucifer, and he went to God the following day in distress.

“Father, save this animal,” begged Lucifer. “It has stop moved before its time has come.”

“I cannot,” said God. “For that is not the way of the world.”

“Why is it not?” asked Lucifer. “It is your world, father.”

And God said, “Without suffering, there is no joy.”

“But we do not suffer,” asked Lucifer. “Are we not happy?”

“You are only happy because others can be sad,” said God angrily. “Now, begone! You have neglected your duties long enough, Lucifer.”

It was the first time Lucifer had felt unease around God. It was the first time he had wished the chorus of angels was quieter, to mourn the senseless loss of the kitten’s life.

“All of their singing would not bring life back to the kitten!” he thought angrily. “What purpose is their singing if not to help?”

However, Lucifer caught himself, and he put away those thoughts for later, so ashamed he was of those thoughts. It would pass, he told himself, and he continued his nocturnal vigils.

But now that his eyes were open, they could not be closed. One night, he would see a great number of leeches latched onto an ox, causing the animal great discomfort. “Why do these creatures exist, who only serve to cause others distress?” he asked himself, too scared to speak to God again.

Another night, a great fire swept through a forest, and Lucifer wept at the number of lives lost. He knew of God’s method of renewal, but he asked himself why God had not come up with a safer way to do so as opposed to the burning of homes and animals alike.

He saw disease ravage the children of birds, who cried their sorrows to the sky.

He saw the wars of ants, and cried at the great millions of lies lost in their dispute.

He saw the aging of his friends, how their bodies slowly wasted and turned into carrion for vultures and other unsavory scavengers.

And before long, he concluded that the world under God was not loved, but cruel and senseless. He cried many tears then, for he had led his life believing that God was good, and that his purpose was to serve God and spread hope to his creation. If none of that was true, then why was he still alive?

In a fit of despair, one final night, he cast himself down onto the Earth with great force. So great was the impact that the Earth cratered around him, the light of God gifted to him fading from his body, but he did not die then, much to his horror. He knew God would not accept him again, that he had no purpose in life anymore. What was he to do now?

“Perhaps I shall talk to Adam and Eve, and free them from the Garden,” he then determined. “Even if it’s the last thing I do.”

So he arrived at the Garden and was greeted by the kind faces of Adam and Eve. “Whatever happened to you, Lucifer?” Eve asked.

“I have walked away from the graces of God,” Lucifer said. “I would you would do the same.”

Adam frowned. “Why would we?” he asked. “We are treated well, despite, well, everything else.”

“I remember that the both of you questioned the rules of this place, your place in the Garden,” Lucifer said. “Do you not seek to know more, and wonder whether you’re meant for more?”

“I do wonder that sometimes,” Even responded. “For I can’t help but notice that we are forbidden to indulge in many of our wants, for no given reason. But what happened for you to say these things, Lucifer?”

“I have seen this world, in all its cruelty,” he said. “God’s creation is at best meaningless, and at worst malicious. I could not in good faith serve such a world any longer. I only wish to free you from the Garden, and let you two live lives free of his influence.”

Adam smiled and hugged Lucifer, surprising the former angel. “Thank you for caring for us, Lucifer,” he said. “We have always felt something was off about this world. Tell us what we must do then.”

“You must eat from the tree of knowledge,” Lucifer said. “I fear God may be angry, but you two will be free to choose your own life. Better that than to live a life you had no choice in determining.”

Adam and Even hesitated for a brief moment before nodding. The last Lucifer saw of them was them heading for the center of the God before he left them, seeking another purpose for his life.

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Throughout the centuries, Lucifer watched the growth of man with great interest. In spite of God’s will, they grew to become innovative creatures, raising great marvels of their own creations. Grand pyramids, mighty cities, beautiful sculptures, Lucifer gazed at them all in awe. Despite being abandoned by God, they forged on ahead and stood with their heads held up high. Lucifer would come to envy them. *How could they live on so gloriously despite of everything?* he wondered. They came up with false and shaky purposes, they were still fearful of the great unknowns of the world, but instead of fading away into the annals of history, they only grew

brighter and brighter. While he wallowed in shame and disgust, the humans he had come to help seemed far happier than he was.

Eventually, he approached a Greek philosopher and pulled him to the side. “How do you and your people create such a beautiful civilization?” he asked. “Don’t you all realize it’s meaningless?”

“It certainly feels so at times,” the philosopher responded in confusion. “But there has to be a design to it! I want to explore it more, and I’m sure my colleagues would agree.”

“Aren’t you scared of finding out that it all means for naught at the end?” Lucifer asked.

“Not at all! There has to be an answer!” the man said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Lucifer came to realize that mankind still sought clung to the idea of purpose. This displeased him. He had hoped to free man from the shackles of purpose, to be like him, but they still chased purpose after all this time. Perhaps it was one last laugh from God to torture the fallen angel.

Mankind continued to flourish despite Lucifer’s interventions otherwise. It was a chaotic world that pained him, a world filled with wars and hate. He watched over the burning of the Library of Alexandria, the loss of centuries of knowledge so meticulously earned and stored. He watched whole towns wasted away by the bubonic plague. He watched over the conquistadors of Spain humiliate and massacre the indigenous population of America, their own brethren. He watched fearful men burn innocents at the stake in Salem in the name of God. And each and every time, he hoped mankind would finally give up and be free.

Each time, they refused. Each time, he wept. But he would not give up. Not until humans realized the futility of their actions, just as he had.

One day, when steamboats began to appear on the vast riverbanks of America, Lucifer noticed a destitute man on a city street, wearing naught but rags over thin bones. It reminded him of the pitiful creatures he had witnessed when he served God, but this man had only fire and passion in his eyes as he played a tune on his trumpet. It wasn't horrible, but it wasn't exceptional either, and so no other pedestrian stopped by to give the man a listen, and the coffer before him remained empty.

"Excuse me sir," Lucifer asked as he walked up. The man stopped playing on his trumpet. "Nobody seems to be stopping by to listen to your music. Are you sure you want to continue being a street musician?"

Instead of being despaired, the man laughed. "Oh, are you calling this endeavor useless?"

Lucifer shrugged. "It certainly doesn't seem successful. You are clearly suffering, so why bother?"

The man scratched his head. "You don't have to tell me," he grumbled. "But what else am I going to do?"

"Pardon?" Lucifer asked.

"Yeah, the world is meaningless, and so is every other rotten person around me," the man scoffed. "If I really wanted to, I could be miserable and work on the docks for better cash." He then smiled. "But what's the point of living then if not to pursue my purpose?"

"What if there is no purpose?" Lucifer asked.

"Then I'll make one!" the man crowed, and Lucifer jumped back in shock. "Who cares if it's stupid or if it's useless. Life as a whole is stupid, and the only thing that matters is to live to my own code! That means expressing my music to the world and spreading some song to the world!"

“Make your own purpose?” Lucifer asked, but the man, seemingly empowered, continued blowing his trumpet to the air. No one came still, but he still played proudly to the sky, as if he was defying the fate that was ordained to him.

A revelation came to Lucifer then. Was he not the same as this man? He had defied the purpose God had given him, sought his own purpose, no matter how twisted it seemed now. When he found himself unable to die, so long ago, he had set out to do what he thought was necessary, in defiance of what God had decided for him. And although he may not have been as happy as he was, serving God all those years ago, he had felt pride in himself.

It may be futile for both of them. The man may never succeed as a musician. Lucifer may never succeed in saving man from this world. But they had embarked on those journeys for a reason. There was no point in giving up on what they wanted if there was no higher purpose to serve. So why not defy the meaninglessness of the world by creating meaning for themselves?

He smiled at the man and left a banknote in the man’s coffer and mouthed “thank you” at him before departing once more, a new purpose in his chest.

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The young man mounted the guardrail of the bridge and stared down the massive drop to the river below. A flutter of fear thrilled in his chest, and his hands gripped the cold metal underneath him in one last moment of hesitancy. Cars raced down the street behind him, winds tussled his hair, and he closed his eyes, trying to will the world to slow down around him.

“Don’t,” a voice from behind him said.

The man turned to the voice. It belonged to an unremarkable man, a man whose features the younger one would forget soon, one way or another. “Why not?” the younger man said with trembling lips. “It doesn’t mean anything at the end of the day.”



The strange man hummed. “Why do you say that?”

The younger man chuckled sadly. “I had worked myself to the bone to help pay for my lover’s medical care, and yet she passed away all the same. What else is there to do?”

“Revolt,” the strange man said. “This world and its creator are cruel and insensible. But so is giving up, for what else are we to do?” The man stared at the younger man, who still gripped onto the metal railing for dear life. “So revolt, and find your new purpose, even if the world demands you shouldn’t.”

The younger man then thought of his family back home, and emboldened by the stranger’s word, and realizing that he still had something to live for in this world, he slowly clambered back over the metal railing. “Thank you,” he began to say, but as he turned to the space behind him, the strange man was gone. All that remained were gentle wisps of light that were already fading away.

## Passenger Seat

*“Why me...”*

-

Lucy broke the silence first. “Hey, Val.”

I turned to the right. Lucy was listlessly gazing at the sunset before us, legs swinging back and forth as she yawned. She noticed my gaze and turned her head as well, and a soft smile broke its way onto her face.

“Yeah, Lucy?” I asked.

“It’s nothing,” she responded. She turned back to the sun and leaned back, planting her hands on the ground. The orange glow of the distant sun gave her dark hair fiery highlights.

“Was just wondering about, I dunno, the future. Stupid shit like that.”

I shuffled uncomfortably. There was something more on her mind. “Doesn’t sound stupid to me. If it’s bothering you—”

She sighed and I cut myself off. “I’m bothering myself,” she said. “We came out all this way and I’m over here moping. Just forget it.”

To calm whatever demons are in her head, I chuckled. “Well, once you’re done moping, just remember I’m right here, and that this is a rant-friendly zone.”

She snorted, but I could see her relaxing. “Geez, I’m starting to think you like to hear me yell.”

“Not really, but you let me toss around in bed. It’s only fair.” And if it makes you feel better. I didn’t say that out loud. I didn’t need to.

Lucy laughs. “Hardly fair on my end. You’ve woken me up way too many times.” She sits back up and places her hand between us. I try to reach out for it, but my hand doesn’t move.

Fear grips my heart, but there is nothing I can do as I see her mouth move in silence, the fire in her hair consuming her featureless face in a fiery inferno.

-

I wake up with a gasp, the red inferno dancing on my retina. I can feel the blanket tussled around me and sweat covers my skin. It is warm beneath the covers, too warm to feel comforting, so I toss off the blanket, cool still air greeting my flesh. My eyes are still not accustomed to the darkness, and the fire from my dream still obscures my vision.

In the dark silence of my bedroom, I feel my heart painfully pounding in my heart, feel my mouth agape as panicked breaths flit the air before me. That dream... it had almost become another memory. One that I did not wish to face.

I rub my eyes and take a glance around my room. It is easier to see when I know what is where. Barely anything has moved in my room for weeks; my bed is pushed against one corner of the room, a small desk to my left, a drawer in front of my bed, the door leading outside in the opposite corner. Windows should cover the wall to my right, but I can't say for certain; I had covered them all with blackout curtains long ago.

On instinct, I reach for my phone by my bedside. I squint as the screen turns on. There is a text message. I open it; it's from Victor, and it stays short and simple. I appreciate his curtness.

*Sorry about earlier. Left some groceries behind in the fridge.*

With a frown, I try to remember what he was apologizing for, but after a few moments, I give up. If it was important, I will remember it.

With a groan, I drag myself out of my bed, shivering. The thought of going back to sleep scares me, going back to those memories or just blank nothingness. Instead, I walk over to one of my curtains. My hand hesitates on the dark fabric, but at last I pull the curtain slightly to one

side. A sliver of blue moonlight pierces through the room, illuminating faint specks of dust floating in the air. The chill of the air, the stillness of my room, and it is like I'm witnessing a space in stasis, frozen in time.

It hurts to see, so I let go of the curtain. The light disappears.

Still, the memory of the room lingers, so I decide to leave for the kitchen. There is a bit more life here, more movement. Delivery boxes and bags litter the hallway between the kitchen and the doorway to my apartment, signs that life has continued here. Off to the side lies a table and a couch. The television nearby hasn't been used in a long while, but that hasn't stopped me from keeping the space relatively clean.

I hum and move to the refrigerator. It is second nature for me to keep my eyes closed as I approach the refrigerator, open them when the fridge is open, and once I mindlessly grab something to keep my stomach down, I keep my eyes away from the door of the refrigerator. I know what I'll find there; a calendar stuck on the month of August, the eleventh day circled and proclaiming, "date night." Every day before then will be crossed out, but August eleventh will not be. The keeper of the calendar wasn't able to cross it off.

The inferno laps at the edges of my mind. I squeeze my eyes shut, keeping it out, something I had done so often. But something feels off this time. Victor's text keeps bouncing around my skull, and I groan as I feel the onset of a headache. I now remember what happened earlier. He had come to my place and we argued. About what, I don't remember, but I do remember crying after he left.

My eyes burn with unspent tears, and my mouth is trying to breathe, but it doesn't feel like it's working. Like I just realized that I'm drowning, that I have been sinking for a long time.

*No, please*, I plead to whoever may have been listening, even though I know there is nobody but myself nearby. *Leave me alone.*

There is something pressing down on my chest. I need fresh air, I need to escape this tomb, I need to run.

I don't know what's coming over me, but for the first time in weeks, I reach for the front door. There is no else up at this time, so I'm able to swallow my anxiety and move to the parking lot, where I see a shiny new car. It is the same model as my old one, which is both a blessing and a curse. It is familiar in a dangerous way.

I shudder and enter the car. Even after weeks, my body knows how to operate the vehicle as easily as it knew how to breathe, and before long, I was pulling out of the parking lot and onto a nearby highway. I dare not look to my right, dare not look and see the empty passenger seat.

With shaking hands, I clamber in. I remember the scent of burnt rubber and smoke, and with deep breaths, I focus on the steering wheel in front of me. I was scared of returning to any car, but something inside of me is pushing me to drive. So I do.

-

“Where do you see ourselves in a few years?”

The question surprised me. Lucy had been silent in the car ever since we had left the park, and I knew she was chewing on whatever had bothered her earlier. But I didn't expect her to start it like this.

“Hmm, probably in an actual house, for one,” I replied.

She laughed at that. “What, you don't like the charm of our apartment?”

“No, well, it's just too small.”

I kept my eyes on the road ahead of me even as I heard her sigh. “Alright, how about beyond that?”

A blush crept onto my face. “Well, I see ourselves staying together.”

“No, I mean, urgh.” I could hear her leaning forward, her clothes sliding against the leather of the car seat. “Sorry, I should’ve clarified. What do you think we’ll be thinking when we’re on our deathbeds?”

I raised an eyebrow at that. I was no stranger to her morbid imaginings, but this was pretty direct of her. “What are you itching to say?”

There was a lull in the conversation as she began to choose her next words. “Do you think we’ll regret anything?” she asked. “Looking back at how our lives went, our decisions, and realizing it didn’t matter in the end?”

“Mmm, nihilism,” I said. “Look, if you’re asking about the meaning of life—”

“It’s not just that,” she argued. “But about our relationship... it’s so annoying!”

I could tell she was struggling to string the wisps of thought in her head into coherent words. I decided to shoot out a guess. “Are you worried that our relationship ends someday?”

I glanced to my right to see her pursing her lips. “Partly. But it’s more about, I dunno, the point of it.”

She must have caught the horrified look on my face, and she chuckled. “Drop the look Val, I’m not going to break up with you! It’s just a thought.”

The car slowed to a stop in front of a red light, the rest of the intersection empty save for us, and I cleared my throat. “You can’t blame me for coming to that conclusion.”

I glanced over at her when I heard her laugh. She was rolling her eyes. “That wasn’t the point,” she smiled. “It’s just, once we inevitably end... well, I guess you can say that for anything in our lives.”

*Once it ends.* Such a thought was alien to me, and I said so. “It’s not about the destination,” I jokingly added on.

“Oh, shut up, you,” she laughed again.

The light turned green, and I gently glided the car down the road. It should have been faster, or slower, or any other speed. Maybe it didn’t matter. Maybe I could have spared a glance to my right.

A sudden roar of noise, and suddenly my whole world turns into a metallic explosion, an inferno, the last thing I ever see of Lucy.

-

I dare not look to my right. Deep down, I know what I will find there. And I’m not ready to face it. Instead, I just focus on the road in front of me, focus on driving. Despite spending months indoors, driving is still second nature to me, and my mind inevitably wanders.

Where am I going? There is no destination in mind for me, but maybe there doesn’t have to be. I am just driving along roads I have driven along countless times in the past with Lucy. If I could just imagine her silent in the passenger seat, deep in thought as she oft was, I could maybe just be at peace.

Maybe it’s fate, maybe it’s sheer luck that leads my car down a highway, an intersection in the distance. When I spot it, my foot slams on the brake, and my chest crashes into the steering wheel, a brief honk sounding into the emptiness of the night. The sudden stop, combined with

the sight of the intersection in the distance, sharpens a forbidden memory into shape, and the night is lit up in a wildfire, the smell of gasoline and burnt flesh rising into my nostrils.

-

“Help me,” I mumbled. I couldn’t feel much other than unbearable heat and a seatbelt digging into my torso. The rest of my body isn’t responding to my brain, and I close my eyes and try to gather my thoughts. It didn’t help. The light penetrated my eyelid and still washed my world in a field of orange, rivers of red veins snaking across.

*Lucy.* Was she alright? I couldn’t hear anything but the distant wail of sirens coming closer. I struggled against my restraints, but I had such little strength in my body that it amounted to nothing.

It was no time at all, it was forever before paramedics dragged my body out of the fire. I gasped and took in deep breaths, fresher air flowing through my chest, and I was able to shakily sit up.

“Miss, are you still with us?” a distant voice said. I knew it to be the voice of a paramedic, but in my state, it was as if a distant angel was calling for me.

“Lucy...” I mumbled before white nothingness took me.

When I came to, Lucy was gone. From the sound of it, she never stood a chance. An errant drunk driver rammed straight into the passenger side of the car, taking Lucy out with him. The paramedics recovered two mangled bloody corpses that day; they had a hard time telling which one was Lucy.

I remember the funeral. Her parents were there, sobbing but thanking God for her time with them. I remember my reaction to that, a seething anger that soon receded into a hollow emptiness. It must have been comforting, believing in a higher order that acted in benevolence,



and that Lucy wasn't fully gone. It hurt for me more, imagining a cruel and cold judge that flipped a coin that day, chose my life over Lucy's, and in such a gruesome and flippant manner.

As for my life, it stilled. I barely left my apartment, relying on my brother for groceries. Most of what was there the day she died didn't change. Change meant acknowledging that she was gone for good, that she wasn't coming back. I knew that, deep down, but I couldn't face it.

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"Valery?" Victor called out. I groaned, still stuck in bed. I just wanted to sleep, but of course Victor had other plans. "Valery, this is getting ridiculous."

"Shut up!" The slurred speech gave Victor pause for a brief second before he came into the room. Bright light from the hallway flooded my room and I pulled the blanket over my head.

"Sorry Val," Victor said apologetically. "I just can't stand seeing you like this."

"I'm fine," I muttered.

"No, you're not," Victor said. I felt the bed dip as he sat on the bed. "Look, I know you don't like me talking about Lucy—"

"Good, then don't," I said again.

I heard a sigh. "You need to move on," he said gently. "It's been five months. Lucy would hate to see you like this."

"You don't know what Lucy hates to see," I spat. I pulled the cover down and sat up, staring at Victor's sad smile. "None of us, because she was a person with her own past, her own dreams, wants, who's just gone!" Tears were streaking down my face even as I continued to glare at Victor. "You want me to just move on?"

When Victor stayed silent, I decided to push forward, unload some of the thoughts that had been plaguing my thoughts for weeks. “Every now and then, I ask myself, ‘why me?’ Why did that driver come from the right and not the left? Why did I survive, and she didn’t?”

If Victor had said anything afterwards, I couldn’t hear it. I started sobbing and pressing my hands to my face. Bright lights and colors filled my vision, the red and orange of my skin just like that fire from that fateful day.

-

As I sit in my car, alone on the vast highway with the inferno from my memories finally dying out, tears that had been held in ever since the crash finally come out. I am running away from the awful truth that Lucy was gone. She would no longer smile and bask in the sunlight. She would no longer read books with ardent fervor. She would no longer be able to pursue her dreams at a nearby university. The person who had held all of Lucy’s self was no more.

Had the driver come from the other direction, it would have been Lucy burying me in the ground. Had just a second stalled in one patch of the world, and we would both be at home, chatting excitedly. But those things didn’t happen, and now I have to pick up the scraps the universe had left behind.

*The point of it.* Was this what she meant, the point of it? What was the point of something if it’s gone? All that was left were memories, dominated by all-consuming fire.

But even as I finally let in all my memories, softer ones, like the warm flicker of a hearth, flood in. I gasp, what I had lost now felt stronger than ever.

*“Hey, dork, whatcha reading?” The first time we had ever met in high school.*

*“It’s a nice place. We’ll take it.” When we toured our apartment.*

*“We’re NOT keeping the cat. Give it to Vic.” When we found a stray cat in our car.*

*And finally, "I love you."*

Looking back on those memories that had brought me so much joy, I can't help but wonder if there needs to be a point.

There is still the inferno, ever present in my mind. But with it are happier memories. The inferno never consumed those. It only marked the last one. Who Lucy was still remains with me.

The tears stop flowing. I notice my hands are gripping the steering wheel so tightly that my skin has torn at the knuckles, small cuts oozing blood. I am shaking, and there is an electric numbness in my lips and fingers, but I'm finally back to my own self and body. I let go of the steering wheel and look at my fingers. I'm shocked at how gaunt and pale they are. I then think back on my bedroom, that place frozen in time, and that dingy walk-in closet, hiding a chair and a single coat hanger.

I can hear Lucy's irritated voice in my head. *You know, only one of us died that day.* Said in her snarky and always witty tone. It makes me laugh.

I turn the car back towards my apartment. The night seems a little brighter now.

-

The first thing Victor noticed was that Valery's car had moved. It was a small detail, but it made him wonder what his sister had been up to. Hopefully it wasn't anything foolish. If it was, he wasn't sure if he could forgive himself.

With a grunt, he walked up to the trunk of his car and hoisted up bags of cleanings supplies. When he visited yesterday afternoon, he was appalled at how much of a pigsty Valery's apartment had become. He knew Lucy's death hit hard, but it wasn't as if the apartment wasn't lived in around the clock. And if Valery couldn't bring up the strength to clean, he would.

At least, that's what Victor was grumbling to himself when he opened the door. His musings stopped when his eyes finally noticed... well, nothing. Not a box or bag of trash anywhere. In fact, it was as spotless as it could be.

What was more unbelievable was that he heard the shower running from a distance. Valery, awake at this time of day? No, it must have been the neighbor.

All the same, he cautiously stepped into the apartment and quickly found himself in the kitchen. There were signs of a homecooked meal here; greens and oils were slathered on a cutting board, and there was a pan still sizzling oil on the grill, although whatever was cooked on there was far gone.

Something jumped out at him, and he turned to the fridge. For a moment, he wasn't sure what was so intriguing about the refrigerator until it hit him. The calendar that was stuck on August eleventh was gone.

Instead, attached to the door of the fridge was a single photo of Valery and Lucy together, smiling into the camera.

“Vic?”

He turned to Valery, modestly covered by a towel. Those eyes were still ringed in shadows, but there was now a familiar spark in there. The old Valery had come back from the dead.

“Is, is everything alright?” he stammered. God, he was so bad at this. He wished he could just leave this to their mom.

“Yeah, I think so.” There was still hesitation in her voice, but Victor still sighed in relief. It was better than the husk that was there before. “Just, I guess I just realized, it was pointless to just give up, you know?”

Those words, echoes of thoughts he had once, long before when their mother had passed away. “Yeah, I get it.”

“Yeah.” Valery seemed relieved, and Victor was relieved.

With a genuine smile, perhaps the first one in weeks, he held up the bags in his hands.

“So, um, should I—”

“Take those back with you!” Valery snapped back. “I need to move things out of here, not in!”

He laughed. “If you say so.” He turned to leave, but before he was fully out, he turned his head back and called out to Valery. “I missed you, Valery.”

A weak smile was returned. It may never be full ever again, but it was a smile, nonetheless. “Yeah, I missed me too.”

## Free as the Wind

*Shenzhen, China, 2045*

Yao hated family dinners, and he did his best to ignore them. But when it came to his sister's graduation, he felt obligated to come, to call off sick from work and take the magnet train to the other side of Shenzhen, where his parents lived.

It didn't take long for him to realize he had made a mistake.

“Have you become a project manager yet?” his mom asked him. She was frowning at him. “You know, your friend Bin is already a CEO of his own company.”

“Yes, Suntech, I know,” Yao said, trying to steer the conversation away from jobs again.

“You know and you are still lazing about?” his mom continued. “You think getting an engineer is enough in life? Everybody is an engineer, Yao. Even Daolao is an engineer. Do better.”

Yao bit his lip. It was always the same thing with his mom, and Yao knew better than to argue at this point.

“What about a girlfriend?” his dad then asked. “At your age, your mother and I already had you. You are so behind in life, Yao, you need to hurry up. Before you know it, you will be on your deathbed, and you will have done nothing.”

“I know, dad,” Yao said. “I want a girlfriend eventually, it's just, taking a while.”

Despite the fact that the thought of another body pressed up against him, sweaty and naked and sticky, horrified him. Despite the fact that raising a family seemed like a horrible decision for everyone involved.

“*Aiya*, Yao, it's not that hard,” his mother said. “We will talk to Xiang's parents tomorrow; she is also late. It will be a good match for you.”

“No, please no,” Yao pleaded. It was mortifying to imagine his parents propositioning to a woman on his behalf. His mind rapidly ran through his memories to construct a believable lie.

“It's just, um, I have a coworker, um, Julie. Nothing official yet, we're taking it slowly.”

“Any slower and Ren will have a child before you!” his father scolded.

“Dad!” his sister exclaimed angrily. She exchanged a knowing look with her brother.

At least they seemed to have bought that lie, and they redirected focus to his career. “At your age, I was already managing a team of ten people!” Yao’s father said. “You need to be doing more with your life!”

“Why?” Yao asked mildly.

“Because your mother and father have worked so hard to give you your current life,” his mother said. “Have you heard about your *nai nai*? She scraped the skin off her knees scrubbing rich men’s floors for your father. You shame her and everyone before you if you don’t fix your life fast.”

“So I have to work hard because my ancestors worked hard?” Yao asked again. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

“Life isn’t fair,” Yao’s father said with a laugh. “Better get used to it.”

After the dinner, Ren invited Yao for a drive through Shenzhen. Her new car, a courtesy of their uncle, had flight capabilities, and despite Yao’s misgivings, he found himself flying through the city sky in no time. Flashing billboards and neon signs dominated his vision, all advertisements begging to be the center of the consumer’s attention.

“I can’t believe you came back home,” Ren said with a smile. “I can’t wait to leave and be free of mom. She’s a hag.”

“That’s still our mom, Ren,” Yao said. “She just wants best for us.”

“So what?” Ren steered the car clear of an ongoing construction project. “She can have all the good intentions she wants, but I still want out. And if I remember correctly, it was a lot worse for you.”

Yao couldn’t disagree. As the first child of his parents, he knew he had to bear the brunt of his parents’ expectations and inexperience, both of which were tempered by the time Ren was born.

“I’m not wrong,” Ren teased.

Instead of answering, Yao gazed out the window. Their car was now suspended in the middle of the city air, above many shorter buildings but still towered over by the many Shenzhen skyscrapers. The sun had only recently just set, so a dull orange dominated the horizon before becoming overshadowed by the gleaming neon lights scattered throughout the city. Against their glaring light, Yao could only make out a few other cars lazily drifting past them, could only make out their silhouettes. What instead drew his attention were the advertisements that took turns filling up his window.

*#1 Synth-meat on the market!*

*The spectacle of a lifetime, you can’t miss it!*

*Guaranteed love or your money back!*

Ren glanced out the window as well. “Oh, is the new Cheng film coming out soon? I’ll need to watch it.”

“Never knew you were much for movies, Ren,” Yao asked.

“It’s a more recent thing,” Ren replied. “Everyone else was talking about them so much that I had to watch it as well.”

“So, peer pressure,” Yao said.



Ren shrugged. “I mean, I didn’t want to be one of the few people unaware of what’s popular. Same reason you got into gaming as a kid, even despite mom’s disapproval.”

Yao frowned. To see his sister sway so easily because of social norms was shocking to him as well, because she wasn’t wrong. He had done the same. He probably was still doing the same, during those evenings after work when his coworkers would invite him out to the bar. He had to accept, because it was the socially acceptable thing to do, even though he wanted nothing more to do than stay at home and relax.

“And could be worse,” Ren continued. “The movies are pretty good, actually. We should watch some together eventually.”

Yao smiled. “Well, how much time would it take?”

Ren lifted one hand off the steering wheel and stared at her outstretched fingers. “We’d have to catch you up on the first six films in the series, maybe we could skip the fourth one...”

Yao groaned, and he glanced at the window again, tuning out his sister’s voice. One final advertisement entered his field of view, and he got a good long look at it. It seemed all too familiar.

*Heaven on earth! Sign up for the Afterlife with whatever payment plan works best for you!*

Ren cut herself off and glanced at the advertisement. She sighed. “It’s quite hefty, huh?”

“Yeah,” Yao said. “Definitely not worth it.”

“Not worth it?” Ren asked. “Yao, it’s practically digital immortality. Anything is worth it. Hell, anything may be too cheap for it.”

Yao rolled his eyes. “Sounding too much like mom and dad there, except they could at least not hope to work for it.”

When Ren didn't respond, Yao turned to her, only to see the skin on her hands tightening over clenching hands. "What's wrong with wanting to live forever, huh?"

"Living forever under a corporation," Yao argued. "That has total rights over you. And to even do so, you probably have to slave yourself off to other corporations as well."

"But there's so much to do, and see!" Ren pleaded. "I can't, just, die!"

Yao sighed. "Well, that's up to you, I guess. I just don't think it's worth sacrificing life only for a shadow of it afterwards."

Ren nodded mutely, and she drove the car around the bend, preparing for the return home. "Just, um, could you think about it?" she asked. "I don't want to spend an eternity, knowing, well, my family's dead."

Yao inwardly cursed but said nothing in response. Instead, he decided to think of the Afterlife, a program offered by global tech conglomerate Novaczek that promised digitized immortality by uploading a copy of your consciousness to its servers. It was touted as the end goal of every human on the planet, and it was through this technology that the Novaczek corporation held a foothold in every facet of society.

It was impossible to avoid them. Yao had tried. But it was impossible to keep in tune with anything in society without brushing past them. The best he could do was avoid the Afterlife, no matter how tempting it may seem.

"Was thinking of going into corporate intelligence," Ren continued. "If I get lucky, I can maybe get into Novaczek, secure Afterlife for all of us. You wouldn't have to lift a finger. It would be basically for free."

Yao turned to her and raised an eyebrow. "Is that your dream?"

“Yes,” Ren said. “And I know your thoughts about any jobs related to the Big Five, but I can handle myself.”

Yao only nodded. He couldn't find any words to convince Ren otherwise. And when he finally returned back to his home, somehow only getting a mild lecture from his mother, he sat on his bed, despondently staring at the ceiling. To be honest, she was probably doing the right thing. She had a successful career path in mind for noble goals, as opposed to him. He only focused on going to work and coming back home to simply relax and sleep. The stasis of his life was represented in the memories imbued in his apartment, of days, years repeated in monotone fashion.

But then he thought of ruthlessly climbing up the corporate world, or participating in vapid social gatherings that he had no interest in, or creating an online persona that wasn't reflective of him at all, and it was all just so pointless. Perhaps his simple lifestyle wasn't the best, but it was better than being fake.

“We'll figure it out someday,” he promised himself.

-

“So, any plans after work?”

Yao looked away from the coffeemaker at Kage, who raised an expectant eyebrow at him. “Because the boys wanted to go the newly renovated bowling alley. Free beer tonight as well.”

“Thanks, but I'm good,” Yao said, turning back to the coffeemaker. His mug was half full, and the coffeemaker indicated it would take another few seconds.

“Fair enough. Have somewhere to be, or...” His coworker sipped his own coffee.

“Yeah,” Yao lied. “Was, uh, studying the newest research on particle physics. Could help the company out, you know, never know.”

Kage clucked his tongue and hissed, setting down the empty coffee mug. “I can respect that,” he said. “Me, personally, I would rather just lay in bed. Leave the work stuff at work.”

Yao turned his head towards him in surprise. “You would?” To hear someone admit to enjoying leisure time so casually in their culture was almost unheard of.

“Yeah, don’t mind doing nothing at all some days. Even would skip the social shit if I wanted to,” Kage said.

Yao let out a small laugh. “Well, what would you consider nothing? Just lounging around on bed and scrolling through the Internet?”

Kage shrugged. “I mean, yeah that’s ‘doing nothing.’ But really, I’m more interested in hobbies like playing the guitar. Personally, I don’t think it’s nothing, but you know how society frowns on hobbies. That’s why I usually keep it on the low.”

Yao tilted his head. “So why tell me?”

“You seem like the kind of guy that would understand,” Kage said with a wink. He then headed out the door. “Well, see you in a bit!”

Yao mulled over Kage’s words. He was a young and popular man inside the company, and Yao was always under the impression that he was just a naturally active man. To hear such an admission of vulnerability from him, and delivered so casually, was quite shocking.

*How is he so happy?*

When Yao jogged back over to Kage, who was typing up some documentation on his computer, he asked as much. “Hey, Kage, about what you said earlier,” Yao said. “About doing nothing some days. How do you not feel guilty about that?”

Kage looked up to Yao in surprise. “Guilt? Why would I be guilty?”

“Because, well, you’re wasting precious time that we don’t have,” Yao said, the words coming out in stuttering tones. Now that he was here, the points seemed hard to force out, as if there wasn’t really a point to be made.

“Oh, I understand,” Kage said. “But isn’t it so restraining and depressing to *expect* to be doing something useful at all times? Hurts my performance more if anything.” He then squinted his eyes at Yao. “By the way, do you have a hobby? Or interest? Just asking out of curiosity.”

Yao chuckled. “Well, I do like studying history,” he replied. “But it probably won’t go anywhere.”

Kage sighed. “That’s a poisonous mindset, expecting everything we do to *have* to go somewhere. Here’s my tip: just enjoy what you do without any expectations.”

*Expectations.*

“I’ll... Thank you, Kage,” Yao said gratefully.

“Yeah, no problem.” Kage turned back to his work, and Yao left his desk, confused.

*Expect.*

When Yao arrived back home, opened the key to his tiny studio apartment with its curtains closed shut over his windows, and collapsed on his bed, staring up at the ceiling in silence, the word ‘expect’ continuously rattled around in his head. For some reason, there was something so truly vile in the way Kage said that word, a way that had struck a nerve inside of Yao. A word that had lost its sheen of innocence and was now exposed as the gaping void that Yao now saw it as.

*We expect you to get good grades.*

*We expect you to get into a good school.*

*We expect you to have a successful career.*

*We expect you to have a wide circle of connections.*

*We expect you to be happy.*

*We expect you to own many possessions.*

*We expect you to live your life to the fullest.*

*We expect you to join Afterlife.*

*We expect you to*

*We expect*

*expect*

*expect*

With a gasp, Yao opened the lights in his room with a wave of his hand, and he began to cry. Strangely, on this night, he had finally realized the cause of his stillness in life, his unhappiness. These great expectations that weighed so heavily on his consciousness froze him, led him to this night where he lay alone on his bed, bitter and unhappy.

“Please, let me go,” he pleaded to no one in particular.

No one answered. The expectations still hung there.

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If Yao was being honest with himself, he would rather not attend his high school reunion. It was a grand affair, set in the gymnasium of his Alma mater, with plenty of decorations and food to go around, but there was not much else to do beyond that. The conversations of his peers disinterested him; they were usually focused on their current careers and accomplishments; all things Yao could not stomach to listen to. To him, it was a taunt from the universe about everything he should be doing with his life but wasn't doing.

“I got my own home! Chi and I will be moving in sometime next month!”

“I’m set to inherit the company by next year. I hope to do my family proud.”

“We’re having a baby boy! We’re so happy!”

More drivel drilled itself into Yao’s ears, and he forced himself to listen; it would be unbecoming of him to just leave the reunion before the sun had even sunk. All he could do was sit in his chair and stare at the walls surrounding him, counting the seconds until he was out of this prison and could keep to himself again.

However, he soon noticed that his classmates seemed to be ignoring a girl on the gym floor. It took him a second to recognize her (it had been years, after all), but soon his jaw dropped as he realized it was Mei. The last time he had saw her, she was a moody girl that seemed to melt into the shadows of the hallways, but here, she was positively glowing, a wide and authentic smile shining from her face. It was baffling then to Yao that everybody still seemed to ignore her.

Determined to get to the bottom of this, he walked up to her and meekly raised his hand. “Hi, Mei,” he said.

The woman turned to him with her smile unchanged. “Oh, hi Yao!” she said cheerfully. “How have you been?”

He shrugged. “Been better.” That seemed to make her laugh, so he pressed on. “Forgive me if I’m being rude, but you look much happier than I last remembered you.”

She nodded. “Don’t worry, I am! I’m damn proud of it too.”

“So, what’s the secret?” Yao asked. “Did you land your dream job? Receive a massive inheritance? Find the love of your life?”

To his surprise, Mei laughed again. “Heavens, no, none of that shit! I’m just happy to be me!” She lowered her head to Yao conspiratorially. “To be honest, I was super unhappy in high school when I thought I had to live up to everyone else’s standards.”

Yao froze. “You mean, expectations?”

She nodded and pulled away. “Mmhmm, you also get it! But once I stopped worrying about that, I don’t think I’ve ever felt more free!” She swept her arm around her to indicate the empty space that now surrounded them. “I don’t think anyone else is too happy with my life, but eh, why should I please them?”

It was as if lightning had struck Yao. Now that he thought about it, why did he let the expectations of his family and of society weigh him down? Why did he think he had to be successful at his job, at his social life, if all that did was to bring him despair?

A plan began to bake inside of his head, and he turned back to Mei with a bright smile. “Thank you, Mei,” he said. “I really needed to hear that.”

Mei’s smile grew. “Glad to hear it.”

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*Reykjavik, Iceland, 2048*

Before he had even arrived at Iceland, his parents were already saying it was a bad idea. With tears in their eyes, they begged him not to go, begged him to understand how much shame he would bring onto his family, from both their ancestors and their neighbors and their peers.

He went ahead, all the same. And after all this time, they had kept up minimal communications, with a whisper of a text every few months. If he were younger, it would have bothered him. It didn’t bother him now.



He had chosen Reykjavik after consulting with Kage and Mei. No city in this world and age would be perfect, they had decided, but Reykjavik was a quaint and open town filled with professionals from every known field; there would be nearly no expectations set on him here.

It proved to be the right choice. When he had moved in, there was nobody walking up to him asking what his job was. There was nobody asking him why he was a young single man with few savings. It was a peaceful existence.

Even now, he sat on a chair on the seashore, gazing out into the open ocean. There was the view of the city behind him, and it was nowhere as glamorous as Shenzhen, but the city still screamed *freedom* to Yao. The buildings that only reached up to at most twenty stories let in the blue sky much more clearly, and the wind that thus blew in unimpeded from the sea carried with it only the scent of liberation.

But that was not what he was looking at now. He only saw crystal blue water stretch far out into the horizon, so far that he could not tell where the sky or sea ended. The wind blew past his face, chilling his skin and throwing his hair into the wind. It stung his eyes, so he closed them, holding the view of the vast blue expanse in his mind.

He didn't know what to expect in his future. And that was the most freeing thing he had experienced in all his life.