

Leaving for Castalia

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Preface

This is my first time writing a real, complete, full-length novel. I formed the idea of this book in 2017, when I just dropped out from high school. I was having major depression and didn't know what to deal with my life. One day I was reading Nietzsche and he seemed very misogynist from his works, and I thought, maybe I could create a world where the gender dynamics is reversed in an extreme way. In that world, women are seen as closer to God, while men are seen as closer to animals. Because it is my first novel, I also wanted to be personal—that's why I let Loulouthi be 19 and Asano be 16—19 and 16 were the ages my boyfriend Wei Hao and I first met. Indeed, it is more appropriate to say that almost all characters in the book has myself as an inspiration.

I've fast-drafted the first draft of this novel in November 2018, as a project I'm doing for this year's NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month). Here I thank Giuseppe Stelluto for introducing me to NaNoWrimo. It's a truly wonderful experience. I thank @lampbearer (Becca) for hosting numerous events for my region as the Municipal Liaison, and all my writing buddies in NaNoWriMo for keeping me motivated. I also thank Wei Hao, Carter Carter, Michael Lubimov, Qi Lingxuan, Veronica Hua, and so many more people for reading my first draft, giving me comments, and cheering me up during my writing journey. Without these people, I wouldn't have made this novel.

Part I

The flower and the giant broccoli

1

The Daydream

Loulouthi daydreams about a little boy. She recalls her way onto the train and meets a boy. She reflects upon herself.

Background music: the sound of bubbles rising up to the surface of water

It was a beautiful winter night, with light snow falling like dandruff. But people in the express train couldn't appreciate the snow, for they are traveling at 360 kilometers per hour. Smells from the food carriage started to be replaced by smoke, and a little boy began shouting.

An elder from the chamber next to the boy's appeared at corridor. Her pajama was loose and dirty but her walking stick was nice and neat. Five feet away from the little boy, she knocked the stick onto the ground, four times in a row, and looked down at the boy drearily. The boy seemed quite embarrassed, but he shouted louder, not because of the hateful smell of the smoke, but because that the elder's shiny red lips on her pale face scared him. He went back into his chamber, wishing for some comfort, only to find his mom asleep on the upper deck, and his uncle reading a political newspaper on the lower deck. No one cared if he is repellent of smoke, or scared by an old lady, thought the little boy.

The woman sitting by the window would have disagreed if she knew the little boy's thoughts. Strangely enough, she found herself more compassionate with children than with herself; and she had no empathy for old people. She felt guilty to call herself a girl. She had too many responsibilities to be called a "girl", although many women older than her call themselves girls.

She was conjecturing her dialogue with the little boy. If it ever happened, it would go like this: (If it didn't go like this, she would make it like this)

"Hi", says Loulouthi, squatting.

"Hi, says the little boy."

"What's your name?"

"Ivan. (If it isn't Ivan, Loulouthi would think that he looks like an Alexander, or a Peter)" The little boy looks at her boobs, and dare not stare into her eyes.

“Oh nice name. My name is Loulouthi.”

“How old are you?” Asks the little boy in a Eastern European accent.

“I’m 19. You?”

“Chetyre”, the little boy answered in Russian... “one, two, three, four. Yes, FOUR!” He counts with his tiny fingers. Upon counting to four in English, he looks up at Loulouthi’s face with a cute smile.

“Oh. So where are you heading to, Ivan?” This time Loulouthi switched to Russian, so that Ivan would better understand her.

“В Европу”, Ivan answers unwillingly.

“Я тоже”. Loulouthi smiles at him.

“Would you play with me? I’m so bored.”

“Yes. What would you like to play?”

“поезд.” The little boy grabs a train model from his bed, and starts trilling his pouty lips to make the “brrrrr” sound. However, he realizes that it doesn’t sound right, so later uses a “du du du” sound instead.

Loulouthi thought about this as she looked at the little boy’s back. He had the perfect short hairstyle that would make any muscular man handsome. She hallucinated that had the little boy born 15 years earlier, she would’ve fallen in love with him. She would’ve not dated anyone else, for she steadfastly belonged to him.

She immediately detested her wandering thoughts. “Belonging to someone” is such an ancient concept! Loulouthi is no slave. And thinking of a woman belonging to a man is so ethically corrupted—it gives her a sense of nausea—It has been tens of centuries since the total upheaval of women, and now nearly all men are seeking a stable life from relying upon a woman, even if that means sharing her with other husbands. Ahh, when will I ever be able to find an independent man? Or how can I make Konstantin less dependent on me? I was so tired of him. Thought Loulouthi. Or is marrying a man even a thing at all? Now women with high status just wanna marry women. They say men are barbaric.

Yet a sharp noise came from behind. It was probably the noise of carriages coming across a special barrier, or the noise of metallic surfaces rubbing each other.

Loulouthi had the natural talent of not having a heart attack, or more specifically, not be scared by things that scare others. But this time, she was scared. She was scared by the little boy's spooky face when he turned around to see what's making the sharp sound in the carriage. Oh suck, thought Loulouthi, that boy looks like a bitter melon. His face is distorted, green, and wrinkly. Now all her pinky-bubble-ish pedophilic dreams were gone. She was ashamed of herself.

But yeah, why was she here on the train across the great continent? Even Loulouthi herself didn't know the exact answer. Yes, she's traveling alone. Yes, she knew that the place she's heading to is called Castalia. Yes, she had money with her that'll promise she won't starve, at least not in a few months. But why? She had a good life back in Nil, Miezhdustan, where she was born and raised. She ranked well, if not the best, in the Computer Science Department of Miezhdu Institute of Technology, and she had so many wonderful projects going on. And she had a considerate boyfriend. Her life was desirable. She was the star of her family, and every young cousin and niece looked upon her as a role model. She had got a bright future.

She remembered her twelve-years-old brother's cry three days ago when he first discovered that she was to leave. He knew it by seeing her diary box empty—Loulouthi told Siddhartha that if she dies she would hand in her diaries to her best friend Oluwa beforehand—but Oluwa said in a phone call that she received nothing from Loulouthi. Sid, Loulouthi's young brother, was the only one that she wouldn't mind having her true plan being exposed to. He would keep it secret anyway. Only Sid knew that she left. Other people must have believed that Loulouthi died. Why? Because she set her studio on fire. Her studio was far away from anywhere her family and friends can easily access to, so people couldn't find out that she was gone until a few days later. It was somewhere like a cave for her, where she goes to once a week, usually spending her Saturday afternoon painting, writing songs, or playing with clay. There she felt safe.

She remembered Sid's cry, and mom's deadly stare at him. "Boys must not cry", said mom, "if you cry no girl would want you and you will be an old bare stick. And Sid, you are interrupting my work." Loulouthi was hiding outside the window when she heard this. By then she had already packed her suitcase, which was filled with minimal number of clothes, one toothbrush, one toothpaste, one soap, and eighteen diaries, all of different sizes and shapes. Loulouthi started writing diaries since the second grade, and she kept them all. On the day she left for Castalia, she shaved her head, put on heavy makeup, and spoke a distant accent of Miezhdu, her national

language, all due to the fear of being scrutinized and excruciated by her mom.

She checked things in her backpack, held her suitcase tight, and went onto the subway. She did come across an acquaintance, her high school friend, but due to her heavy makeup and unusual styles of walk, she was fortunately not recognized. All her fear for being recognized was exaggerated after all.

When she got to the central train station, she went to the restroom and cleaned up her makeup. She looked like herself again, except for the hair. Her hair was dark and straight, all the way to her hips. She used to make a long braid with her soft hair. Now her hair was as long as her nail, radiating from her head. It didn't look soft at all. Looking into the mirror, she had a strong feeling of loss. Why the hell did she ever decide to shave her head?

She had no time to think. Freshened up, Loulouthi walked confidently and quickly to the platform and got into the train.

That was how she came onto the train.

Now she was sitting by the window, looking at the stars. It was all dark outside now. Little snowflakes were not falling, but bumping onto the train window, and soon turning into little streams of water that run at the angle of about ten degrees to the horizontal.

Being alone made her sober. She was so drown in the community that she lost her own mind. Loulouthi missed being alone because it gave her the chance to breathe. How can one live without breathing? Yet it was so cold without her long hair. She felt insecure for not having long hair covering her body anymore. She blamed herself for cutting her hair, although she knew that she would be easily recognized if she kept that length of the hair and she may not be able to escape her crappy life like what she was doing now.

Now the whole train was asleep, Loulouthi felt bored again. The little boy was not shouting in the corridor any more. Loulouthi took out her Vidi (a device functionally similar to was called a phone in pre-AI modernity), and started listening to Hildegard von Bingen's music. As a non-religious person, Loulouthi happened to find peace in religious music, be it medieval Catholic or Hindu. She listened to the music with one ear on and one ear off as she walked to the restroom at the end of the carriage. A boy was standing there before her; he looked like a boy, not a man, thought Loulouthi. Later she would prove her assumption inaccurate.

The boy was playing sudoku on vidi. The vidi projected a simple screen in front of him. Black grids, white space, black numbers.

“Who writes diaries on paper anymore?” Loulouthi secretly mocked herself upon seeing the boy’s red vidi. “Who the suck even write diaries? Nowadays they just video record everything that they see from their eyes, and replay them if they need.”

She sluggishly looked at the boy’s sudoku screen, and noticed a mistake.

“Hey, you shouldn’t put a six here. If you put a six here that blank would have to be eight but there’s already an eight in that column,” Loulouthi couldn’t help to speak out.

“Oh yeah you’re right.” The boy’s eyes brightened.

Loulouthi noticed that the boy had a tattoo on his inner left arm. It’s a picture of a skinny man proudly holding the sky.

“Hey, may I ask you how you’d gotten that tattoo? Just curious.”

“Oh I went to a tattoo shop and got it.”

“No, I mean, why did you choose this picture? Does it mean anything to you?” Asked Loulouthi.

“Uh-huh. It means something to me. You know? In the twentieth century, The Heavenly Dynasty, or then called China, had a leader called Mao. He said ‘Women can hold up half the sky.’ So I thought, men can hold up half the sky too. And you know what? Not only muscular men, but also skinny ones. Some muscular men are the victims of women objectifying men, so I prefer skinnier ones. This tattoo is what I have to remind me of fulfilling my masculinist duties.”

“Oh.” Loulouthi frowned. “I prefer skinnier ones”—does that mean the boy in front of her is a predator for skinny boys? And “masculinist”—is that the equivalent of what is called “feminist” centuries ago? She became interested in this boy.

The restroom door opened. The boy paused his Sudoku, and walked into the restroom, leaving Loulouthi behind, listening to Hildergard. “Ky-rie—” She hymned quietly to one of the songs.

She started daydreaming again, it’s her ingrained habit.

It’s 3 a.m. and Loulouthi can’t fall asleep. She climbs down from her bed and walks to the restroom to pee. She wishes she’s wearing pajama, because first it would be more comfy, second it would be sexier. But it was too inconvenient to change into pajamas on a train!

As she tries to push open the restroom's door, a strong resistance arrives on her hand. Suddenly a warm and strengthful hand grabs hers. The moment was given a sacred flavor, and it seemed like the moment lasted forever.

Somehow she can't resist the hand, as if one couldn't resist falling into a black hole at the event horizon.

It's that sudoku boy. He looks fifteen and immature, but he's got beautiful lips. Beautiful lips. Lips that remind her of her thirteen year old's diary. And his voice is so coarse and tender. Then the two of them kissed and sucked like never before.

Oh, people centuries ago don't use the word "suck", thought Loulouthi. Not completely fell out of the way, but it had different meanings back then. Loulouthi took out her vidi and searched on whitegown.com, and found out that the ancient word for "suck" is "fuck". Oh, how peculiar I never knew this before, thought Loulouthi.

Loulouthi thought more about her daydream, "Sexual desire is such a impediment, just like hair. Wish I can get rid of both of them..." Loulouthi said to herself, "I must rid of corrupted thoughts and deeds and remain pure in spirit."

When the toilet door opened and the boy walked out, Loulouthi found herself staring into his gorgeous eyes. It almost felt like a crush. She hadn't had crushes in years.

"If I am a character in a novel, the readers must have thought that this novel has degraded into a Mary Sue soap-opera romance. Uh-uh. No. No. Bye, sexual desire. Sorry, the higher dimensional being that makes my life not deterministic but merely the result of YOUR WILL. Suck you, writer!" Loulouthi grimaced, as she pees straightly into the toilet. She usually stood while she pees, not for any particular reason, but just for fun. She found clicking her clitoris an art to master, from which she can control the direction of urination.

She released her anxiety as she shook her head left and right like a wet dog, instilling in her body vivid energy. She recalled a song verse that she wrote with Athena, her friend, but she wasn't able to sing too loud for it was late and people on the train were asleep.

Giant broccoli, standing in a line

Giant broccoli, shooting fireballs at the sky

*Giant broccoli, taking further math
Giant broccoli, playing avalon at night*

Its melody was as shocking and liberating as this song in the 21st century musical of Les Misérables:

*Do you hear the people sing?
Singing the songs of angry men?
It is the music of the people
Who will never be slaves again!
When the beating of your heart
Echoes the beating of the drums
There is a life about to start
When tomorrow comes!*

...

Indeed Loulouthi thought her melody for Giant Broccoli was inspired, if not derived, from the song above. What she was trying to convey through the Giant Broccoli song shares similar environment with the Les Misérables song. She was inspired when she saw lined-up trees in the city, and trees look like powerless passive giant broccolis, which in fact can symbolize people, or the so called “masses”, living a paralyzed life, a factorized, enslaved life. Or on the other hand, giant broccoli can be analyzed without so much negative connotations—it can be the proletariats marching across and shooting fireballs at those that oppress them. They know that knowledge is power and rest is necessary, so they challenge themselves unto the motto “work hard, play hard” by studying further math and not succumbing to the loss of social life or entertainment.

The music of Hildegard instilled a sense of holiness in Loulouthi. Thinking about the concept of “masses” versus “the chosen” or “the saint” always made her feel uncomfortable, and so does thinking about eternity. “If life in heaven is perfectly good, and life in hell perfectly bad, what’s the difference between those two eternal lifestyles? I’ll feel trapped both ways.” Thought Loulouthi. The perfectness in Hildegard’s music aroused Loulouthi’s rationality as well as disgust. Or, it merely serves as a mirror, by which she sees both sides of herself.

Now disgust overwhelmed the feeling of rationality; Loulouthi wanted to escape. She felt like being trapped in a tall cylinder room with blue windows, where there is smoke, fart, and the smell of leather seats in the air, and the oily taste of Tibetan buttered tea in her dry mouth. She would resurrect, if and only if someone gave her a cup of kumquat lemon tea...

How ironic it is! When she decided to escape from her university, family, and all sorts of relationships, she never actually imagined the details of her life after boarding the train. What she imagined was a utopia, a heaven, which was actually only a conjecture resulting from her deadly needs to escape. Now she had got nowhere to escape to: she has already rebelled once, and had nothing else to rebel against. What she now faced she must bear.

Loulouthi felt sad as she walked back to her bed, 9C. It meant that her bed is the upper bed on the right in the 9th chamber. It also meant that she could lie on her bed, belly down, and enjoy the scenery outside the window. But since it is night time, there is not actually anything to see except for the moon and the stars.

Loulouthi's chamber was next to the bitter melon little boy's, the tenth chamber. There, the boy was listening to his mom's story as he fell asleep.

Loulouthi was as fortunate as the bitter melon boy. Though the bed opposite hers was empty, two men from the lower beds in her chamber were conversing quietly in a rather interesting way. Loulouthi always felt safe listening to people talking while she was ready for sleep.

2

The Househusband

Loulouthi listens to Rock and Scissor's conversation about Scissor's private life.

Background music: 1st Movement of Moonlight Sonata, Beethoven

These were two middle-aged men. The one that sat under Loulouthi's bed was called by the nickname Scissor while the one sitting opposite to Scissor was nicknamed Rock. Rock seemed older than Scissor, his hair grey and his eyebrows always frowning.

Scissor wore a light blue shirt inside his suit. He was holding an embroidered fan in his left hand and a vidi in his right hand. On his bed were a large brown bag, a plate of cold pizza, and a dozen of manga magazines. Under his bed were a huge fluorescent yellow suitcase. His curly rosy hair was falling everywhere; you can find some from the sticky bubble gum on his tie, as well as some on his pizza and some on Rock's feet. Although Scissor was on a train, he still hanged heart-shaped fairy lights around the top of his space. The light shining from his bed made the outside seem even darker. Loulouthi couldn't imagine that a guy like Scissor is wearing a suit on an overnight train.

In contrast, Rock, the brother of Scissor's wife Electra, had nothing but a black backpack under his bed. He wore a grey gown and a pair of slippers. While Scissor was speaking gibberish, Rock was staring at him and rubbing his beard.

"No one knows you are in your forties, Scissor. You are still the old you, haha!" Finally said Rock, smiling.

Scissor seemed eager to interrupt, "Who wants to be over forty years old! Did you know that Electra was planning to get a third husband? Once a man is old he loses value! It has always been like this. Listen to me, Rock, if you don't make yourself look young when you still can, you will regret!" He leaned in and whispered in Rock's ear.

Rock sighed, while Scissor kept on saying, "Rock, look at your hair! It's all grey! And it looks so dry! I bet your wife doesn't like the texture."

“I once had the same logic that you have. That was, eh, twenty years ago. I last met you twenty years ago, right? Heh heh. Indeed we haven’t seen each other in a long time. It was all thanks to Tom that we’ve met again.” Said Rock.

“Thanks to Tom?” Upon hearing his brother-husband’s name, Scissor felt jealous and irritated. Tom was 24 when he became Electra’s second husband, and since then, eleven years had passed. Eleven years with extreme humiliation for Scissor.

Scissor continued, “Let me tell you secretly, I won’t tell this to anyone but you: Tom is the person that made every piece of my life miserable. Thank God that now my son is in college. When Sorano was in high school, every day I had to make three meals for him, his mom, Tom, and little Electra. But Electra and Tom did not take care of little Electra at all. Electra was too busy, and Tom was having an affair with an older, richer woman. Electra never discovered that and kept sleeping with him every other night. It has been eleven years since Tom came, and Electra has never stepped into my room in eleven years.”

“I felt like an old nanny, but only hired for nothing, for nothing in return at all! Nothing except for the title ‘father’. You see, it has always been the custom that all children in the family call the first husband ‘father’ and the rest of the husbands ‘uncles’. But how is this as valuable for a man as being cherished by a woman? After all, as men in this world, all we want is to get a good ending. Tom’s got both Electra and his lover. I’ve got Sorano and little Electra. But alas, both children are going to run away when they grow up. I hope they will remember their old father and treat him better than their uncle Tom!”

“I know why Electra abandoned me. Rock, you’ve probably never heard about it but twenty years ago, on our wedding night, Electra almost broke up with me. I panicked. If it were not for her I would still have many followers; but I chose her because I admired her wisdom, and I thought her wisdom could bring more wealth to the family than anything in the world. But back to the topic, She almost broke up with me because... Because I could not grow a beard, and that was a shame to her family. I had a goatee but twenty years ago, a beard was the symbol of manhood. People behind my back were cursing me because I couldn’t have a beard. Now I still can’t grow a beard—it’s a genetic thing—but I’ve also shaved my goatee because now even Electra doesn’t care!”

“So eleven years ago, when I was 37 and Electra 33, she brought home Tom,

and had little Electra with him. Tom made Electra proud, because not so many women in town could afford a second husband with a master degree. And what made her more proud was that Tom's mother was the mayor. Tom couldn't grow a beard neither, but it was not the trend anymore, you know. Electra liked Tom more than me not only because unlike me, he had a daughter with him, but also because he was younger, and more energetic in bed."

"So I made many surprises to Electra throughout the years since Tom came. Sometimes I even took viagra in hope of her ever returning to me. I set up candles, booked travels, made big dinners, all wishing to rekindle our romance, but Electra... She detested my surprises and called them a waste of time and money. You know what? That was when I started to gradually feel that I actually know very little of her. Before Tom came, I always thought she liked older men, but Tom's appearance proved me wrong. And now, she's soon gonna marry a 16 year old boy whose facial hair hasn't even grown much! By then Tom will feel how I felt, haha."

Rock took his feet off the ground, crossed his legs so he's in the meditation position, and straightened his back. He looked out at the window and took a deep breath, "Scissor, don't be so sharp. It's our destiny. I used to be as sharp as you, but I've grown more rounded. After all, we can't get everything in life—we are just men—and isn't having someone calling you 'dad' better than nothing? In the end, career, beauty, money, everything—nothing matters, except for our family. It is our destiny."

"But..." Scissor hesitated. His lips were in the shape of pronouncing a "ku" while his eyes moved around anxiously. He wasn't even fully unbuttoned when he started taking off his coat; he was so quick as if he was scrutinized by a police.

Rock asked, "What? Say what you want to say, you are safe with me."

"Umm... It's too hot here... Could..." Scissor stared at Rock's slippers.

"Could you help me?" Asked Scissor.

"Help you with what?"

"I mean, you, you are Electra's brother, and I think you have some power to change my destiny, right?" Scissor uttered, moving the minimal number of muscles on his face.

Rock frowned even more. When he stared into Scissor's face, Scissor dared not lift his vision.

“Scissor, you are over forty, and I am not supposed to help with family matters at this age,” Rock said, “You see, Electra was my sister, but I haven’t seen her in ages, especially after she split with our mom. She was so resolute. Even when we were young, she never listened to me, so what’s the point, Scissor? I don’t see the point. I don’t think I can help you convince Electra to treat you nicer. I hate to say this, but it’s your own battle, and you have to fight it alone.”

It seemed like Scissor had something to say, but Rock was tired and told his brother-in-law that they should sleep now and they could talk more both later on the train and once they arrived. So Scissor cleaned his bed unwillingly and stared at Rock’s sleeping face. On his face, Scissor saw his wife. They had the same big boney nose and thin red lips. Rock slept on his right side, so Scissor could see him well enough. Scissor stared at Rock’s face for a long, long while. Then he softly lifted Rock’s blanket upward so that Rock’s shoulders were well covered. Then he read some manga and fell asleep. Though snoring, he slept soundly.

3

The Memories

Loulouthi recalls memories with her mother, Ubuntu and Konstantin, respectively.

Background music: Lady, Regina Spektor

Ubuntu used to tell Loulouthi, “It’s the society that made people heterosexual.”

Loulouthi’s short hair reminded herself of Ubuntu, the teacher that she once so venerated, but now feel ambivalent about. In her Loulouthi was seeking a mother, a mother that would pacify Loulouthi and tell her, “everything will be okay.”

Loulouthi’s own mother wasn’t what she wanted. As her name suggested, Regina lived her life as if she’s a queen, always giving orders and never succumbing to anyone. You may think, well, being a princess is nice, right? But it wasn’t for Loulouthi. All her life she dreaded her mother, for Regina was squeezing her as if she was sand. And Loulouthi was sand. Regina made Loulouthi gradually lose herself, every minute and every second.

The only time that Loulouthi saw Regina cry was when she was five years old. At that time, Loulouthi’s grandfather died of heart attack just one week ago, and Regina also had a misfortune in her career—hurricane destructed her company’s storage house and killed one employee, and Regina, the boss, had to deal with everything.

Loulouthi didn’t understand how serious the problem Regina was facing, and she didn’t know that the employee killed was Regina’s favorite one, but she didn’t want to see her mom being so devastated. So she did what she could, that is, to bring a cup of water and some snacks to her mother’s desk. But surprisingly, Regina became angry on her, and screamed: “Don’t—bother—me! You’re being annoying!”

At that moment, all Loulouthi ever felt was being denied. She wanted so eagerly to help her mom, but her effort ended in vain.

In Ubuntu Loulouthi was seeking the mother that never was there. Loulouthi, the flower, was seeking a big tree that looked like a giant broccoli

who would protect her during rainstorms and allow her to thrive during sunny days.

Ubuntu was Loulouthi's advisor in college. Initially, they met once a week to help Loulouthi with her academic and life decisions. Throughout time, Loulouthi started to feel a strong connection with Ubuntu. Loulouthi understood Ubuntu from two sides.

One side was Ubuntu as a guide.

Though born into a religious environment, Loulouthi had never had any holy feelings with her religion. More still, when she read the Holy Kitab, she felt a strong disgust—she could feel something bitter on her palate, as if she hadn't drunk water for days. She had always been struggling with her internal conflict, until Ubuntu told her that it was okay to be an atheist.

Ubuntu was in Castalia when she was in her twenties. Castalia used to be the highest academic institution in the world, and the most mysterious one—you would expect that in a post-AI world everything would be transparent, but it's not. Rumor has it that Castalians are preferred by God, and that they live longer, but it's largely unsubstantiated, since not a lot of people who go into Castalia leave it later. Ubuntu was a rare exception. It was Ubuntu who told Loulouthi the secret that people in Castalia don't actually believe in the Holy Kitab. This was a strike for Loulouthi.

Ubuntu told Loulouthi further that there's a popular mythology in Castalia: originally there are two different secret genders of people on earth, some being the Shunnyas and the others being the Ek. Eks largely outweighed Shunnyas. An Ek is born with an extra bone in the back of one of the ears, which makes them closer to certainty; a Shunnyas is born without the extra bone in the back of the ear, which makes them closer to uncertainty. For ages, Eks and Shunnyas uncovered their ears and interbred, until Eks got so tired that they went deaf. Later, somehow Eks turned into men and Shunnyas turned into women, and since initially only Shunnyas were allowed into Castalia, now only women are allowed by tradition.

It is said that not all the people in the world believe in the Holy Kitab, and for whatever they believe in, they believe that Castalia is on their religion's side.

Back to Ubuntu as a guide—at any rate, Ubuntu made Loulouthi proud of her gender and her agnostic attitude.

Another side was Ubuntu as a witch.

This is a simple but hard truth—Ubuntu bewildered Loulouthi and they had sex. But of course Loulouthi would not agree that she was bewildered.

TEN MONTHS AGO

Spring was almost coming. Loulouthi stared outside her window and saw light snow falling down. She felt lighthearted after finishing her math test. Put herself in the blue sweater she made, she then put on her beige downcoat and wore the black leather boots. As she tied her shoelaces she laughed at her attempt: she is going to Ubuntu's apartment for the first time!

She took a taxi and told the taxi driver that she was going to meet a friend, and it's urgent. The taxi driver believed her.

She walked meticulously down the alley and came to a garden. But spring hasn't come yet so everything was not alive. She saw Ubuntu in her sunglasses, waving at her at the gate. She looked as if it was not a secret.

Loulouthi followed Ubuntu to her apartment, and Ubuntu told her: "Your philosophy professor live just four floors above."

She shivered.

Ubuntu's apartment was warm and cozy. There were fairy lights as well as bread that just got out of oven. There were also candles everywhere, some of which are put into black skulls.

"I'm making bread for another student of mine," Ubuntu said, "she was a student here eight years ago. She's coming here to visit me right after this."

"This?" Loulouthi uttered. She was thinking if Ubuntu meant their agreed-upon sex.

"Well, don't tell anyone that you came here, otherwise I'll lose my job." Said Ubuntu, lightly, as if nothing mattered, "You don't have to do it, it's your choice."

Loulouthi looked at the beautiful candles, and said, "Emm... I want to do it. And... are you a witch?"

Ubuntu smiled, "You'll know." And she grabbed Loulouthi's waist. Her hands were soft. They leaned in and started kissing. Loulouthi never kissed someone with such full lips. Ubuntu moved her hand on Loulouthi's breast, as if she was rubbing a dough.

Loulouthi wasn't moving and Ubuntu asked her what's wrong.

“It’s just... I’ve never done this before.”

“Oh, you’re a virgin?”

“No. I’ve never done this with a teacher.”

“Well, you’ll get used to it.” Ubuntu smiled again, and suggested that they go upstairs.

Loulouthi forgets how it went, but she remembers that Ubuntu was licking her and they both looked at their naked bodies in the mirror.

“You’re so black.” Said Loulouthi, almost losing contact with reality. She pressed Ubuntu’s head closer to her pussy. Her short hair was so kinky and a little grey.

“You’re so white.” Said Ubuntu. Her eyes was shining with purple lights.

Loulouthi defended in her heart, I’m not white! I’m yellow or brown.

Now

How political it was! Loulouthi thought, thinking about what she and Ubuntu said. She did not know what the norm was like in the past or what it will be in the future, but she knows that in the present, the norm is the black woman, and everything else is measured against that ideal. She thought about all the black magic she did with her, and all the sex she had with her. She almost forgets what her face looks like. She heard that she is engaged, with a woman in her twenties she met overseas. Yet it is 1a.m. in the morning and Loulouthi can’t fall asleep.

She can’t help but compare Ubuntu and her mother. She turns her vidi into flashlight and writes down in her diary:

My mother is a narcissist. Ubuntu is an altruist.
 My mother is a workaholic. Ubuntu likes to enjoy life.
 My mother has no taste for music. Ubuntu sings jazz.
 My mother doesn’t love me. Ubuntu loves me (?)
 My mother likes Konstantin. Ubuntu dislikes him.
 My mother has grey hair and so does Ubuntu.
 My mother doesn’t understand me.:(Ubuntu does.:

...

Whenever someone asked Loulouthi who her first love is, she would just make up a name. But she knows her first love was her mother. She loved

her mother more than she loved anyone or anything in the world. But all her mother returned to her was, “Don’t bother me, I’m busy.”

When Loulouthi needed help with homework, her mom said she’s busy. When Loulouthi wanted to tell her mom her new invention, she said she’s busy. When Loulouthi was about to confess to her mom that she’s in love with a boy, she said she’s busy. When Loulouthi wanted to plan her birthday party, she said she’s busy. It seems like Regina’s daughter was too trivial compared with her work.

“Maybe I should just stop thinking about my mom.” Thought Loulouthi.

She turns her diary into page 111, and sees a giant broccoli on the page.

“Now what’s that supposed to mean?” She talked to herself.

That was five weeks ago, when Loulouthi had a huge fight with her boyfriend Konstantin over phone. Konstantin was in Amharic Queendom to do his anthropology research for his senior thesis. He blocked her vidi.

After a long while, he told her that he needed to split into two personalities in order to take care of himself.

“So which two people are you?” Asked Loulouthi, curiously.

“The giant broccoli and the flower,” said Konstantin, “sorry if I’m betraying you.”

Loulouthi realized that he’s been peeping her diary since before they went onto long distance relationship. She got angry.

“So you’ve seen my diaries.” Said Loulouthi.

“Yes. I’m sorry.” He cleared his throat. “I mean I’m betraying you because now the Giant Broccoli part of me is taking care of the Flower part of me. And Giant Broccoli loves the Flower.”

“Hmm. So you’ve grasped the whole point of my metaphor,” said Loulouthi.

“Yes. We are becoming a threesome. I am introducing you to my Giant Broccoli, and my Flower.” Said Konstantin, sweeping.

4

The Meetup

Loulouthi starts her conversation with Asano.

Background music: Thinking Easy, Sainkho Namtchylak

It's over 1 am and Loulouthi climbs down her bed for a walk. She sees that Sudoku boy sitting in the corridor, staring at the moon.

“Hey, what's your name?”

“Asa. I'm from Nippon.”

“Ah. I'm Loulouthi from Miezh dustan.” Loulouthi says, thinking about how people in Sunorigin like to call their country Nippon. It does sound better, right? Well, a lot of countries are called differently in their native language and in other languages. Amerika calls itself the United States, and there are 63 states from the northwestern Alaska all the way to the southeastern Florida. Heavenly Dynasty calls itself Zhongguo, which means the middle country. But Miezh dustan just calls itself Miezh dustan, because it is surrounded by countries instead of ocean and because of its traditional value of cultural exchange.

Somehow Loulouthi lifts her hand and scans Asa's face with her vidi. Her vidi then shows his name: Asano. “I knew that his name would end in a ‘no’ ”, Loulouthi thinks.

“Why, you don't trust me? Scan me anyway, I have nothing to hide. Uh, Miezh dustan is a good place—a lot of religious people, huh?”

“Yeah, you would imagine.”

“I hate it that all boys in Nippon have the same ending in our names. People say we all have ‘no’ because it signifies us being a possession of our mother. Usually our mothers pick characteristics they want for us and add a “no” behind.” Asano says.

“So, are people in Sunorigin still abiding to the one-child policy?”

“Most of us are,” Asano pushes up his glasses, “you wouldn't want to lose your job and your life expectancy promise. You know how people are discriminated against by the entire system if they have more than one kids

per family? It's the shame culture thing, people from guilt culture won't understand."

"That's interesting. By the way, would you like to know something else interesting?"

"Yeah?" Asano gives a wondering expression.

"I think I just had a crush on you." Loulouthi says plainly, as if she is a robot.

Asano laughs, "Wow. You just ruined the conversation. But um, I feel flattered."

"Tell me more about you."

"Well, I am Asano, apparently. I'm from Nippon. I'm 16. I'm a high school drop out and I'm on this train because my mother dragged me here. She wants me to go to Factory O in Ellatha so that I could go to Castalia. My favorite music style is duo; I'm fascinated by bird sounds. Have you ever heard of Lingo? He's my favorite duo musician. And my vidi is sucking broken." Asano took his vidi off his right ear and breathes in.

"What is Factory O?" Asks Loulouthi, feeling a bit repellent of Asano's pompous speech style and intrigued at the same time.

"It's the best factory in the world that turns men into women. We copied Factory O in Nippon and called it Factory N, but there were many side effects for people doing operations there. Honestly, I don't want to change my sex, but my mother wants me to go to Castalia." Asano says nonchalantly. He does not tell Loulouthi that he plans to kill his mother on this train.

"Of course you wouldn't want to change your sex. That is cheating!" Loulouthi exclaimed, "But I do want to go to Castalia. My, um, friend, told me that Castalia is a beautiful place. There I could study Math, Philosophy, Physics, Psychology, Computer Science, and all the other classical subjects, as well as younger subjects like Glasperlenspiel and Viditecture. I could be friends with the wise and become a real strong woman. It's like... a utopia for me."

Asano stares at her weirdly, as if she is from Mars.

"You know, Castalia isn't what you think it's like. Castalia is hell."

Loulouthi shivers with disbelief. "No, you are totally getting it wrong. Have you ever been there? No you surely haven't, because males are not allowed into Castalia. No. Ubuntu went there and left, and she told me it's great.

She has never been into such an academically concentrating place since she left.”

“Well. You’re wrong. In fact, Castalia is—for—slaves. And the person you mentioned has no reason to leave Castalia had it been truly a good place.” Asano leans in and whispers in her ear.

“How come? There are no slaves anymore. It’s the 23rd century.” Not again, Loulouthi sighs. She has heard so many people say evil about Castalia just because they are jealous of those who get into it.

“People in Castalia don’t have freedom, simply because it is perceived as a perfect utopia.” Asano says, looking at the red vidi in his left hand. Though broken, it still projects on the window the current time: 1:25 a.m.

People in Castalia don’t have freedom, simply because it is perceived as a perfect utopia. No freedom, utopia. Castalia. Loulouthi thinks, this does not make sense.

“It’s good that you don’t want to change sex,” says Loulouthi, “you will be looked down upon as a trans woman. You will be living a double life. Even if you manage to get into Castalia they are still gonna discriminate against you because you are born a male. Males are just... so sucked up. I mean, the males in Miezhdustan. I don’t know about Nippon so I can’t generalize.”

“Huh, seems like you hold a lot of matriarchal values.” Asano comments.

“It’s just natural. Our most important text said so, so poeple would naturally believe. Let me show you the first chapter of Holy Kitab—” Loulouthi spins her vidi around and said, “It’s *the* book that leads people’s thinking in Miezhdustan, though I don’t believe in it.” Her vidi projects a screen on the window which shows:

God said, let there be Tao. And there was Tao, and Tao was under the guise of God: God created Herself. Then in numerous waves of Tao, She created the sky, the earth, and Nüwa. God created Nüwa to resemble Herself. Settled on the earth, Nüwa felt lonely, so God kindly made her fertile. Nüwa took water from the Indus river to create Izanami, for she knew that water resembles the highest virtue; and took soil from the bank to create Izanagi, for Nüwa had already depleted the river. Then Nüwa inhaled air from Izanami’s bottom, until she was perfectly alive; and Izanagi as well, though its bottom was inhaled too much that the tunnel was drawn out into a serpent and two apples.

“Though I don’t believe in the Holy Kitab, it does make sense. The male gender is screwed up. My mother always recited a paragraph from the politics textbook she was told to learn in elementary school:”

God never meant to create the male gender; it was from the beginning a huge mistake. Many people consider men as dirt-made, barbaric, animalistic walking-dildos, who must be guarded against their ominous instincts and lewd impulses. They shall always be under the control of women—who are always holy.

“And you know how men in Miezhdustan please their lovers? They do penile subincision. They cut open their penis all across the urethra, some of them bleed so much that they faint... Masters in sadomasochism like to see their slaves with a subincised dick so that they cannot be sucked by another master’s vagina...”

Asano interrupts, “that’s disgusting. Ew. But it wasn’t like this 200 years ago, when women can be raped. It was only 200 years ago and people have forgotten everything?”

“What do you mean? How can a woman get raped? Only men can get raped, no?” Loulouthi thinks about the sex education in college she sneaked into (it was only for boys), and the anti-assault workshops. She cannot think of a way that a woman can be raped. After all, the vaginal sphincter can be strong enough to break the erect penis and even if it does not, the vagina secretes a special liquid that harms the glans and kills the semen. No one gets pregnant unless they turn on the button on their belly. It has always been women who take advantage of men during sex, but not the opposite. Men are just punished for their sexual desire. If they are too horny, they are called sticks; if they are too frigid, they are called softies. If they try to do something to women, they have a thousand way to lose their penises and balls. That’s why men are born to be so timid.

Asano sighs, not wanting to talk to Loulouthi for a while. He thinks, “she is such a misoandrist. Maybe she would treat me differently if I am a woman.”

Loulouthi, on the other hand, feels like Asano was projecting the giant broccoli figure on her. It feels like that he is like a small child rebelling for liberty. But she is not responsible for taking care of Asano. She just knew him. Asano speaks as if he is really a small child, so confident, like a butterfly flying around or a little puppy rolling in the meadow. It makes her feel like she is supposed to act as the meadow that embraces the puppy. How could she have had a crush on such a young and naive boy?

“Let’s switch topic.” Loulouthi finally says, after the long break of silence. “I suggest we talk about your trip to Factory O and Castalia. So how can you go to Castalia as a trans woman?”

“I don’t really want to talk about that; it’s my mother’s business.” Asano backs up a bit puts on the hat of his hoodie.

“Seems like you have a little plan going on in your brain that you don’t want to tell me. Ha.” Loulouthi feels like Asano has something that makes him insecure.

“No, nothing. Not really.” Asano says, thinking about his plan to kill his mother with the drug he bought. “I’m just thinking about my bleak future.”

Asano looks out of the window while Loulouthi takes measure of him. He looks determined and ambivalent at the same time. Though shorter and skinnier than Loulouthi, he looks rough, not delicate. Worst of all, he stinks. Loulouthi thinks that he probably hasn’t taken a shower in a week, with all the dandruff in his medium-length curly black hair and the eyeshit and his oily ear. This is the first time she observe him closely. And he is in a yellow sweater with a black patch, a pair of dark blue jeans and old black sneakers. There is a large part of food stain on his sweater and a couple of old yellow rice on his jeans. What a sluggish boy!

“What do you think Castalia is? The place for the good and the rich? Or the place where the rich *buy* their way into slavery as well as turning other people into slaves?” Asano finally speaks.

Loulouthi clears her throat and says, “I don’t know why you associate Castalia with slavery. Castalia is the place for liberty. But yeah, I’m interested how you get your information about Castalia. Castalia is even farther away from Sunorigin than from Miezhdustan!”

Loulouthi thinks, Sunorigin isn’t even on the great continent; you’d have to take a ferry to Heavenly Dynasty to get on the cross-continent train. After Heavenly Dynasty did the steel colonization around the world, taking a train become much cheaper and faster than taking a plane. Loulouthi did not choose the train because of its price though. She just wanted to look at the scenery and have a sense of ceremony.

5

The Steal

Asano's mother steals. Asano recalls a memory with her.

Background music: Si la Photo est Bonne, Barbara

Asano's mother wakes up from her fake sleep and sneaks out of her chamber. Then as she moves agilely through the carriages, she sniffs around without making any noise, like a cat about to catch a rat.

She goes a long way until she arrives at a chamber in the 9th carriage and sees two lower beds with people sleeping soundly. A fat black backpack is right next to the bed on the left. There are many buttons pinned on the front side of the backpack, and with the dim moonlight, Asano's mother sees that there is only one white one, while the others are all black. She carefully kneels down beside the bag. As soon as she zips the bag open, a kid from the upper deck starts whispering with a sleepy voice, "What are you doing with mommy's bag?"

Asano's mother takes her hand back and sneaks out of the chamber. Then she goes to the next one. There are four people snoring in this chamber, all in different styles. The one on upper left bunk is snoring like a pig, with long intervals and very loud noise. The one on the lower left bunk snores gently and shortly; her snoring is like music with beautiful rhythms. The one on the upper right bunk snores with her mouth open, and he sounds thirsty. The last one, the one on the lower right bunk snores like an elephant, loud and steady.

"Good that they are snoring," Asano's mother thinks, "They are as asleep as dead. No one would notice me."

She does not aim for the suitcases, but only for the backpacks, since important things are all in the backpacks. Out of the four people she can see, three of them are wearing their vidi, and one of them, the one on the upper right bunk, puts his vidi on the metal tube sidebar of the bed. Asano's mother quickly takes it off, without making any noise. It is a brown and yellow vidi, with a solid screen around the size of a passport photo. Just like any other vidi, the screen is connected to a malleable ring, which makes it to be clipped on tubes, fingers, wrists, and ears.

After taking the vidi, she looks around for bags. Upon seeing two people on the lower deck holding their bags in sleep, she smiles and shakes her head.

“So stingy. Hehe.” Asano’s mother thinks, with air coming out her nose in rhythm, since she’d better not laugh out loud.

She lays out the ladder that leads to the upper left deck, and sees that the one who snores like a pig has her purse by her feet. Happily, Asano’s mother opens the purse, as quietly as possible, and finds a wallet.

“No, you must be kidding me.” The woman who snores like a pig suddenly stops snoring and speaks. She kicks her foot on the wall twice, and stretches her body. Then she goes back to snoring.

“Thank God she is just talking in sleep,” Asano’s mother thinks, while taking out cash from the wallet. There are around 10,000 rubles in this woman’s wallet, and 2000 yuan. Asano’s mother takes out about three fourth of the money, tucks the purse in the quilt, and quietly climbs down the ladder and push the ladder back into its folded form.

“Not enough, I should find more.” Asano’s mother thinks, while tucking the money she just stole into the pocket of her coat. She’s really bulky, so no one would notice that there are a few extra pieces of paper money in her pockets. No one who see the vidi either.

Then she sees a pineapple man standing in front of her.

“What ya doin’?” She whispers, looking stunned.

“What ya doin’ here on train?” She frowns.

“I’m telling you not to steal. Put back what you took.” The man with hair of green leaves and a pineapple body speaks.

“No way. I ain’t gonna survive with no money.”

“I said, **PUT THEM BACK**. Will you?”

“No. Unless you lemme touch ya. Why ya never lemme approach ya?”

“Because I am not real.”

“No, you are real. Who else am I talking to then?”

The pineapple man’s voice shivers and his image becomes unsteady.

“You see? I am transparent.” The pinapple man says.

“I don’t wanna talk.” Asano’s mother says, walking away, back to her chamber. She sees Asano sitting by the corridor just outside their chamber.

“Asano, why don’t ya sleep?”

“What are you doing, mother? Stealing other people’s stuff again?”

“I ain’t stealin’, I ain’t no thief. I just gotta do somethin’ to put food on my table.”

“Fine. You do what you want to do.” Asano says, nonchalantly.

Then Asano’s mother gets into the bed and starts gloating over her victory. It is rare for people to carry cash in their wallet. It’s a tradition abandoned two centuries ago. Cash is only for rich people to fool around with. She feels glad that she happened to steal from rich people.

She caresses the wallet again and again, while hymning a cold melody in the dark. She loves the leather texture of the wallet, and the smell of cash. While she was rummaging the purse, she was not anticipating a wallet—she was hoping for getting some cigarettes or achievement tokens. People usually bring their tokens with them when they travel, so they could get certain VIP services. Twenty years ago, when the tokens were just invented, they were virtual ones on vidi, but then the aristocrats all around the world developed real tokens, and then gradually tokens were popularized and now almost everyone have a couple of tokens. Tokens are made out of ores from the Mars, and since the central government of the earth controls access to Mars, only the aristocrats, who are in charge of the government, gets to make tokens. Tokens are granted by the central government to people with great achievements. Throughout the two decades that achievement tokens have existed, there has been an huge inflation. Twenty years ago you could trade a “bookworm” token with a husband with PhD degree, but now a “bookworm” token just worth an Apple reading pad. Now the most valuable token are those with vacuum in the middle. It is said that they have something to do with your chi, and can make you live longer.

It is weird how that woman did not carry tokens with her but a wallet full of cash. Cash is a symbol of wealth and erudition, because cash can be easily fortified, and those who are brave enough to carry cash must be very rich and experienced in the field.

Asano’s mother takes out the cash and licks it. She loves it so much. Although it is just a little amount of money compared with what Asano’s fiancée has given them, it is still legit money.

Asano feels very bored. He hasn’t been so bored in a long time. At home, he always had to do schoolwork, to write songs, to sell music, to repair bicycles, and to talk with Ek. He also had to cook for his mother, while her mother sits

there having hallucinations and talking to the air, and occasionally screams in her sleep.

Asano and her mother lived in seven apartments. Each time they got driven away by the landlord, they move in a shabbier apartment with a meaner landlord. The mother and the son live in the same bedroom, and share the bathroom, living room, kitchen, and dining room with four other house-mates. The longest time they lived in the same apartment was four years. That was from when Asano was 8 and 12. The shortest span was five weeks, when the landlord had a distant relative come by and forced them to leave in a day. They left most of their stuff at that apartment, because they had no where to go. They slept on streets for three weeks, with big bags.

For one time Asano's mother was having severe paranoia. She thought someone was stalking her and planning to kill her. And Asano believed it was real for a while, until he realized that that man was the pineapple man his mother always saw. She has been seeing this pineapple man for eleven years now, but according to her, the pineapple man never ages.

"Why didn't they force you to give up on me when I was little? You should have been sent to a mental hospital." Asano asked, while holding a wok to do some stir fry veggies.

"Because I was tough. I wanted to keep you. You were my hope, and to some extent, my only valuable property." Asano's mother adds salt in the wok.

"That's too much salt, mother."

"I just want to tell you that I'm the one in control. They say I've been too nice to you. You are spoiled. If you don't eat the greens, I'll eat them, and you get to starve." She takes the ribs soup out of the pressure cooker.

"Fine."

"One day you will marry a rich woman and be happy ever after. You won't have to wait for a month to eat pork ribs for once. You could get them every day."

"You never asked me if I would like to do so. You always force stuff to happen on me."

"You are just a typical teenager, trying to rebel for your freedom! But what I'm doing is for your ultimate concern—your happiness. You just haven't experienced it yet."

“You are saying so because you didn’t have me a sister so I’ve got no one to depend on when I grow older, except for if you marry me off to someone.”

“Just get it over with. Marriage is not something you would like to think about seriously. It’s not men’s place to think; let your future wife do all the thinking.”

Asano took the veggies in the wok out on a plate, “Mother, please show some respect for me. At least a little. I’m not like those boys who think about marriage all the time. I’m an independent young man. I have good grades in school. I’m gonna have a bright future.”

“Only if you marry right,” Asano’s mother said firmly.

Part II

The heaviness of lightness

6

The Movie

The train stops. Asano and Loulouthi starts talking again. Asano recalls an unpleasant memory. Then they watch a movie and Asano realizes that the two people in Loulouthi's chamber are his (according to his mother's plan) brother-in-law and husband-brother.

Background music: ???

The train slows down, and then it stops. People are still sleeping, but the speaker on the train starts to make loud noises, and in a few seconds the noises turn into human voice. "The train has stopped due to a technical problem. Now we are trying to connect with the headquarters; we have mechanical engineers fixing the problem and you will soon be told how long you will wait until the train moves again."

People on the train wake up, and start complaining. Scissor lifts his legs and kicks the metal skeleton of Loulouthi's stack while saying, "Well well well. It's all good now. I was having such a bad dream and the broadcast just saved me!" Rock was facing the wall but now turns around, hushes Scissor, and stares at the ceiling of the chamber. The ceiling is white and there is one white light bulb up there.

In another chamber, Asano's mother turns around, tightens her quilt, and curses from her bed, "damn it! Who knows how long we will be stuck here, in the middle of nowhere? This is sucking ridiculous. We paid for the service and now the train is not working? I had to work extra hours for eight months to get the sucking train tickets!"

Standing in the hallway, Asano is occupied with his plan to kill his mother. Good that the train has stopped. Maybe he will not kill her now that they won't get to Factory O on time? But he still has to kill her. He hates her so much; they had such a complicated history. She hurt him so much with her close watch on the wallet and her always speaking mouth.

Loulouthi is thinking that being becomes nothingness when time is invalidated. The train and the time they have to wait for an unpromised length. Hopefully the train will move soon; she can't wait to get to Castalia. When she had anxiety, she easily got bored, and she could not focus on anything.

Now she is anxious but not bored. She is looking forward to her new adventure in Castalia. In order to become a Castalian she has to pass all the tests at the entrance, including a one week long final camp with interview. She is confident that she will get in. At least, Ubuntu told her that they would be glad to have her.

The old lady at the beginning of the story is sneezing and doesn't seem to know the train has stopped. The little bittermelon boy who was scared by the old lady is also asleep.

They wait for four hours and the train has not yet moved. Neither has they ever announced how long the passengers are going to wait. But every time the woman speaks in the radio Asano's mother get more anxious. Asano thinks about not killing his mother.

After painting a few artworks with her vidi pencil on the wooden pad, Loulouthi still can't fall asleep. Somehow Loulouthi wants to go back to a conversation with Asano, so there she goes, walking through the corridor, trying to find Asano's bunk. It would be nice to have a conversation with a person with such a different view of Castalia.

"What do you think about the quote 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger'?" Loulouthi asks, with her hands on the door edge of Asano's chamber.

Instead of answering her question, Asano poses another, "Do you think Castalia take murderers?"

"What, you're about to murder someone?" Loulouthi laughs.

"No, I'm just curious."

"See, if you are going to murder someone I'm not going to support you. It's simply against Kant's categorical imperative! If everyone kills other human beings, we will no longer exist as a race. But Castalia may take murderers; murdering someone doesn't mean that you are not an elite, and the criteria of Castalia is all about letting the elite rule."

"Nevermind. As for your question, I like this quote. In the song *Akai Akachan*, Lingo sings about this red baby that got dropped to the ground and hit by a car and makes this hitter of baby guilty for the rest of her life. The baby dies immediately, but in the moment of death she is beautiful. Ha, I don't know what I'm saying, I'm just blabbering."

He recites quietly the lyrics of *Akai Akachan*:

*As my brain explode under your wheels
As the brake loses control under your heel
Red baby asks you one last favor
What's your favorite human meat flavor*

With a mixture of metallic sounds and the singing of cuckoos, *Akai Akachan* sounds terrific to Asano. In Sunorigin, a lot of families with more than two husbands choose to create a child by taking all the husbands' sperms and genetically modify them and the wife's egg into a germ cell, so that the baby get a bit of trait from everyone. Once, probably in the year 2198, there was this baby born with thirteen fathers and one mother, and he was all red when he was born. He was on newspapers and famous. But he died on the day he turned one, and no one knew why. This song is dedicated to that baby.

"No I just changed my mind. I don't think what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, because the matriarchy is killing me and it's not making me stronger. I'm about to kill someone else or myself." Asano thinks. He feels like he is almost about to cry.

Should he kill his mother or not? If he does, he will be in prison for a long time, because he is an adult now, at the age of 16. If he does not, his mother has already arranged for his trip to Factory O and he will lose his genitals in a week.

And there is this shame that pricks the trauma in his heart open once again which is the result of his mother: He was sold by his mother to a woman, and that's the backup plan his mother has—if he does not successfully enter Castalia he will be forced to marry a woman thrice his age.

He remembers having this conversation with his mother earlier this year, when he was about to drop from high school.

A SATURDAY NIGHT

"Mother, you make me work all day, and I'm sick of it. I don't want to repair bicycles any more! I don't sucking want to repair these sucking bicycles just to pay for your stupid meds! You live on my welfare!" "See, Asano, if you don't make 5000 yen a day, we have no money to support you to continue high school." "Who's the "we" anyway! It's just you and me. Don't make it sound like as if I have a dad. Not even an uncle! All your relatives died! That's why you are so pathetically depending on my ability to support us. And you are sick as hell!" "Daughter of

a stick! How dare you speak like this to me? Your mother's sick, huh? You think that pineapple man is not real? I heard him talking to me just now. You know what he told me? He told me I should marry you to that rich woman. Listen to me. You don't have to go to school next Monday, I have everything arranged." "What? You what? What rich woman? You are marrying me off?" "Shit! I forgot her name. What was it? Elena? Yes, Elena. She lives in Ebisu, with her two husbands. She'll be a good match for ya. The pineapple man told me so. He's right there! Outside the window." "Are you insane? There's no sucking pineapple man! (Asano holds out his hands and made a wondering expression) Yes, you are, you have schizophrenia. And bipolar. And paranoia. And bad teeth. And you F-A-R-T a lot! Mother, I can't stand you any more." "All mothers are selfless. I wouldn't have begged them for Castalia if all I wanted is for me to have a good life. I care about you, and I want you to have a good ending. Oh, yeah, her name is Electra, not Elena." "You don't even remember that dick's name." "Don't call her a dick! You know how disgusting that sounds? She is not manly. She is not weak like a man. Show some respect for you future wife." "She will not be my wife." "Yeah, that is, if you get into Castalia." "I won't. I have my own goals." "Don't be so stubborn! She lives in Ebisu and she has so many houses and apartments. With a blink of your eye she you could be as rich as her. And it's not like you would marry her forever. You are young. She has a terminal disease. She may die any time before you. Then you, as the youngest husband, would take all her property. See? I have this all planned out." "Oldest husband has the right. Have you not read about the marriage law?" "Oh, so you have prepared yourself quite well. You've read about all the jurisprudence and stuff. Asano, I know you've always been a good boy. So if you want to rebel, do it now! It's not like you have less strength than I do. Haha..." "I see. So your plan is to let me do the transgender operation, and go into Castalia. What if I don't get in? What does Electra think about marrying a boy with no dick?

"I've signed a contract on your behalf. If you do get the operation, you will 100% get into Castalia." "But mother, I don't want to go to Castalia. Someone I know told me all about

it...”

At that time, Asano almost told his mother about Ek, his resourceful virtual friend. But he had to keep it a secret.

“Hey, what are you thinking about?” Loulouthi snaps her finger in front of Asano’s face.

“Ah,” Asano sobers up from his memory, “I was just thinking about my mother.”

“It’s depressing how the train hasn’t moved for so long. Do you think so too?”

“No, I’m fine with the stop. We’ll get there anyway.”

“Why don’t we watch a movie together? It’s dark outside and I’m not in the mood of sleeping,” Loulouthi looks at his eyes through his glasses.

“Yeah sure,” Asano answers.

So they walk to Loulouthi’s chamber, the 9th chamber, together.

As soon as Loulouthi takes out her vidi and projects the movie screen on the curtain, Scissor, the one under her bed, complains, “You’re too loud!” Rock immediately hushes him.

“We will wear earphones, okay? Sorry we have bothered you,” Asano says, climbing onto the upper bed opposite Loulouthi’s. The passenger on that bed had left at the last stop long before the train stopped due to the problem, so it’s empty now.

The movie starts. It is a movie called *Return*. It is an old movie about two girls who were raised by their father all their life but whose mother just got back home after 12 years. It was produced way back into the earlier 22nd century. It belonged to a movie style called Schwarzerfilm.

Somehow watching the old films makes Asano happy in a weird way. To Asano, in some ways old movies are much more realistic than 23rd century movies, and in other ways they are much more abstract, or maybe primitive is the right word to describe it. The technology for films hasn’t improved much since the mid-21st century, when three-dimensional films were perfected, and smell, touch, and taste were included, but the styles have changed a lot decade by decade.

It must be hard for the girls to live without a single father for all those years, Asano thinks. When he smells the aroma of candles in the movie through his nose plugs, he starts sniveling. He remembers how his mother couldn’t

bear him cry and needs him to stay strong for her. Every time he had to cry he just jostle his tears back, so they fall out of his nose, and his mother would dispraise him for she thought he caught a cold out of the blue.

What do the candles in the movie smell like? They smell like home. A home that Asano could earn only by himself, not by some mid-aged woman or by Castalia. But exactly in this time of the human civilization, it is almost impossible for Asano to live independently. He is, and will always be, the property of either his mother, his wife, or his daughter. Confucianism is still popular in Sunorigin, and to varying degrees in the entire Asia. Confucia said, "Men! Obey thy mother at home; obey thy wife after marriage; obey thy daughter after the death of thy wife." Asano has no choice unless... Unless he start a revolution. But people are ignorant. How could he get started?

Then, suddenly, Asano realizes that Scissor has been staring at him. Seems like Scissor and Rock have been talking about him.

Asano takes out his earphone and listens to their conversation secretly. Rock is speaking English with a Nipponese accent, while Scissor is speaking with an accent he is not familiar with. Scissor looks middle-eastern.

"Honestly I don't know why he is here!" Scissor whispers into Rock's ear, "I'm afraid. Is he a worse version of Tom? Tom would leave me be and he wouldn't even let me have my own time and follows me in case Electra come to me again?"

"We're gonna have a nice travel in Italia," Rock says, pouring hot water into his cup with a green tea bag inside.

"Yeah, old mate. Cheers!"

Asano realizes that the two people sitting in front of him are his fiancee's relatives! This is exactly the arranged engagement he went into a few months ago, because his mother was in huge debt and Electra could give him a lot of money as the dowry. He never wanted to marry Electra, and here he is, with his mother's plan to help him escape the marriage and launch into Castalia. He wants neither marriage nor Castalia.

"I don't want to study the classical subjects and be among misoandrist women all day and have to report to the headquarter every time I want to go out of Castalia," Asano thinks.

He cannot focus on the movie anymore. He feels like he has to listen to the two men.

7

The Basketcase

Asano listens to Scissor and Rock's conversation, and recalls an unpleasant memory, about his suicidal thoughts, in school.

Background music: My Body is a Cage, Peter Gabriel

This is Loulouthi's seventh hour on the train and Asano's fiftieth or sixtieth. Morning has not yet come.

There the train stands, midst of a prairie, or I guess you can call it a desert. It's totally dark outside, but the moonlight shines on the wavy mountains far away and the boundless snow that covers everything. With the dark blue sky, the mountains look even blacker, with silver linings. The snow is in fifty different shades of dark blue. There is no sound. Silence. Just the sound of the train quietly standing. Most people have gone back to sleep.

Loulouthi thinks about her future. She will be in Castalia studying Computer Science, her favorite classical subject, as well as philosophy, math, music, physics, literature, psychology... She will make friends that fit Aristotle's definition of friendship of the virtue. She will wake up everyday, be able to embrace her life. She will live on a mountain, and travel to the ocean every week. She can't stop feeling happy, almost ecstatic.

While Loulouthi is happily rested on her bed watching the movie, Asano is worrying about so many things. What are the two men here in Loulouthi's chamber talking about? How could he manage to put the drug into his mother's drink, or is he really going to? How could he pretend not to cry when all the movie does is to make him want to cry?

"Let's talk to that little stick. Give him a lesson to learn," Scissor whispers into Rock's ear. Because Asano took off his earphone, it is actually very easy to hear their whisper.

"No, let's show kindness. He is just 16! How do you know it is him anyway? Maybe it is just the darkness that made him look like your brother-husband."

"He's not my brother-husband yet! And don't call that little stick *that*. He doesn't deserve it. He is definitely already my rival."

“Relax, Scissor,” Rock pats Scissor’s shoulder, “you are gonna be fine. You’ve know Electra for so many years. You love her, while all that little stick wants is money, right?”

“Yeah, maybe I shouldn’t worry so much... But his merely being here disturbs me so much. He—shouldn’t—be—here!” Scissor tries hard to exemplify his anger while keeping his voice low.

“What do you want, kidnap him?” Rock laughs quietly, with all the air flow coming out of his nose.

“Maybe, if that is necessary. I can’t just let him follow us and be a spy on every move we take.”

“They are so so wrong”, Asano thinks, “I’m not that kind of person. Plus, I am forced and I never intended to take away your happiness and wealth.”

Asano shakes his head in disappointment and try to bring his attention to the movies again, before Loulouthi finds out and find fault with him.

The movie is good, even measured up to the 23th century standard.

Sasha and Nastya were two girls who grew up with their father, after their mother left them alone. Their mother had just returned home after 12 years. The two girls were so happy for their mother to come home. Their mother intended to teach them how to be a woman. So her father agreed for the mother to take the girls away for a trip. She took thee girls to the woods, and they built up a camp together, where they hunted, gathered, and designed traps for preys. She taught them to be smart and sophisticated, just like the ideal woman would. Gradually one of the girls, Nastya, started to miss their father’s tenderness and care, while Sasha wants to stay with their mother. One day, after Nastya and mother had a fight, while the three of them were climbing onto a water tower, Nastya pushed her mother down, and she fell off and died. Then she ran away with her favorite candles, which appeared at the beginning of the film in her room, and left Sasha there alone with the dead body in the woods, with the setting sun.

There were many other subtleties in the movie but all Asano remembered was these candles that represent hope. They honestly smell so good. It reminds Asano of the taste of the first dinner after a day of fasting. It also reminds him of his own candles.

Asano had psychosis, just like his mother. When anyone asks what he thinks of immediately as a symbol of psychosis, he would answer lightly, “the stare.”

He used to stare at people so much, just staring into nothingness. Whenever someone poses a question, he genuinely did not know how to answer. Once

he thought and believed so: “Life is too gentle on me.” But this is just a narrative he’d been telling himself. His life was harsh.

When he had psychosis, he found it so hard to concentrate and so hard to make an argument. It was like all the wit he had disappeared into thin air. He was eloquent once. Though he does not argue about philosophy like the well-educated do, he sings and raps and makes music in a very vibrant, vivid style. But psychosis took away all of that from him. He was constantly seeing things that weren’t there, making strange connections, hearing voices that directed him and threatened him. For so many times he felt like he was trapped in a mud, with nowhere to travel to. Even Ek, his friend could not drag him up from his bed. He was too scared to leave his bed, and too scared to be alone. Thoughts of death and murder suffocated him.

It started with him seeing a spider with eighteen fingers. It was a huge dark red spider, and it was small at first but then grew big, and grew small again. Asano thought, this must be a being from the 4th dimension, because of how creatures living in the 3rd dimension do not understand the 4th dimension and see things shrinking and growing and disappear and stuff. The spider followed him when he went to school. When he peed in the public restroom, the spider was hanging up there on the wall in front of him, playing with its web. When he went back home, the spider was outside his window. He had to share a room with his mother. His mother does not see the spider but sees the pineapple man. He realized that both of them were not real.

There was also the voice. The calm voice of a woman, telling him to take certain actions.

“Now walk,” the voice appeared in the park, where Asano was doing his part time job, walking dogs. He started walking.

“Now turn left,” the voice ordered again.

“Now touch the tail of the black labrador, and touch the nose of the brown poodle.” He did so.

“Now stand there still and start spinning yourself, for three cycles.” He did so.

“This is God speaking to you. If you believe in me, bend your knees a bit. If you don’t, you will go to hell.” Asano did not bend his knees.

“I asked you to do it!” The voice shouted.

He bent his knees.

“Good boy. You do what I tell you, alright?”

Sometimes Asano kept avoiding doing the thing the voice told him to do, and the voice would be out of patience. It would continue screaming until Asano did what he was told to do.

The week before the final week of the first semester of his Freshman year in high school, he decided that he could not live on with this voice. At least the spider was not bothering him. The voice was driving him crazy.

So he did the same thing with the little girl in the movie. He picked up his candles in the dorm and ran away, to the brink of the school.

There was a huge wall on the brink of the school, where students could climb on and see the road downhill. Asano climbed onto the wall and stood there in the cold wind, looking down to the ground, which is about three floors away. He did not know whether jumping off the wall could kill him. He was crying too much to actually decide. Only if he could die without pain...

And his mother wasn't understanding him. He had no friends at school, or almost none. He was a weirdo singing songs about suicide and violence all day, and people were either too afraid or too happy to listen to him.

In middle school, he once wrote a song called "Don't Jump Off This Building":

Don't jump off this building You're not gonna die— You're just gonna get crippled, crippled, crippled For the rest of your life...

Of course the counselor in school did not appraise his effort, and saw this as a dangerous sign. She "educated" him about how to be a lawful considerate citizen as a part of the school community; he called it brainwashing.

In fact, dying has become very different in the past few centuries. First, when you die you get a certificate of decease. Second, now everyone, unless you have written a will, gets an automatic will generated at the moment of brain death, based on lived preferences and other indexes. Third, now the automatic treatment of corpse is to be burned into ashes, unless the person has done enough to the environment to earn a spot to be buried. (The criteria for this one is listed in a UN document.) Fourth, in Sunorigin, dying old has become a privilege: only women who have reached certain requirements, or their brothers, uncles, or fathers, could be taken care of on the National Senior Health Care Plan (Nasehecap), and thus live for more than 85 years. Other people could as well live more than 85 years, but their physical conditions will be worsened each year artificially after they are 75. People who are not on Nasehecap, yet refuse to be artificially worsened, will face death sentence.

In fact, the suicidal rate of males in Sunorigin is three times higher than that of the females. The suicidal rate of trans women are higher—that is thirteen times the female suicidal rates. Asano wonders whether his mother has known about this. She must have thought that living as a woman would be easy for Asano, but it will indeed be hard. His mother intends to change his name into Aya when, if, he becomes a woman. Even though Asano could get rid of the “no”, which is degrading to him, this is too small a benefit he could get compared with the loss of his preferred gender—male. Although he hates it that males are at a disadvantage in this world, he is proud of being a male. He feels honored to be able to join the revolution—even though the revolution hasn’t really exist yet.

“Males are brainwashed into supporting this patriarchy. It’s a lot of benevolent sexism. They are saying that males are weak and deserve protection from extreme emotions. Saying that males are athletic and better at doing houseworks and taking care of children. They say males are more physical than emotional, more physical than intellectual, and cannot understand the subtleties of literature, sciences, arts, and engineering. The ideal man is a housebrother, or a househusband, where he is limited to the house, and his own status only comes from his sister’s or his wife’s status. If a man is unsatisfied with his status at his mother’s or his sister’s place, he can choose to marry and join his wife’s household. This seems to be a good choice to men, but in fact it is enslavement again. There was a math theory about how women propose to men leads to the result of men getting the wife they want least and women getting the husband they want the most. Plus that now in most countries a woman can marry as many husbands as she like, as long as she has the money. I just reached the age for marriage and my mother has already arranged a marriage to me...” Asano thinks. These stuff has been in his mind for a long time.

What about his future? Asano has no clue what he will do, now that he has dropped out from high school and gone on a trip to Factory O and Castalia in Ellatha. He has no sister, and only a mother to legally depend on. Though his mother is using him to make money because she herself is too sick to produce any economic benefits, he still needs his mother’s approval on many things since he is her legal property. Of course he loves his mother, in the way that a mental patient feels for another mental patient for company, in the way that he feels gratitude for his mother for not killing him, and in the way that she at least brought him into the world. But what is his mother to him beyond that? She is just a needy creature yearning for love and money. People say that she is unfortunate since she has neither a daughter nor a

brother. Her surname will be lost, since boys can't carry their surnames to the next generation.

“So many things have been taken away from me. When I was five, the law does not force all males to be owned by females. Males that are educated were allowed to stand on their own. But now, in Nippon, with 94 percent of government officials being females, males are largely underrepresented in policy making. My mother knows all this and just want me to escape, by turning me on the other side of the gendered power relations. Or by selling me off to make the life of both of us easier.” Asano thinks.

The movie ends in an upbeat song, which marks the ironic tone of the ending.

To be written

8

Ubuntu

Loulouthi looks at texts her family has sent her. She then recalls doing magic with Ubuntu.

Background music: Human Behavior, Björk

As the train is still stuck in the wilderness, Loulouthi looks on her vidi screen, with 182 messages unread and 53 calls unanswered. No, she wouldn't like to read them. It's probably her mom, she thinks. Reading messages from her mother is a torture each time, for she would bloat and brag about herself more than she would actually care about Loulouthi.

She climbs back to her bed and ouch! She hurts her toe. Her pinky toe was stuck in between two metallic brinks of the bed. It feels awful. Somehow she wants to cry. And that makes her want to read their messages.

So she lies down, puts the vidi back to her left ear, and adjusts the screen so that it falls right in the middle of the ceiling. She clicks the red notification sign with the number 53 on it, and saw the names of her uncle and Konstantin, but not her mother. Her uncle called her 50 times, and Konstantin called her 3 times.

Loulouthi's uncle is her mother's brother, who lives with Loulouthi, Sidhartha, Regina, and Regina's mother back home. Loulouthi doesn't know who her father is, and that doesn't matter at all. In fact, the word "father" is some odd ancient word in her time. Well, in some countries, they still keep the fathers, but in most countries a grown woman either lives with her brothers or her girlfriend.

How light my life is! Loulouthi thinks. "My mother doesn't even care that I'm gone." She whispers to herself.

A new message comes in. It's from Ubuntu.

"Now what does she have to deal with this?"

Loulouthi clicks open the message, and it goes:

Your uncle is very worried about you, but I told him that you won't do anything stupid. Are you still alive? Do keep me updated! I miss you.

She sees more messages from Siddhartha and Konstantin.

Siddhartha texted:

Uncle is worried about you.

Uncle found out that your studio is burnt. He called the police and they are soon coming over.

Sister, I know you are still alive. They said you burnt down your studio and I pretended to be in grief, but I know that you are probably just tired of life and mom and want to escape. I saw that your diaries are gone. Oluwa came to our house today and cried. I told her that you are not really gone, and I told her to not tell anyone. So you will be fine. I just wish to see you again some time.

Konstantin texted:

Please answer me as soon as possible. You haven't call me in a long time.

What's going on? Tell me.

Loulouthi I love you and I miss you. You promised about the trip in Amharic Queendom. Please don't leave me! I can't do it if you are gone... I'm literally picturing your death right now... Please...

How ironic it is! Her boyfriend, the person she is supposed to be most close to, thinks that she is dead. And he only sent 3 messages, so succinct. So simple. Was that all that he cared about or was he being minimalist?

Loulouthi does not want to read more messages. Upon thinking about her brother, she wants to cry. How smart of him at his age!

And Ubuntu... How did she get to know about her uncle? Did her mother know about them? That they did witchcraft together and had sex?

Her thoughts drift back to last spring when she went to Ubuntu's apartment for the second time. She saw her philosophy professor right outside the elevator—she is glad that she was hiding behind the wall.

Ubuntu was smoking, drinking vodka and listening to dance music. She told Loulouthi that she was writing her evaluation. Because Miezhdu Institute of Technology is a small institute, every student in it gets an advisor, and the advisor has to write a monthly evaluation of the student. It's really like a small college. There Ubuntu sat, on her sofa with real unruly gestures,

with her legs all spread out, her vodka bottle on the ground, her academic papers on the table in front of her, and a blanket on top of the papers.

When Loulouthi knocked on the door, Ubuntu, half naked, opened the door for Loulouthi. Her full breasts were hanging from her chest, like two saggy bags full of fruits. Loulouthi shrugged when she saw Ubuntu's breast.

"Why don't you wear a top at home?" Loulouthi asked.

"Oh I'm just too lazy," she smoked a bit and exhaled, "plus I'm feeling dope." She dances with the vodka bottle in her hand.

Loulouthi stood there staring at her.

"What?" Ubuntu uttered with a sinking tone, "You want a shot? Here's one just for you," she took out a shot glass from the cabinet.

"Um no thanks. Can we just get to the topic? You told me last time you would do juju with me."

"Oh, that. I thought you wanted to talk about sex," Ubuntu lay down on the sofa and laughs maniacally.

"Seriously. My brother Sid is having nightmares every day. I want us to work together to help him."

"Alright, alright! Huh!" Ubuntu stops laughing and stood up, fidgeting, frowning. She walked to the corner of the living room and grabbed a few candles to the dining table, and tried to find the lighter on the table in front of the sofa.

"Duh. I can't find my lighter."

"You must have just used it. You are smoking."

"Where the hell is my lighter? Daugh—ter of a stick! It's gone!" The pronounced the "daugh" sound in a Russian way, like "duo".

Loulouthi walks to the table, and within a few seconds, she found the lighter. "Here." She speaks gently as she handed the lighter to Ubuntu.

Ubuntu rearranged the candles into a circle, and lit them up one by one. She then started to hymn. It was a melody Loulouthi had never heard of. It was a weird melody indeed, like a mixture of Holy Kitab citations and Sunoriginese Enka and jazz. After the singing was finished, she took one candle and dropped the hot wax onto Loulouthi's left hand as she kept repeating "onmanipadmehum."

Loulouthi felt enlightened by the hot wax. It was hurting, but endurable.

Ubuntu took her left hand, scratched the top of her head, and placed the center of it right in the middle of her forehead.

“Now you close your eyes and do a deep breath.” Ubuntu directed.

Loulouthi closed her eyes and breathed in and out.

“Now fix your mind on your brother, just his face. Think of the nightmare as a specific color.”

At first Loulouthi thought the nightmare is black, but she remembered how Sid told her the nightmares are full of the red color, so she changed it to red.

“Now hold your breath until I count to 20. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5...”

“19.”

“20.”

“You’re all set. He will not have nightmares anymore.” Ubuntu looks down at the bread and the candles on the table.

“But is there a cost associated with this? I heard that all juju comes at a price,” Loulouthi said.

“Not with me. I know a way to avoid the price,” Ubuntu grins, “Don’t worry, I’m writing you a god evaluation. No one knows that you’ve come here to my place.” She wraps her arms around Loulouthi’s waist.

“Ubuntu, I’m afraid...” Loulouthi said, with fear in her eyes.

“I’m here, I’m here. My baby Loulouthi, do you know how good I feel to have you here? I am truly blissed,” she smiles, “Today I’m gonna show you the new toy I bought you...”

Then they went upstairs.

Loulouthi remembers telling Konstantin how good Ubuntu was at sex, and compared him with Ubuntu. Konstantin always answered, “She’s almost forty, while I’m just over 20. She’s got a ton of experiences.”

Anyway.

The sun rises. As the little bitter melon boy sees the sun coming from the left side of his window, he rejoices at it, and shouts excitedly. His mother tries to calm him down and tells him that other people are still asleep.

Now half of the sky is illuminated by the sun. Red, orange and yellow swallowed the part of sky that was once dark blue. It isn’t snowing, but the snow covering the earth all seems orange by now. Up in the sky some

leisurely clouds pass by. There is not a sound of birds. Probably no animal is around here by now, with this wilderness and this freezing temperature.

Some noises appear at the rail. And within a minute, the train is moving again! People awake all hoorayed and burst into laughters. Asano's mother climbs out of her bed and put on a coat, and blabbers to herself, "Ha! A new day, a new beginning! One more day to live! And we are closer to Factory O!" She takes out her vidi and called the people in Factory O, telling them that they are to arrive later than normal. Then she projects a screen on the wall, showing her bank accounts. After receiving dowry from Electra, she has paid back most of her debts and now she is in good standing. She feels fresh. She feels like she has gone back to her youth. She feels like she can forgive Asano for his indulgence in violating her authority.

9

The Poison

Asano's mother asks him to bring her coffee. He poisons her and quarrels with her one last time before her death.

Background music: Funeral March, Chopin

“Asano! Come.” Asano’s mother calls him to come forth.

“What do you want?” Asano comes with a dreary face.

“Make me a cup of coffee!”

Here comes the chance, Asano thinks. He squeezes the white powder in the pocket of his jeans. He got it from Ek, his friend. It feels so soft. It is extremely toxic—it hypnotizes you first, and then kills you in your sleep, and you would die in two hours.

He thinks of not killing his mother, and think of killing her because the train has started moving again and they will still arrive at Factory O and Castalia, though a few hours late. He takes the cup and walks to the coffee maker right next to the bathroom.

Asano holds the coffee cup, and dark, good-smelling coffee comes out of the coffee maker. He talks to his vidi, “random number generator.” He thinks, if it is an even number, I’m not gonna put drug in the coffee; if it is odd, I am gonna put drug in the coffee.

His vidi dings, and he took it off his right ear and looks at the tiny screen.

It’s a 37.

“Well, destiny has it.”

Asano puts the drug in the coffee, without any hesitation. It reminds him of Mersault in *the Stranger*, who killed a man for no particular reason.

Then he puts milk and cream on top of the coffee, and brings the coffee back to his mother’s bed.

She puts the coffee on the table and starts reading. She projects a screen with a book on her wooden reading pad.

Ten minutes passed, and she’s still not drinking it.

“Mother, can I try the coffee?” Asano tries to make his mother want to drink the coffee.

“You can have it all if you want.” His mother answers.

Asano pretends to drink from the coffee cup, and says, “It tastes awesome, try it, mother. I made it!”

Asano’s mother pushes up her glasses and put away her reading pad, “Fine, I’ll drink!”

Then she chugged the coffee.

“What? You just drank it all? Without tasting it? Is that what my work is worth?” Asano looks surprised but is actually quite happy. He hated his mother his whole life and now it’s about to end. He wants to have this one last fight with his mother.

“What? At least I drank it!”

“Fine, you daughter of a stick! I bet you don’t dare drinking like this in front of Electra.”

“Now you’re suddenly on Electra’s side? I saved you from marrying her by giving you the choice to go to Factory O and Castalia!”

“Giving me the choice to go to Factory O and Castalia? I don’t even have a choice! You forced me to go! And it’s not like that once I am a female I am guaranteed into Castalia; they have a very rigorous exam with a long interview. I don’t think I can qualify. I’m not the elite. I’m just another poor Nipponese boy.”

“You didn’t have too. You could have told me you don’t want to, so you could marry Elena, oh, no, Electra.”

“You don’t even remember her name. You don’t care about her, and you don’t even care about me. All you care about is money!”

“No,” Asano’s mother frowns, “Why would you think that way? You know in Nippon a boy is denied all his civic rights, and by marrying Electra you could have a good life,” she sighs, “a rich life. And after she dies in a few decades you would be rich, and then you can marry yourself again, to a woman you like. You can’t always get what you like the first time. It’s not like this. You have to endure. It’s all about endurance.”

“Suck the endurance! I want my happiness! I don’t want either Electra or Castalia... I want revenge, I want revolution!”

“Asano, I care about you. And I’d do anything to give you a happy life. You see, happiness for men, (you are almost a man now) comes from marriage and family. Only if you become a woman can your happiness come from career. And I gave you the safety net of marriage and family, as well as the ladder to climb up and get a career. Why are you not satisfied? It only shows that I love you, dear.”

“If you truly love me you would give me freedom,” Asano speaks indignantly, “Freedom is all I ever wanted.”

“Asano, listen to me. Freedom is nothing if you don’t have the bread. You need physical support, and then a spiritual support—that is, marriage, and then you can pursue a higher happiness. Freedom just doesn’t fit in any of these. Freedom is dangerous. It leads to defiance. You wouldn’t wanna to provoke anyone, would you?”

“That’s called challenge. Of course I would love to challenge the current system.”

“Don’t speak as if you are a saint. It is unboyly. No one would want to marry you if you pretend as if you are a saint.”

“Then let no one marry me!”

“How pity that is!”

“I don’t take any pity on me. I am me. I don’t need the pathetic form of marriage that you forced on me.”

“You are just young and haven’t tasted the bitterness of life. I’ve been to so many places and I know.”

“You’ve been where? To Ellatha? No! You haven’t even gone to Heavenly Dynasty except for on this trip. This sucking trip.”

“I.. I won’t argue with you. You are making me angry. After all, it is me who raised you all the way till now. I fed you, changed your diapers, cleaned after your shit, tutored you in homework...” Asano’s mother stares at him coldly.

“So? Does that make you have a right to take freedom away from me? Huh?” Asano leans in while his mother backs up, into the corner of her bed.

Asano opens his eyes wide. The drug must have been so strong that he mother is already yawning.

“Your coffee makes me tired!” Asano’s mother says.

Then she starts laughing, wholeheartedly. “You coffee is making me tired!” She laughs even more maniacally, with disbelief in her own words. “You hear that? you coffee is making me tired!”

“How do you know it’s the coffee? Correlation doesn’t mean causation,” Asano notes coldly.

“You little naughty stick. Wanna suck with your mother? I’m gonna make you suffer if you try tricks on me,” Asano’s mother suddenly changes her speech style.

Asano wonders, does this drug also make people prone to kinky stuff? Otherwise why would his mother call him a “little naughty stick”? Isn’t that what masters call their slaves during sex? Woah, this drug is making his mother abnormal, and it is fast.

“Who the hell do you think you are to say such words to me?” Asano raises his voice, enjoying the last argument with his mother. Yeah, maybe people in the past, while they were still in patriarchy, would say something like “suck me, daddy” to stimulate their sexual desire. Or did they use the words suck, stick, softie, and so on?

But at any rate, his drug is doing its effect already. She looks tired. She’s soon gonna fall asleep, this time forever.

What Asano does not notice is that her mother hides his favorite teddy bear under her pillow, in the corner of the bed. Of course he wouldn’t know.

10

The Dream

About the dream Loulouthi just had. And its analysis.

Background music: Beautiful Mother, Dirty Projects & Björk

Loulouthi just had a dream while the sun is up, so I guess it could be called a “daydream”, but it is definitely one of the “nightmares”.

It started with the snake that often appears in her dream. It is a dark green snake as wide as Loulouthi’s forearm.

Loulouthi writes down in her diary:

The green snake with grey spots came to the door, and I recognized him at first sight. I slammed the door but the snake slipped right through the opening as quickly as possible. I started to fly, thinking that the snake wouldn’t be able to reach me that way.

The snake tried to fly too but he failed. I climbed out of the window and flew away into a large parking lot.

It was a mega parking lot with many floors that looked like a concentration camp. I was there with many people. “They” asked each of us to do a self-destined task. “They” include the terrorists with red hair, all female, Ubuntu, and some other people. They all wore green sleeves. For the self-destined task, I seemed to have chosen to write down the first lines of the Holy Kitab. I knew they were going to test if we are being religious or not.

There was an Indian boy besides me. He finished his work first. It was a double sided paper with closely written math problems. A person started correcting his work. She ticked a lot on the first page, as well as the second page. The Indian boy was smiling. But then that person turned his paper back to the first page and drew a cross. The Indian boy turned nervous. They asked me whether I have completed my work. I felt a little bit relieved to have done it slowly, but still I know that they were going to find reasons to kill me. Much more to my relief, they said, “Let’s

get some lunch first, and then we will proceed with y'all.” The image of Ubuntu eating a sausage popped up in my mind. Then I saw the green snake again, not far from me, hiding behind a column. He was just standing there with his body curved like an Q, glaring at me. I tried to run away by flying.

There were the red haired terrorists with guns and rifles. I was always flying through buildings with the convoluted parking lot design. And as I flew, my hair fell out strand by strand.

My runaway also had something to do with food. But the only thing I remembered awake was my aunt giving me a bowl of ricecake-looking starch with meat. I asked what meat it was. She answered, “lamb.” And I know that lamb is a forbidden meat in the Holy Kitab. As soon as I bit off the first piece of ricecake, I noticed that there is a piece of bone in it. It’s a snake’s bone!

I was flying from India to its neighboring country, Switzerland. The terrorists followed me, and the snake always appeared in the least obvious spot. They tried to attack me from everywhere. We went through a hall with many famous living scientists. But I had no time to greet them. Then I flew to Deutschland. They were still following me. I felt very tired from flying and my muscles were sore. Seemed like Ubuntu wanted to kill me. I finally flew to a forest where I found a tree to nest on. Just as I was about to relax, the snake appeared on the adjacent tree!

I wanted to move, but my body was frozen. Then the snake hisses at me and approached me. I saw that his eyes were brown. He tried to enter my body. But suddenly I was empowered again so I jumped from branches to branches to avoid that. Finally he was tired and turned into the figure of a woman looking like a mixture of my mother and Ubuntu. I was disgusted by the idea of sucking my mother. Then I fell from the tree and woke up.

Loulouthi analyzes this dream in this way:

The snake is a symbol of sin and danger. In my dream I was chased after by both the terrorists and the snake. In other words, I was shunning both inhumanity and sin. I was scared of them because they were trying to turn me into a believer of the Holy Kitab. They were trying to assimilate me, with the appearance of religion and the heart of evil. But I tried to refuse being

assimilated, which is shown through me running and accepting the lamb that my aunt gave me.

Now we assume that Asano has heard about this dream. He would analyze the dream in this way:

The snake is a symbol of masculinity, which poses a threat to Loulouthi's femininity. The female terrorists were treating her as if she was a man, which is synonymous to being a sub-human. The terrorists examined the boy's work; they were about to examine Loulouthi's work. There is this concept of the female gaze here—females enjoy watching males, and males enjoy being watched. They were about to criticize and judge Loulouthi's work. As for the image of Ubuntu eating a sausage, with the sausage being a euphemism for a man's dick, is revolt against Ubuntu. In Loulouthi's mind, Ubuntu has degraded into a man-pleaser, instead of who she actually is—a woman pleased by other women. The lamb provided by her aunt is also a sign of the start of revolution. Her aunt is on her side against Ubuntu, her ultimate rival. And at last, again, the snake, a symbol of masculinity, wanted her vagina to suck him.

Loulouthi always has a lot of dreams. She dreams almost every day. Maybe it is because of her leisurely schedule—she isn't really busy with her studies. She paces herself right, just enough to spare time doing her own stuff for most of the time in a day. She doesn't need to worry about getting a job, for her mother has high social status and has already given her connections to well-paid jobs.

Now, with the letter that she received from Castalia, she is sure that she will spend the rest of her life being a proud castalian.

On the invitation letter from a Magister Ludi in Castalia, one point especially stood out to her:

...

Loulouthi, you've been adhering to the traditional values of Miezhdu culture since very young, and we would like to see some change in you. That doesn't mean you are not doing a great job, because otherwise we will not invite you to join Castalia; it just means that we wish you to be bold, to try and explore and be a different version of yourself. Remember, we only choose the very elite from a large population. You are excellent in thought and manner and your achievements, but

you just need to step out of your comfort zone.

...

At the time Loulouthi received the letter, which was one month ago, Castalia wasn't that appealing to her. She always imagined a life with Konstantin, though people discriminate against her because of her sexual orientation. Most people say, straight women are as useless as men. But Loulouthi always thought of straight relationships as a part of a tradition of human race, and she was naturally attracted to both females and males; it's just that she haven't found a person she loved that she could call her girlfriend. Well, Ubuntu was sort of that role, but she was also playing a role of her teacher and her mother, so it was complicated.

The letter from Castalia ignited her dream of becoming a greater person, a person built for the society, not just for her own family. She remembers almost talking with her brother about this letter:

"Sid, what if I can leave this place, leave Miezhdustan, forever and ever and live in a paradise? Would you do it if it were you?"

"No, I don't want to leave my family. That would be scary," Sid said.

"What if they have all the things you want there? And all you have to trade is your family?"

"How do you know that this deal is real? How do you know that the person who promised that you can go to this place is not playing with you?"

"I just know. I received a let..." She realized that she should keep this a secret.

"You received a letter? From where? A company? An aristocratic school who wants you to teach? A man, possibly? Oh no but you have Konstantin. When can I see Konstantin, anyway?"

"You will see him sooner or later. He's in Amharic Queendom right now."

"Why did you not bring him to us earlier, when you lived together in the summer?"

Loulouthi did not want to mention to her family that Konstantin has eye problems. He could not look at anyone straight in the eyes, nor can he focus with two eyes working at the same time, nor can his eyes stay in the same position for even one second—it is oscillating at a few thousand rounds per second. Loulouthi did not care about exposing his eye problems to her family, but Konstantin cared. He gets nervous around people who don't know him well, because of his eye problems. In fact, it was Loulouthi

who urged him to apply for the senior program in Amharic Queendom—she wanted him to learn to be independent.

Now Loulouthi stares out of the window at the snow. She wonders how the train still moves forward with all that snow on the rail. Doesn't the snow make it slippery? What if the train slips off the rail? What if the driver falls asleep? What if it snows also in Ellatha?

She enjoys being on the train. She could have taken a plane, but a train is much cheaper and much more interesting with the sceneries outside—except that there isn't much scenery outside now, just the snow on the prairie and the boundless mountains in the backdrop. But when they went past towns and cities, Loulouthi saw so many buildings that have different roofs than those at home. She saw flat roofs, oblique roofs, red roofs, yellow roofs. She saw houses made of dry earth, of bricks, of concrete, and of wood. She saw Cyrillic alphabets and Arabic alphabets. She saw people wearing dopas, turbans, and hijabs. She saw people pulling carts and selling local treats along the railway, and she saw cars and helicopters in traffic. But now she only sees snow. Endless snow. Snow flashing in front of her eyes, white, grey, blue. The snow is reflecting the sunshine, so strong that it hurts her eyes.

She is amazed at how flat this prairie is. There is not any vegetation over the snow at all, not a tree in sight. There is also no buildings. The train is moving in the direction of the mountains. Erasing the fog on the window has made her hand wet.

... To be Written

Part III

Hugging a teddy bear

11

The Teddy Bear

Asano has a supernatural experience with his teddy bear.

Background music: Letter, Yosi Horikawa

Asano picks up the instruction page, and it reads:

Hugging a teddy bear is different from hugging a real human being. When hugging a real human being, you need to try hard not to hurt them; when hugging a teddy bear, you can squeeze it in any shape you want.

He grabs the teddy bear from the corner of his mother's bed and saw that its face is entirely ruined. There he sees his mother lying on her bed, so peaceful, except for her purple lips. She is dead and hasn't moved for two hours. Nobody has found out yet. He holds her hand, and squeezes it as hard as he could. His mother used to squeeze his hand when she wanted to imply him to do something.

"Yeah, you ruined my teddy bear, mother, and now I can ruin your hand. And screw your whole life. I just ended your life." So thinks Asano, with a grin on his face. A while ago he was feeling so nervous, but now he feels relieved. So what if they found out? I'll just go to jail and jail is better than Castalia and being a someone I'm not in a place full of hypocrites.

He looks across the corridor. He sees Loulouthi sitting by the window, writing in her diary. He feels glad that he did not tell Loulouthi that he killed his mother. Loulouthi is such a traditional person that she would never understand him.

Then he looks back at the teddy bear on his bed. He remembers the quarrel with his mother three hours ago, but he does not remember when his mother took away his favorite teddy bear from him and tore it apart. When arguing with her, he had to act like he doesn't know his mother is gonna die soon. He had this one last fight with her, and now she is completely gone. Done with life.

Asano tried hard to not hurt his mother while she was alive, but she hurt him so deep that every move of her became abominable in his eyes. That

forcing him to go to Factory O was just the last straw that killed the camel. Before, he always thought of a violent way to kill his mother: by cutting her head off, by pushing her off the subway platform, by burning her room... But he never did it until it was urgently needed to be done. Which is now, on this train. It is surprising even to himself that he killed his mother in such a peaceful way.

Asano takes out his vidi and caresses it repeatedly. He and his mother had to work hard in order to buy this red vidi. It's an Apple vidi, one of the oldest brands, one of the less developed brands. One of the brands that belong to poor people like him.

For so many years he longed for freedom, but his mother took it away from him. At first, when he was really little, he treated his mother as if she is a teddy bear—and of course that is not right and abominable and hated by his mother—but he felt good in that way. His mother is obese and it is really comfy to hug with her.

Now, it is naturally for babies to treat their mothers as teddy bears, because babies are all needy and can't really take care of themselves. They need their mothers. They need to feel like once they cry, food will come to their mouth. A shower will happen to them. They will feel safe.

As Asano is sitting by the window in the corridor, he begins to take notice of the train. What if someone found out? What if mother's body start to smell bad? What if someone comes to check the train tickets and his mother does not wake up? What if...

He starts to panic, though he knows that panic is useless. He grabs the teddy bear from his bed, and cotton from his head keeps falling out onto the ground.

"Oh Akikun, look at you. Your brain has fallen out of your head. Look what she did to you," Asano looks at his teddy bear concernedly.

"You'll be fine, right?" Upon uttering this automatic consolation, he realizes it's not gonna be fine for Akikun. He is dead. But was he ever alive? He was just a creature that physically exists in space but spiritually exists in Asano's mind.

"I'm all right." Akikun answers, his lips moving. More cotton falls out of his head.

"What? Did you just say something?" Asano looks at him with wonder.

The teddy bear stares at some uncertain place in the air, like a person dying with regrets.

“You just said something, right? Or am I hallucinating?” Asano asks.

Asano looks around and see people passing by, with toothbrushes and toothpastes and facial cream and cups in their hands.

“I love you.” Akikun speaks lightly.

Asano frowns and open his mouth wide in surprise.

“You just spoke to me!”

“Shh! Don’t tell others, it’s a secret.” The voice seem to come from the teddy bear’s chest hole.

Asano touches the place where Akikun’s mouth has been, and it is as broken as rags. Then he touches his open chest, and it is as soft as any other cotton objects. How could voice come out of this teddy bear?

Akikun is dying. Asano remembers when he got him, at the age of six. He was given by a distant relative. He loved him so much that every night he could not sleep without him. But his mother, who hated that distant relative, always tried to take him away form him.

He used to make stories with Akikun. He was a rich prince in a queendom with servants and playmates and beautiful horses. He had a whole castle to himself. He lived in a queendom where his mother did not exist, and violence is unheard of. But he kept torturing himself; he was a masochist, and his happiness came from the deep guilt and shame he had for himself.

“When men rule the world people were in physical torture. When women rule the world people are in constant mental torture,” the eight year old Asano concluded, sitting by the large window of the room he shares with his mother.

He could only talk to Akikun when his mother had not yet come back from work. Once his mother was standing in the common corridor and heard him speaking with Akikun. Of course she did not know that he was speaking with his teddy bear. She asked who he was speaking to. He had to pretend that he was talking to God.

“Since when did you become religious?” Asano’s mother asked.

“I always am,” Asano answers, with tears in his eyes.

For so many times his mother cut Akikun open, and for so many times did Asano sew him back together. He doesn’t even look like a teddy bear throughout the years. But Asano has always been loyal to him. He placed

him in his bag and took him out to school, and each time after he got bullied he talked to him.

At least Akikun was his friend.

The instruction page! How come it is here? The teddy bear was from more than a decade ago.

Things are getting creepy.

The lights around Asano starts to go off. Things starts to get shaky. Asano's heart races. There's must be something wrong! He feels like being absorbed by a huge vortex, and he is soon falling into an abyss. Sounds appear. Sounds that are similar to a broken TV's shaky black and white screen. Then he hears a crow caw. Then it turns into a weird shriek.

"Help—Help me!"

"Who are you?" Asano thinks, but does not dare to speak.

"Help—" The shriek continues.

Asano looks around and everything is dark. He seems to be in a forest with leaves flying around.

"I was just on a train," Asano thinks.

He feels like he is falling down and down and on every level there are tree branches of a huge, skyscraper-like tree, and the tree leaves are flying around him. Gravity is pulling him to the center of the earth and the crow keeps cawing. The earth around him drones. He puts on the hat of his hoodie, and crosses his ten fingers right in front of his heart. His hair is floating in the air. Under his feet is no ground but emptiness.

"What is happening to me?"

"Help—" The sound does not come from the bottom of the abyss but is from around him. He doesn't know how deep the abyss is, and doesn't know where is the border of this hole. This is the first time in a long time that he feels so uncertain. Wind was coming from below, slapping him right on the face.

"This is what happens to every murderer? Is that mother nature's return?" Asano speaks silently to himself.

He seems to be falling at a slower rate.

"Help—"

He cannot, in any ways, tell if it is a woman's voice or a man's voice. The voice is mechanical, robotic, and lifeless.

Maybe it's Aki's voice, Asano thinks.

He stops falling, and steady ground appears at his feet. And the darkness gradually disappears like mist. Sunlight comes in, there are people squeezing through the long line of bathroom, and the train is lively.

12

The History

Loulouthi and Asano talks about psychology and a new conception of history.

Background music: ???

Loulouthi walks by, and looks at Asano's broken teddy bear.

"What is this?" She laughs lightheartedly upon seeing the teddy bear.

Thank god she doesn't know, Asano thinks, guiltily. The back of his shirt is soaked with sweat, and he almost can't stand straight.

"This is my teddy bear. He is, uh, broken. Tore apart."

"Who did this?"

"My... no, it was me. I was angry."

"Is this your transitional object?"

"What is that?"

"Your transitional object. Like a thing that is in between your subjective mind and the objective world. It's a concept raised by an English psychologist a few centuries ago named Donna Winnicott. She's my favorite psychologist."

"Yeah, he's sort of like my transitional object. I always talked to him. But he, uh, pissed me off."

"How can a teddy bear piss you off? It's more like you pissed off yourself." Loulouthi smiles and looks into Asano's eyes.

"Well technically yes. I, uh..." Somehow he cannot keep talking. He is occupied with what just happened to him. It was supernatural. How come he was just transported into an abyss? Or was that a forest?

"What? Say it." Loulouthi asked, when she is not hearing any more words from Asano.

"I think... I think this teddy bear is cursed. Akikun is cursed. Someone must have done magic to it." Asano said.

"How come? What happened? Why do you say it has magic?" Loulouthi thinks of Ubuntu's black magic.

“Nevermind, it’s complicated. I don’t honestly know what happened. I just...” Somehow Asano feels like it’s better not to tell her his supernatural experience.

“How’s your mother? Are you getting along with her? I heard you two fight a while ago,” Loulouthi tries to connect with him.

“She’s fine. She’s asleep again. She’s getting old,” Asano lies naturally.

“Yeah? I think actually when you get to fifties you need less sleep and you wake up earlier.”

“Maybe that’s the case, but my mother definitely loves sleeping.”

“Good. My mother hates sleep. She’s always working, and she’s such a narcissist.”

“You mean, she admired herself a lot?”

“No, I mean, the concept of narcissism in psychology. Wikipedia has it that ‘Narcissism is the pursuit of gratification from vanity or egoistic of one’s idealized self image and attributes.’ And you know how there’s this subreddit called ‘r/raisedbynarcissists’? It’s really interesting.” Loulouthi says without changing breath, “as for my mom, she’s just too busy to care about me. Sometimes I feel like I want to kill her. Blah.”

“You’d better not say that,” Asano’s heart almost jumps outside his body when he heard the word “kill”. “You know it’s dangerous. People could have looked at their vidi and realize that someone near them just had a dangerous murder ideation.” He thinks about whether people on the train has checked their vidi for this purpose. He must have been exposed if someone did search for a thought check.

“Fine. I’m just complaining,” Loulouthi shakes her head lightly. Her hair is so short that she is very unused to it. Two days ago when she shook her head all her hair would follow and swing around.

“So what about narcissism?” Asano raises a question.

“Babies are needy, but a narcissist mother needs their baby to behave in a certain way to feel good about herself. Isn’t that pathetic?”

“Yeah?”

“A narcissist person intentionally or unintentionally stimulate other people so that they have the emotions she expects them to have. My mother usually expect me to feel ashamed if I seek out for help when I’m feeling down. She wants me to be a version of herself; she wants to enslave me and kill my

free will. She always told me that if I show others my depressed self, no one would want to be friends with me anymore. In fact, she was just threatening me from living authentically. She anticipates me being locked up in my own emotions, feel guilty and be obedient.”

“So in a way, it’s like Sartre’s saying, hell is other people. Your mother tries to objectify you by denying your needs to feel loved, which is a basic need for a child, and even for grown ups. She doesn’t want to have your free will, because she is afraid of you behaving in a way out of her expectation. She needs the norm to feel secure.”

“Exactly. Narcissists are insecure. Em, who is Sartre again? I’ve never heard of her.”

“It’s a he. He was a existential philosopher in the 20th century. Don’t just assume that all philosophers are females! You know how history is written by the conquerer.”

“I thought male philosophers are only an ancient phenomenon. I’ve never learned about them in as late as 20th century. I thought male philosophers only exist 6000 years ago in Mesopotamia.”

“Oh no. You must have assumed that Aristotle, Confucia, and Buddha are females then?”

“Of course they are females! Males in that time did not have a chance of education and they could not have come up with philosophies.”

“You’re wrong. What they taught you is wrong.”

“Do textbooks in Sunorigin tell you so?”

“No, no textbook did. I went on some dark net and searched for myself.”

“So you could gain access to dark net in Sunorigin? That’s not allowed in Miezhdustan,” Loulouthi looks at him in wonder.

“We are also not allowed to surf on dark net, but I had a friend who lives in a dark net, so he got me all the connections.”

“A virtual friend?”

“No, he’s real. As real as you and me.”

“How come a real person live in a net? Is he like a spider or something?”

“No. I see him through dreams. Every dream with him is so lucid, as if I am awake. His name is Ek, spelled as ee-kay.”

“Oh.” Loulouthi thinks about the ancient genders that Ubuntu told her. Eks and Shunnyas.

“He lives in a dark net and I can’t tell you the IP. I must keep the address a secret, otherwise he would explode.”

“Is he like the robot, um, Janet, in the Good Place?”

“What is that?”

“Um, the Good Place is a TV show in the 20th century. Em, no, it might be the 21st century.”

“What is a TV show?”

“That’s an classical way of amusement. It was popular in the late 20th century and early 21th century. At that time they still needed a real, solid screen to watch videos.”

“Wow, must have been very inconvenient.”

“Yeah. Can you imagine that they put a huge solid screen in the living room and have couches around it? And it’s hard to recycle.”

“Yeah, people in the past have done so much damage to the environment. They had so much solid waste. Why couldn’t they just get rid of the solid screen?”

“That’s what they did in 2039. There was a screen revolution. After that people set limit on the solid screen and started to use the projectile screen much more often. But back to where we started, how is your friend in the dark net like?”

“He’s a professional rapper. He raps a lot.”

“What is rapper? Is he like a technician?”

“No, rap is a kind of music. Probably originated in the 20th century. It’s a traditional form of art, thought you might be interested.”

“Of course I’m interested in all things traditional. I love history and cultures around the world.”

“Anyway, because he lives in a net, he does not need to earn a living. Nor do I know where his food come from. He probably eats the cables and pictures of real food on the dark net.”

“Does he have any friends?”

“No, just me.”

“How did you meet him?”

“It was five years ago, when I started having sleep paralysis. I lay on the bed, I could feel everything but could not move any of my muscles. Then I saw a shadow come near my bed, and it was him. He told me his name was Ek, and told me that came to me because he was lonely. He also told me he hates adults and want to talk to children. I was eleven,” Asano swallows his saliva.

“He’s not real then, if he only exists as ghost and visit you in your dreams.”

“No. At least he was real. He lived in Osaka, that’s why he had the accent. And I’m from Tokyo, by the way. I mean, I prayed to God the day before he appeared. I was a deist. I prayed for something to change my life. So he came.”

“And changed your life?”

“Sort of. He told me about his version of history.”

“His version of history that these philosophers are male?” Loulouthi starts laughing with disbelief.

“Hey, don’t laugh. I think it is true,” Asano says.

“Try to convince me.”

“There are a lot of evidence. Do you know that in ancient Greece gay activities were encouraged?”

“No. Gay is low; lesbianism was encouraged, just like now.”

“Fine. You don’t know that.”

“I can’t believe in you if you don’t say something that match with my current understanding of history,” Loulouthi argues.

“Ah right! Look at the word anthropology. The root of this word is *άνθρωπος*, which means person, or man. That means at least, in that time, a person is by default a man.”

“Even if that is correct, what is the point you try to make?”

“I’m just telling you that we live in a huge lie! We live in a web of lies weaved sometime last century. It is not true that women are superior than men.”

“You’re just thinking with you weak masculine mind. You’re jealous. You must be. Freud said that men are jealous of women’s vaginas and regret having things hanging between their legs.”

“Which Freud?”

“Anna Freud, not his son Sigmund Freud.”

“Ha! You are just like any other ignorant person,” Asano shakes his head, “Anna Freud is Sigmund Freud’s daughter, not his mother.”

“No. How can I believe you if it is just one word that raises suspicion? People who made the hellenic language could have said ‘gentlemen first’ so they let humanity equate masculinity. That shows the chivalry of us women.”

“You are all messed up. You would believe me if you just go on the dark net.”

“I won’t. I believe in what I believe.”

“Would you like to be the ignorant staying in Plato’s cave?”

“I would assume that you say Plato is a man?”

“Of course he is.”

“Okay. Whatever. I believed you before, but now you are just being crazy.”

“No, I want to tell you the truth, because I think you are a smart person. I have hope in you.”

“No way. You speak as if you are a priest. But you are just a little stick, or a little softie. Whatever. I was planning to talk with you about psychology, not on some weird version of history. I bet I know more about history than you do. I studied a lot of classical subjects on my own.”

Asano shakes his head in disappointment. “You’d never understand.”

He feels like he is so much a grown up compared with this person next to him. Although he is younger, he is closer to the truth. Which means, he is closer to a real revolution. But he needs more people to believe him. Of course Loulouthi would just rot in her own safety corner when the time comes by.

13

The Diary

Loulouthi reads her diary, contemplates about her friend and family, recalls an occasion when Konstantin ate grass, and then keeps reading her diary.

Background music: ???

Sunlight shines through the window in Loulouthi's chamber. The snow outside calms her down and makes her feel cozy in her bunk. Her vidi buzzes every few seconds, but she is busy lying face down in her bed reading her past diaries. She haven't read them in years and now she need to read them to straighten up her mind and reflect upon herself.

She is thinking about Konstantin, her beloved boyfriend. When she reads the entry for April 7th 2215, she finds a great metaphor for her relationship with him.

April 7th 2215, Friday

Today I talked with Jenny about our performance for the Art Festival that will happen in two weeks. I proposed that we can demonstrate the different relationships between a dog and a human. We will have multiple one-minute acts upon request, or we will do these acts in sequence. The acts are: A woman about to kill the dog and eat her. A poor beggar living with the dog alone on streets. A blind woman who needs her dog to cross the road. A little girl who steals a new-born puppy and takes care of her. Basically I just want to present a relationship between a dog and a human that is mutually dependent. Many of their lives are at stake. I'm gonna act as the dog and Jenny is gonna act as the human. I'm thinking of doing the combination of poor theatre and theatre of cruelty...

Isn't her relationship with Konstantin similar with the relationship between the dog and the human? He is obviously dependent on her. He needs to call her every day, while she is fine with just being on her own. But in a way she is also dependent on him—she needs his dependence to feel sane about herself. When they lived together over the summer, Loulouthi was studying all day, while Konstantin cooked for her, did the laundry, and cleaned the

room. Loulouthi, if living on her own, doesn't really do these things well. She thought about the criticism people had for Descartes, especially for her Meditation on First Philosophy—she ignored her relationship with the outside world. This is self-absorbingly biased. Of course one cannot ignore her relationship with others.

She remembered the cult she joined in 2214, where the ability to be alone and cutting off ties with mediocrity was emphasized. She remembered the sticky note she put on the door, declaring herself to her mother: “I’m a studying robot. I live for expanding my knowledge, and I don’t waste time in chitchatting. Don’t talk to me because I won’t respond.”

And it was her uncle who bought groceries, cooked, cleaned the house, did the laundry, and played with Sid, while Loulouthi and her mother were working hard, alone in their rooms.

She couldn't have made it without those that supported her, just like the human who curses the dog would not survive without the dog's cooperation.

What she notices more is how she and Konstantin were treating each other like each other's transitional object when they lived together. They almost cut off all their connections with others people. The only way for their souls to breathe was to talk with each other. This changed their conversation style—when Loulouthi and Konstantin first met they talked a lot about philosophy and poetry, but in the summer when they lived together they were talking more about relationships between people, about what to cook, and about their future life together.

Loulouthi remembers the first time she told her mother and uncle that she has a boyfriend. They were doubtful about Konstantin from the beginning. They wanted Loulouthi to live with her brother Sid, and have a girlfriend, instead of a boyfriend. Loulouthi's mother has a girlfriend, who lives near and comes visit them twice a week. In her society, those who have a boyfriend are considered less a person than those who have a girlfriend. But Ubuntu and Konstantin were happy about each other. That is, before Konstantin knew about their little secret. Konstantin always thought of Ubuntu as a positive adult figure in Loulouthi's life, despite the former's unrestrained attitude towards life. It is weird how a person as traditional as Loulouthi became close with a person as progressive as Ubuntu. Maybe Loulouthi wasn't traditional at all: her being with Konstantin and Ubuntu was a symbol of her defiance against her culture. But she loves her culture. She loves how women dress neatly and comfortably in whatever they want. She loves how men are told to dress in a way that please women. She loves her family,

with her uncle, her grandma, and her brother around. She loves the way Konstantin emotionally depends on her—it makes her feel strong. But is that what a healthy relationship would be like? He needs her approval on almost everything just to feel safe.

She then thinks about Oluwa. She and Oluwa have been best friends since high school, and Oluwa also went to Miezhudu Institute of Technology. She studies space-time engineering. Next year she will have learnt enough theories to get hands on with time machines. Scientists have sent books, plants, and small animals back in time and to the future, but haven't sent any human beings due to ethical concerns. Maybe one day Oluwa would disappear in a huge time machine, Loulouthi thinks.

It was all too much thinking. It is thinking that led her to Castalia. Castalia is a place to think and to meditate. She believes that Castalia is where she belongs to.

Under her bunk is Scissor, calling his son Sorano in Sunoriginese. While being jealous of a potential husband-brother, he has to hide it in front of his son, and pretend that his relationship with his wife is good. He knows that Sorano can probably see that their relationship is awkward than ever, but at least he has to try.

“But let's not talk about the changing weather. Enough of that. Hope you're not catching a cold. Anyway, Sorano, how's your studies going?”

“I'm fine, dad, don't worry. I've got 93% on my last exam.”

“You sound like you're drunk.”

“I'm not. I'm just enjoying life.”

“You know how I begged your mom to let you go to college. You've gotta work hard.”

“I know. I am working hard. Hope you are having a great time with mom. How is uncle Tom doing, by the way?”

“He's fine. We're all fine. I enjoy my friendship with him, really. You know what? He made a cake for me and your mom's anniversary! How altruist is that! Being able to see beyond his competition with me, and giving us the best wishes!”

“Oh. That's nice.” Sorano speaks contemptuously.

Scissor knows that his son sees through his lie. How in the world can Tom be willing to do anything for him, anyway. But maybe now he can, with the threat of him being replaced by the 16-year-old third husband-to-be.

“Have you find a girlfriend yet? Got anyone that you are interested in?”

“Nah. Girls don’t like me, because I’m mixed.”

“I see. Maybe they just don’t like that you’re light skinned. It doesn’t really make a difference. They just think you are white because you are only half yellow. But you should feel like home, now that you are studying in your mom’s country.”

“But Amerikans are racist! They just think white people are born to serve black people. And I’m half white. A drop of white blood makes one white. So I’m 100% white for them. I hate coming here. It’s better for me to stay in Sunorigin. At least most yellow people don’t exclude me.”

“Well, you’ve gotta face what you have to face. I know it is hard to live as a white man in Amerika, with all the gun violence and stuff, but it is the experience of being excluded that makes you know how sweet home is. One day, when you find a woman, you will feel content. You don’t have to work no more. God said that in a marriage, the wife is the employer, and the husband is the employee.”

“And that’s why mom has two employees.”

“Three... Oh no... I shouldn’t have told you.”

“I’m having a new uncle? What’s his name? How old is he? What does his mother and sisters do?” Sorano sounds excited.

“He is... Nevermind. I’ve gotta buy groceries now, I’ll hang up.”

“Wait wait wait. Are you already at the grocery store?”

“Why? I’m at home.”

“There are people talking where you’re at. I can hear them. You are not at home.”

“I’m just watching the TV. I’m bored. You want me to shut it off?” Scissor has not told Sorano that he is out traveling, neither does he want to tell him. He knows that Sorano would let him leave the TV on.

“No, I’m fine with the TV on. How’s everything at home? Has mom beaten you again?”

“Not recently. No. She read a book about how God never intended to let wives beat husbands. It is just a cultural practice that we live with. Now I’m good, really. Em, Rock’s here. He’s traveling to Sunorigin all the way from Amerika.”

“Rock? Mom’s brother?”

“Yes, remember when your mom took you and little Electra to Amerika? You must have saw Rock at that time.”

“Oh yeah... Now I remember.”

“...”

Loulouthi is eavesdropping their conversation via the translation on vidi. Because she is one of the aristocrats in Miezhdustan, her vidi is among the top 1% developed. It has many features that other vidis don’t have, such as simultaneous interpretation. There is really no reason why normal vidis don’t have simultaneous interpretation, since it is a technology developed two centuries ago, except for that the rulers of this world want to control the masses by avoiding them understanding foreign languages.

Scissor’s having to lie reminds Loulouthi of the opposite—the truthfulness of Konstantin. He wouldn’t leave any promise unfulfilled. Nor would he do anything that is unphilosophical.

It was early May, a few days before they set in to live together. Loulouthi found Konstantin to be eating grass from the field near the track. And when she asks why he is doing this, he said, “I’m doing this to prove my existence. To convince myself that my life is worth something.”

Konstantin is too true to be that depressive. To him, real respect means respecting the object’s authenticity. In a way, true respect does not exist, because everyone treats others a non-self object, and when they treat others like themselves, they’ve got a problem.

“Why are you not vegetarian then, Konstantin?” Loulouthi asked, staring at the grass he was eating.

“This is one of the many sins I have. I just simply love meat.” Konstantin said after chewing the grass, “Oh the grass tastes good, and it’s got the nice smell.”

“Why do you only eat the green part, not the roots?”

“Because I only pulled out the green part. What, you expect me to eat all of the grass?”

“No, I expect you to stop messing with yourself and do something productive.”

“I am doing something productive. I’m doing my rite. My religious rite. Part of it is eating grass on certain dates. Symbol is a part of productivity.”

“So today is a special day?”

“Yes, it is a special day in my religion.”

“What is your religion then?”

“I don’t have a name for it yet. It’s about running everyday, meditating, occasionally lie on the ground to look at the sky or the stars, and helping others as much as I can.”

“What do you believe in? Do you have a God?”

“It’s not a God. I believe in the mysterious. Again, it does not have a name, so you can’t possibly call it.”

“You know, maybe I can put some grass in the blender and make a smoothie for you, my lovely grass-eater.” Loulouthi leans over and hugs him from behind, “I love you, Konstantin. Now don’t be so sad and lonely and let’s do something.”

“No, I am afraid.”

“What are there to be afraid of? I’m with you. your girlfriend’s with you.”

“I’m contemplating death. It’s so scary. But you promised you will die after me.”

“Yes I will. I will be by your side when you die. We will be in a warm room with a fireplace, and our kids will be there, and grandkids... We will be super old. And we are all gonna remember you.”

“That makes me feel better. That’s something.”

“So you are still up to eating grass?”

“Yes. This smell of spring, of summer coming, makes me feel good. Next spring is far away yet!”

“Nah. I don’t like springs more than winters. I like snow.”

“Of course you like the tranquility of snow. That’s so Loulouthi of you,” Konstantin kisses Loulouthi.

“Ew, you taste like grass.” Loulouthi gives him a disappointed look.

“Grass tastes good. But are you sure you will die after me?”

“Of course I will. I will protect you for your whole life. I won’t let anyone hurt you. I won’t let **anything** happen to you, my little squirrel.”

“Since when did I become a squirrel?”

“Since just now. Your hair looks like a squirrel and smells like a squirrel.” She buries her nose into Konstantin’s hair.

“So you’ve smelled a squirrel?”

“Not really. But I can imagine their smell. It’s a nice smell, like pine nuts.”

“What if one day you don’t love me anymore?” Konstantin stares into her eyes, and sees himself in them.

“Don’t worry. Even my vidi predicted that we will be together for the rest of our lives! When I’m 90 I will still love you as much as I love you now, I promise.” Loulouthi gives him a warm smile. The sun was shining on her face, making her skin the color of maze.

“You should never break your promise then. I’ll live on that premise.” Konstantin moves his index and middle fingers along Loulouthi’s shoulder, as if his fingers were two feet of one woman trying to climb a difficult mountain.

“I love you for being so cute, Konstantin.” Loulouthi kisses him on the forehead.

“I love you not for any of your external qualities, but for you being the authentic you. For your always opening your heart for me.”

“So you mean I will lose you when I stop sharing my inner thoughts with you.”

“You won’t; I’m still giving the most vulnerable part of me to you. I think that’s the most important part in a relationship—to understand and value each other’s vulnerability, and to accept each other’s needs and defects.”

“But relationship is also about materials. We’e gotta live together for a long time.”

“Live together for a long time. What a promise! Now what? I’ve decided to leave him behind.” Loulouthi thinks, and takes out her 8th diary.

Loulouthi keeps reading her diary, and she finds a hypothetical conversation with one of her stuffed animals:

“I kind of feel like I’m being narcissistic.” “Why is that?” “Because I am not responding to people as they need, but sending information that I want them to hear or to stir certain emotions in them. I feel like a control freak” “Well, at least you are not controlling me” “You just don’t realize it. You literally exist in my mind” “I exist physically. See, I’m talking” “Yeah. I feel like I may be criticizing myself too much, because of the way my mom used to criticize me. I have internalized her thoughts. She always made

me feel that I'm not good enough. And I hate people being patronizing, and I'm trying to avoid doing that, but it feels good to be patronizing. I censor every one of my thoughts, and if someone replied to me later than expected, I would feel like I did something wrong. And every time after I chat with Ubuntu, I feel ashamed—I shouldn't let a teacher figure know my innermost thoughts—I should retain boundaries with her, instead of letting her peek into my life" "Have you noticed that your thoughts are spreading everywhere like a sun, instead of focusing on one point like a laser beam" "I've noticed that and I feel ashamed of that" "Why are you ashamed of so many things? What does it mean for you to feel shame" "Basically when I feel shame about something I want to hide it. Or tell others that I'm doing really bad, in order to feel good about myself. It's like what I'm doing (bad) and my essence (good) are separated, if I distinctly make a reason for the products badness" "You just don't have the courage to admit that you are imperfect" "Parts of me have, parts of me don't have" "So can you try to distinguish what behaviors of yours are sickly narcissistic and what behaviors are a part of healthy narcissism, instead of always feeling ashamed of yourself" "Thanks, that's a good advice"

Rock is sipping his tea. Loulouthi looks down at his tea cup and sees floating dark red tea leaves; the water is vibrating in accordance with the vibration of the train. She then tucks her head forward and to her right, in order to see the things out of window. But she is too high on her bed that she could only see the snow on the ground. It doesn't even look like snow, with the train at such a high speed.

Then at one point suddenly the train moves into a shadow. Loulouthi gets off her bed to turn on the lights. She hears the train crunching and rattling, and the wind sizzling through the gap, almost to the point of a scream. She realizes that they are going through a tunnel. They've arrived at the foot of a mountain.

The tunnel is long, and the light isn't as good as natural sunshine.

To be written

14

The Voices

Asano hears voices forcing him to either have sex with or eat a piece of flesh off his mother.

Background music: Clown on a String, Eleanor Minyuan Lu

Asano can't help feeling scared. And whenever he is scared, the voices come back.

"You killed her, what are you going to do next?" One voice says.

"You will regret what you've done. People will know. You will feel guilty for the rest of your life." Another voice says.

"Did you kill her because you were afraid of her?" Yet another voice says.

"You could have survived the life she arranged for you. Why did you kill her?"

"You killed her just because she forced you to go on this trip? You're too vulnerable. You are pathetic."

"What do you want now? Cut her open and eat her flesh? Do it..."

Asano covers his ear and shouts, "Stop!"

A few people from the chambers next to him come over and ask what happened.

"Nothing. I was... Thinking of something unpleasant," Asano explains.

"Well, hope you get better control of yourself next time." The neighbor says.

Asano feels devastated and says, "control myself better? What an unnice thing to say."

"Yo, Just don't be so sensitive okay? It's not like I'm scolding you." The neighbor comes again with an ugly face.

"I withhold my right to be sensitive," Asano thinks, "being sensitive is not wrong. It is a bless. They just don't understand."

"Are you satisfied, now that you pissed off that woman?" One voice say.

“Do you feel guilty for everyone alive because you just killed you mother? What are your friends at school gonna think of you?”

“Shut up, I’m not returning to that school.”

“You must be feeling ecstatic now. You can’t even sit still. You must be so excited to see your mom dead.”

“You wanted to suck your mother, don’t you? You little Oedipus.”

“Could you please stop?” Asano frowns.

“You killed her just to suck her. You have a fetish for dead bodies. I know you do.”

“I don’t. Leave me alone.” Asano thinks.

“I give you two choice. You either suck her or you cut her open and eat her.”

“Enough. I don’t even have a knife,” when uttering the “f” sound, Asano bites his lower lip so hard that it almost bleeds.

He grits his teeth as hard as he can and holds his left fist against his right fist. He feels like his head is going to explode.

“Yeah, suck her. Or eat her.”

“Suck her! Eat her!”

“Suck! Eat! Suck! Eat!” All the voices converge into a loud scream. It sounds like fifty people are shouting from the corners of a closet.

“Daughter of a stick, y’all get the hell outta my way!” Asano gets angry, and crashes his fist into the window.

“Either you do one of these or we keep screaming.” One voice shouts.

Asano tries to sit still and meditate, but he lasts for no more than five minutes. It is all too chaotic.

“Fine. I will... Eat a part of her.” Asano says, looking at her mother, figuring out which part to eat. Lips? No, that would be like kissing. Face? No, it would make it apparent that he did something to his mother. Belly? Hair? Yes, hair would do!

He plucks a string of his mother’s hair from the middle, and the piece of hair happens to be white. In fact, most of his mother’s hair is white already. It reminds him of the phrase, “白发人送黑发人”, white-headed people sending off black-headed people.

He then tries to swallow his mother’s hair. He had never swallowed hair before, and now he just realized how hard it is to swallow a string of hair.

It sticks in your throat. Finally, he manages to swallow the hair, yet the voices are still speaking to him.

“That’s not her flesh! I want you to eat a piece of meat off her!”

“Fine.” Asano feels disgusted after eating the hair. Then he gets an idea—the feet. His mother has a lot of calluses on her feet. Maybe that will count for the voices.

He then moves his butt to the feet of his mother, and takes off the sock on her right foot. He spots a big callus and tears it off. Then he puts the callus in his mouth, holds his breath, and swallows it instantly, trying not to focus on its taste.

The voices are still chaotic.

“Aren’t you satisfied? I’ve eaten a piece of her.”

“No! I told you to eat her flesh. Not her skin. You cut off a piece of her flesh, eat it, and then I will disappear. Or you suck her.”

“Why are you forcing me to do this?”

“No reason. Just for fun. You’ve got some wild voices in your head, young man.”

“I can’t. She’s my mother!” Every word that Asano utters sounds as hard and painful as biting a piece off his lips.

“She’s your mother! Haha, now you say it? What were you thinking when you killed her? Was she not a human being? Was she not the one who raised you? Don’t you have any conscience?”

“Don’t say it anymore. I’m already feeling bad enough. Please...”

“Prove me that you hate her enough to kill her, otherwise I’ll keep screaming, even when you’re sleep.” The voice says.

“I’m not cutting off her flesh.” Asano asserts.

“Why not? You love her, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t love her.”

“Then why are you defending her?”

“I’m not defending her. I just think eating another human being’s flesh is disgusting. This is morally wrong.” At the moment he says “morally wrong” he realized his killing is morally wrong, but then he justifies himself by thinking that his mother instigated all this.

“What if she was forced? What if she had no choice? What leverage does she hold against you? Why did you not escape?”

“I was too sick to escape! I was sick! I see the spider every day. And I hear **you!**”

“You hear us, huh. You know why you hear us?”

“Why?”

“Because you are one of the chosen.”

“So? Chosen for what? The hell? You’ve been telling me this every time yet you never told me more about it. I’m feeling offended.”

“You are one of the good ones in hell, as I told you many times before, I strongly encourage you, no, you are obligated to...” Not until the voice finishes her speech, Asano interrupts.

“All you trying to do with me is to **mainpulate** me. Like I am your toy. Who the hell are you anyway? You are not real, I know that. You are only in my head.”

“Then we are happy being the parasites in your head, and giving you orders.” And old male voice says.

“Come on, just eat your mother. She would love a piece of her to remain in you.” A little girl’s voice says.

“No, Angela, what’s important is his remaining love for his mother. We’re gonna make use of that.” A woman’s voice says.

The little girl’s voice replies, “But Auntie Martha, he told us before that he hates his mom. And he loves her? Why are humans so complicated?”

Asano thinks, “great, now that they’ve got a conversation on their own. I’ll just listen to them and figure out who the heck are in my head, stalking me.”

A baby cries. Asano alertly walks out of his chamber and glances at the chambers around. There’s no baby nearby, nor has he heard the baby cry before.

The baby wails and then screams. And in the scream there is a rhythm, a pattern, that also exist in the scream of the voices. Now Asano knows that the baby is a part of the voices. But they sound so real!

“Let’s kill the baby.” A woman’s voice says.

“No, don’t kill the baby!” Asano shouts out loud. A man standing next to him on the hallway looks at him wearily and asks, “Are you okay?”

“Not I’m not.”

“What’s happening? Is someone going to kill a baby?”

“No. Um. Actually, I’m not sure. I’ve been hearing these things and they are really confusing for me.”

The man gives him a weird stare and walks away, looking afraid.

“You just scared off a man,” a voice says, “you pathetic little stick.”

“What are we gonna do, kill him? Make his head explode?” Asano hears these faint words behind screams.

“Oh, they are planning to murder me. My voices.” Asano realizes, “But how are they going to do that?”

“I know what you are up to,” Asano tries to speak to the voices.

“What do we do now? Tell Martha? Where are you, Martha?”

“Sit down, baby, drink something.”

“I don’t want to drink anything. Leave me alone.”

“Drink it! It’s good for your health. It’s fresh semen and orange juice.”

“Sounds good. But no, I’m not interested.”

These voices are having a conversation on their own! Or were some people really having such a conversation on the train? Maybe these conversations are real.

“Let’s turn my extra vidi into a micro bomb and put it on his head. My extra vidi is really small, and he won’t notice it.” One voice says.

“Or we can poison him, just like how he killed his mother.”

“That would be too silly. He knows everything about poison and he must be super careful not to be poisoned.”

“What about we tell the police that he killed his mother and ate her flesh?”

“Sounds like a good idea. But we want him dead, not miserably alive. He is too blessed not to be spared death.”

“Are we talking about Diablo or Asano? Which one do we want dead?”

“Diablo. He started all this. Asano can wait. We will deal with him later.” A woman’s voice says.

“Who the heck is Diablo? I thought they were talking about me.” Asano wonders.

“No, Asano should be dead too. We’ve left him alone for too long. He would know and spread the word.”

“Don’t worry about him. He will die soon. He will be taken care of.” The woman’s voice says.

Asano walks around the chamber, trying to find Loulouthi. But she seems busy reading her diaries.

“Nevermind, I will deal with this myself. Wouldn’t do better to tell someone what I’m experiencing. No one would understand.”

When he says “no one would understand”, he thinks of Ek immediately.

“Suck! I need to see Ek.”

He walks back to his bed, and sits on it, trying to meditate and see Ek coming. When he closes his eyes, he sees a web, scattered in a corner, with nothing on it.

“Ek, I need to see you! Come on! You are my last friend. Please don’t leave me.”

“He’s doing something! The Asano kid. Let’s kill him.” One voice in the background says.

“What’s he doing? Connecting to the dark net? No, the space ain’t big enough for him here on the train. Nothing would come through on the dark net.” Another voice says.

“What about that? What if he is reporting to the headquarter about us?”

“I know he is not. He does not even have the headquarter’s number. Plus he does not know the password.”

“But he is smart! He got onto the dark net and made a friend there.”

“The dark net is not our domain. Let’s leave him be.”

“He will be fine alone. He will find solitude amusing.”

“So let’s do something to make him feel bad. Wasn’t torturing him the original plan?”

“I think he can hear us speak. Let’s draw the curtains so that he couldn’t hear us.”

Then the voices lower the volume, and gradually fades out. Asano feels surreal. Nothing is right since he killed his mother. It is as if all the psychotic features that happened on his mother is now happening on him. He sees a

man with a pineapple body standing at the far end of the corridor, at the joint of this carriage and the next.

“Pineapple man. No...” Asano gets afraid and hides into his bed, covering himself in the quilt. Then he sees his mother’s dead body and gets even more scared.

15

The Lunch

Lunchtime. Asano's mother's body got moved supernaturally.

Background music: ???

The smell of food floods the whole carriage. People have been stretching out their head and sniffing around. Train staffs have been pushing the lunch trolley forward. It's lunchtime.

"Hey, what do you have for lunch?" Someone asks.

"We have hummus, roast chicken, black beans, tofu, spinach, carrots, rice, quinoa, ramen, potatoes, roast veggies for the burrito, and cheeseburgers, sushi, pizza, CocaCola, lemonade, apple cider..." The staff enumerates.

"Can I have a three cups chicken set?"

"Sure! That will be 200 rubles."

When the trolley moves to the 12th chamber, the woman sleeping on the bed over Asano's bed tries to wake Asano's mother up. "Hey, sister, you want something to eat?"

Asano quickly climbs up from his pillow and stands in between her bed and his mother's bed, and tells her, "My mother's sick. She just want to get some sleep. Please be quiet."

"Sorry. Just haven't seen her move since a while ago. Thought there's something wrong with her."

"No, no, she is alright, she is just tired. She needs some rest," Asano turns around and tucks his mother in the bed, pretending to speak with her, "You're alright, isn't it? Don't wanna wake up? I'll buy lunch for ya."

"Definitely. Let her have a good rest!" The woman says, after seeing all this act. She probably believed in him.

"Yes, let her rest in peace." Upon saying these words, Asano regrets it. This makes it so obvious that he has killed his mother.

He is glad that the middle aged woman he was just speaking to has not found out the loophole in his words.

The trolley comes closer.

“I’d like two slices of Margherita.” Someone said.

“That’s 120 rubles.”

Asano tries to think of what he would like to order. But he just doesn’t feel hungry. Maybe some ramen, as always. Ramen is the option he always goes for when he doesn’t know what to eat.

Yeah, he *is* stuck here with his sucking mother. Maybe the only resemblance he shares with the old-fashioned Loulouthi is their resentment toward their mothers. Maybe his mother is also narcissistic. But Asano isn’t sure about all the psychological terms. Thought being a masculinist, he found what he read about Freud was disturbing in an opposite way. Of course, I mean, the Freud he read about on the dark net with his friend Ek, not the Freud on the standardized textbooks.

The trolley comes to Asano’s chamber. The woman from the bed above him climbs down and orders a tuna sandwich and a coke. Asano orders ramen. The staff pours hot water into the paper bowl and handed the bowl, as well as the flavor packets, to Asano. Asano takes the bowl with shaky hands.

“Did I drink too much coffee?” Asano speaks to himself. It is indeed rare for him to have such shaky hands.

“Till when do I need to fake my mother’s death? Maybe I should told someone that she overdosed herself,” Asano thinks, “But then they will know because they can test my mother’s blood with the bloodwork extension on vidi. Then they will find out that people usually don’t use such extreme drugs to suicide by overdosing.”

After he finishes his lunch without much appetite, Asano sits on his mother’s bed, just besides her dead body. He reaches out he hand to touch his mother’s face. It is already as cold as steel. He stares at her peaceful face for a long time. This is the face that he dreaded for so long as a child. Finally he leaves the bed and heads for the restroom. He has the habit of brushing his teeth every time after meal.

At the restroom mirror he looks into his face. He still looks not fully grown, although with a bit of facial hair unshaved. His glasses are thick and heavy on his nose. His mother always told him that he was too ugly to be married, before he was forced to engage with Electra. But he thinks he is not ugly. He just looks normal, like any other random guy on streets. His hair is what he is most proud of. He keeps his hair almost to his shoulders. It is as black and shiny as coal.

As he squeezes the toothpaste out of the tube onto the toothbrush, he thinks of the food astronauts eat in outer space. Do they taste as awful as toothpaste? But nothing seems to matter now now that his mother is dead. He hasn't thought of what to do next yet. He should've thought about this long before he decided to kill his mother. He did have plans, but they all seem to disappear now that it actually happened.

He brushes his teeth meticulously. There is a cleavage between two of his larger teeth in the lower behind of his left mouth, which always stuck food. He cleans that part for about half a minute until the food wreckage falls out. He seems so calm but feels so anxious. He thought maybe it is time for him to shave.

So he goes back to his chamber and gets his razor out, and heads back to the restroom. He slowly puts the foam on his face and wait until he feels like it is time for shaving. He looks at himself in the mirror again. He smiles at himself.

"I'm cool. It's all good." He talks to himself.

He shaves and then walks back to his chamber quietly, without any sound of his pace.

To his surprise, he found his mother in a sitting-up position, with the quilt and the pillow all messed up. Someone must have noticed and put her in that way! Asano looks up to the upper beds. No one is there. He quickly glances around the chamber, and everything else seems to be in order. Feeling doubtful, he drags his mother's body back down into the quilt and places her head on the pillow.

"Weird things keep happening to me since I killed her," Asano thinks, "maybe the gods do exist. They are blaming me. Maybe I deserve to go to hell. But hell does not exist. Afterlife does not exist. At all. Or maybe I've just been having psychosis again."

The idea that he has been having psychosis again is devastating to him. He thought he has passed that phase. Maybe the supernatural experience he just had was a calling from the souls of all the creatures in the universe.

People in Sunorigin usually don't believe in the Holy Kitab, but they believe that everything has a soul and they will return to the earth, or mother nature. They burn incense and hold libation ceremonies to commemorate their ancestors and the souls of mountains, rivers, and ocean.

Asano kind of believed in this. He feels like everything has a soul. He could talk to plants and animals and they would respond to him. Once he spent

an entire afternoon talking to a cat; he learned so many things from a cat's perspective.

The woman on the top bed doesn't seem to be bothered by Asano. She does not want to talk with Asano either. She does not even seem bothered by Asano's mother not moving. She seems like the kind of woman who would not be surprised by a murder at all.

To be written

Part IV

What respect meant for Konstantin

16

The Call

One past conversation between Loulouthi and Konstantin. She received a phone call from Konstantin, and fakes her death again. She reads an entry on her diary and sees a photo, and contemplates about her own situation.

Background music: Music Box, Regina Spektor

Dear reader, as I've told you before, our lovely Konstantin is in the Amharic Queendom doing anthropological research for his senior thesis. He has been separated from Loulouthi for a few months. He is a liberate. He told Loulouthi he wanted to sleep with other women and men. Loulouthi threatened him with a breakup.

Their conversation was like:

"I don't need to refrain from sleeping with other people to prove that I love you. I love you and you should believe in me because we are a perfect couple. But I do have my needs and since you are far away, I need someone else to fulfill my needs. Come on, I do need physical closeness." Konstantin said. "But you are not respecting *MY NEEDS* by sleeping with others. I have my need for you to belong to me." "But I can't belong to you. We are separate individuals." "You must; you are my man. Men belong to women, no?" "Maybe we should just separate for a while." "No. If we are to separate, this is the end. Like, the *end* end." "But I don't want to break up with you..." "Then don't hook up with people! Never!" "But you had sex with other people." "Not while we are together", Loulouthi defended for herself. "What about with Ubuntu?" "What I did with her was not sex. It was only magic." "But you did have sex with her." "No. What we had was only friendship, not sex. Plus, she loved me. She always had." "Don't you think having sex with someone who loves you other than your partner is cheating?" "No. I did not have sex with her." "You are only saying this from a woman's perspective. You think sex between women is not sex. Don't you think I deserve the same respect that you have for yourself?" "Yes, you do. I am respecting you. To me respect is about being good at doing one's own job, and not disturb each other's life. I am not disturbing your life." "I have a very different definition of respect then. To me respect is about deep empathy. It's a natural feeling I have for many things. I try to feel things

from what you are feeling. I try not to hurt animals and plants also..." "Well, *that* is just anthropomorphizing, plus you are not considering my feeling if you sleep with others." "It's not like I love you less if I sleep with others." "It is! You don't have a large capacity to love. I know you." "Okay, okay. Fine. Let me think twice then."

What Loulouthi doesn't know is that he'd already slept with other people. She doesn't know that in Konstantin's mind, self respect comes before respect for others. In order to respect his own deadly needs, he did what would seem like a betrayal to Loulouthi.

"Speaking of the devil," Loulouthi is thinking of Konstantin as he calls her. She shakes her vidi a bit to turn it off.

A minute later, the vidi starts buzzing again.

She takes it off her right ear and put it on her finger. Then she shakes it.

Then it buzzes again.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Someone knows that I'm alive now?" Loulouthi thinks.

"Fine, I'll answer the call," Loulouthi speaks to herself.

It's Konstantin.

"Hey, Loulouthi, you there? I've been really sick. I had a fever. I did not fall asleep last night. I think I've caught the flu—there's a serious flu around here, the Ralpop, and it's killing people. The doctor said I may die," Konstantin speaks in a weak, hoarse voice.

Loulouthi listens but does not speak. She wants everyone, except for Sid and Oluwa, to think that she is dead.

"You there?"

Konstantin can probably hear Loulouthi's breath. He waits a while and keeps talking, "Anyway, yesterday I went to the archaeology lab and pricked my finger open. There was a little blood. Why don't you call me? I've been waiting for your call for three days."

Still Loulouthi does not speak, but pretends to be sobbing.

"Hello?"

"Say something, Loulouthi."

"Hey. Are you alive?"

Loulouthi keeps sobbing and slowly speaks to the vidi microphone in her mother's voice, "I'm sorry, Loulouthi's dead."

"What?" Konstantin exclaims in disbelief, "you're joking, no? You must be joking. Loulouthi is fine."

"She died in her studio in a fire two days ago." Loulouthi imitates her mom's voice.

"But... why?"

Loulouthi sobs louder. Then she ends the phone call, and starts to giggle. It's been so funny. To be honest, maybe she does miss Konstantin a little bit, but she is more tired of him. But on the other hand, she feels guilty for not having cared about his health.

So she makes her vidi project a screen on the wall, and says, "Plane ticket. Athena, Ellatha to Addis Ababa, Amharic Queendom. Tomorrow."

She carefully reads each entry, and sees that all plane tickets for tomorrow are sold out. Then she checks for the tickets for the day after tomorrow. There are two tickets left, one leaves by tomorrow afternoon, and the other leaves by tomorrow evening. She will arrive at Castalia tomorrow morning, so that will be fine if she wants to catch a plane and fly to Konstantin's place.

Should she go? She feels ambivalent. Konstantin has had flu before when he was young, and he told her that it was fine. But this time, they said that his life is at risk. He would be so happy to see Loulouthi after three months of separation.

If she goes, her being alive will be known. As a computer science student, she has already hacked all her family members' vidis to fake her death. But she did not include the flight to Amharic Queendom as an invisible trip. If she flies, all the work she has done in order to get to Castalia is wasted. But if she does not fly, will Konstantin be okay?

He will, she thinks. Konstantin has for many times exaggerated his feelings, just for Loulouthi to care more about him. He is childish in a way.

She knew that going to Castalia would mean their breakup. It's not like she does not care about Konstantin at all. It's just that she thinks her future and what she may contribute to the world have much more meaning than her relationship with him does. She loves him. It's not like a doting love. Instead, she tries her best to make it a nurturing love.

But his love for her is needy love. He is like a giant baby that depends on her to feel okay. He needs her to help edit his essays; he needs her to call him every day to not criticize himself too much; he needs her to tell him that he is doing all right in studies and in life. He is so not sure of himself that he needs a lot of confirmation from outside. She feels like a mother for him.

And now is finally the time to get rid of this sick dependency.

Konstantin texts again.

Loulouthi, I saw the massage of your death, but how come I can still send you messages? You are not really dead, are you?

Loulouthi shuts off her vidi and goes on to read her past diaries. She's been skimming her diaries for pictures she drew. She usually draws pictures of eyes and the reflections in eyes. In one eye she drew the destruction of a beloved hometown, while in another she drew the death of a loved one. She loves drawing hopeful, beautiful eyes reflection tragedies. Tragedies are closer to her beauty standard. She definitely loves ancient greek tragedies, especially Sisypha with her always falling big stone on a slope.

On another page is a huge hand with a huge crystal ball in it. There's a little man trapped on the brink of the crystal ball, but he is two dimensional and really small. To him the crystal ball is his world.

Loulouthi was inspired by a song that Regina Spektor sang in 21st century:

*Life inside the music box ain't easy
The mallets hit, the gears are always turning
And everyone inside the mechanism
Is yearning to get out
And sing another melody completely
So different from the one they're always singing
I close my eyes and think that I have found me
But then I feel mortality surround me
I want to sing another melody
So different from the one I always sing
...But when I do the dishes
I run the water very very very hot
And then I fill the sink to the top with bubbles of soap
And then I set all the bottle caps I own afloat
And it's the greatest voyage in the history of plastic
And then I slip my hands in and start to make waves*

*And then I dip my tongue in and take a taste
 It tastes like soap but it doesn't really taste like soap
 And then I lower in my whole mouth and take a gulp
 ...and start to
 Feel mortality surround me
 I close my eyes and think that I have found me
 But life inside the music box ain't easy
 The mallets hit, the gears are always turning
 And everyone inside the mechanism
 Is yearning to get out
 And sing another melody completely
 Is yearning to get out
 Is yearning to get out
 Is yearning to get out*

But her little two-dimensional man in the crystal ball does not know about the outside world. He cannot have a food pipe, because as a two-dimensional being, that would mean his splitting into two pieces. Sounds horrifying.

What's more, it's clear from her drawing that the crystal ball can only be seen on the outside, not from the inside. From the inside the surface of the ball is just a huge mirror. So the little man would be trapped in the ball with his own images, infinite images. But he almost cannot perceive himself as two-dimensional—he cannot see, because his eyes are not designed on the side, due to aesthetic reasons. If he had eyes that are two points on one side of his body, he would be able to see one dimensional things, which are just lines. He would also be able to make a basic guess of the distance between things, and maybe get to calculate the surface of the crystal ball, or even the volume of it, had he gone far enough in his math and science. This is unless he finds a way to secure the solar energy sent into the crystal ball, because he is completely separated from the outside world, cut off from any energy source besides the sun.

“What if I'm trapped too? What if I'm a brain in a jar? What if I existed just for some higher being's pleasure?” Loulouthi thinks. She has argued about this with Konstantin many times, and the only solution she could think of is to suicide—if she is a brain in a jar she would not be able to suicide. In her dreams she killed herself for so many times, but she never died in her dream. What if all of this is just a dream?

Oluwa has mentioned this to her once. That's why she cherished their friendship. “I don't know that you necessarily exist; you may be a delusion.

You don't know that I necessarily exist; I may be a delusion. But if we both came up with this thought at the same time, the symmetry proves that we are both real, because each of us are sure that ourselves are real."

Loulouthi often disagrees with her, "We can both be delusions. We can be the shadows in Plato's cave."

To be written

(Konstantin tells Loulouthi that he is feeling sick. Loulouthi thinks about booking a flight ticket from Ellatha to Amharic Queendom, and stay with Konstantin, but after a long thought process, she thinks Konstantin will be fine and she should keep on going to castalia. Konstantin knows that her going to Castalia means their breakup.)

17

The Video

Loulouthi looks at a video, talks with Asano, which then launches into a conversation.

Background music: ???

Loulouthi looks at the videos Konstantin has posted on his social media site. The most recent video is of gelada monkeys frolicking. These geladas with brown fur are playing in a group. On a large stone is a large male gelada sitting there, masturbating. He stares at a female gelada ten meters away with long, pink nipples. Across them run a few children geladas, chasing each other. One of the kids drags a playmate off into the brook.

“Even the males in animal queendoms behave in a disappointing way,” Loulouthi thinks. “When can men have self-respect?”

“Hey, what are you looking at?” Asano steps in and asks.

“Just a bunch of monkeys playing.”

Asano stands near the door, looking at the screen on the window.

“Wow, seems like these kid monkeys are really having a good time.”

“Yep! I’m just disappointed at that old gelada who sits there staring at a female and masturbating. How could he do it so publicly, with kids playing around? It’s funny.”

“What would you say if it is a female monkey, um, gelada, masturbating while looking at a male?”

“I doubt that the females would look at males and masturbate. Males are not that attractive to females, even in animal queendoms.”

“Speaking of Queendom... I really want to go to United Queendom, to see all its castles and stuff.”

“I went there when I was around eight. I even saw Queen Elizabeth the Third herself—she was under a transparent umbrella with a lot of guards following her. It was a rainy June, and we were standing in a crowd on the hillside. There were magnified screens in the air—I honestly don’t know

why they used solid screens—maybe to show the importance of the queen? Anyway it looked like a lot of waste to process.”

“Have you tried fish and chips then?”

“Yes, it was a boring dish. Not as interesting as Miezhdu food. We have a lot of lamb and cheese and milk tea... We even have an art called cheese carving.”

“Miezhdustan sounds interesting. Why don’t you want to stay in Miezhdustan then?”

“It’s not like I dislike Miezhdustan. It’s that I’m too familiar with the way people interact with each other back home, and I want to try something different. I’ve always been so traditional. I guess I should try something new. But it is scary to leave home like this. I’ve left home many times before, but I’ve never been out of home for more than three months. This time it’s gonna be a lifetime.”

“How do you feel about not being able to travel later, and having to stay in the same place in Castalia?”

“I will be able to travel. It’s just that Castalia will be my new home. I will meet like-minded people there and be really able to delve into my studies. And really think about contributing to the world, to people’s enlightenment, to new technology, to new philosophies...”

“So where’s that video from?”

“The video of the geladas? That’s from my boyfriend. He’s studying in the Amharic Queendom.”

“Yet another queendom! Wow. So you have a boyfriend. You don’t look like the type of person who would have a boyfriend.”

“Why not?”

“Because you are so patronizing and misoandrist and... I thought maybe you could like men but I did not expect that you can be in a heterosexual relationship.”

“Why are you so cynical? You are like an old uncle, just sitting there all day and complaining about all his old love back in the days. Don’t judge a person from her appearance!”

“I’m not judging you; I’m just basing off my guess from my past interactions with you—our talks on the train. You were the one who started talking to me. You even said you had a crush on me, remember?”

“I would like to take these words back. You are disappointing as suck.”

“Come on. It was just a few hours ago. What’s up with you?”

“Nothing. It’s pretty boring here on the train. I’ve been reading my past diaries.”

“I always admire those who keep diaries. It’s nice to have everything recorded.”

“It’s a lot. I have ten diaries up till now. I started many years ago. I have to carry them everywhere because they are the lifeblood of me. Without them, I wouldn’t really feel my existence.”

“What if now someone takes them away from you? What if people in Castalia do not allow you to keep them?”

“People in Castalia will allow me to keep these. I know they will.”

“You know, I was in a female-only library once. I pretended to be a girl. I found so many valuable books! But they never allowed me to take them out, because I did not have a female face ID. I really wanted to read the books in the female-only library...”

“So?”

“So I asked my mother whether she could check out books for me. But even she is not qualified as a member of the library?”

“Aren’t libraries in Sunorigin public? There’s a membership thing?”

“In some libraries there’s this membership thing. I would say, in all the good libraries with real stuff. I mean, most libraries put false stuff in, especially the history section. But the libraries with memberships always have *some* books censored by the outside world. These books confirmed me of what Ek told me.”

“Huh. So you believe in Ek so much. What does he say about Castalia?”

“This you wouldn’t want to hear. I bet wouldn’t want to go to Castalia after I told you.”

Loulouthi thinks about all the effort she has done just to get to Castalia. Although she was curious to know, now she feels okay to just not listen to the “truth”. She keeps telling herself that Asano had the wrong source of information.

“They don’t watch videos in Castalia. They demonstrate in real life. But that’s not it,” Asano says.

“What? You mean, not even movies? That’s nonsense. And I don’t want to hear your secret. It’s just some 野史 written by daughters of sticks.”

“No, no, no. All right. It’s your choice. You chose to not listen to me. Now you have to take the consequences.”

“You sound like a prophet,” Loulouthi speaks in a way as though she is going to spit, “which is not good.”

“I’m not,” Asano lifts his glasses, “Ek is one. Ek always tells me the truth.”

“It’s the same. You believe in your version of truth and I believe in my version of truth. Hooray! No conflicts. Just wait and see who is true eventually.”

“We’ll see.”

To be written

18

The Sandwich

Loulouthi and Scissor are acquainted with a bug in the world: a huge sandwich in the sky. They realize that they are in a novel. Loulouthi recalls a novel that Konstantin has started a long time ago.

Background music: 泰安洋行, Hosono Haruomi

A sandwich is hanging in the sky. It's larger than the sun, but it has no shadow. It is relatively still compared with the train, and no ingredients are falling down, though it looks sloppy.

Loulouthi looks out of the window.

"What's happening? A sandwich? Are aliens coming? Do you see this, Scissor?" Loulouthi asks.

Scissor responds, "Really? Are you joking me?" He pushes his glasses and looks out of the window. He frowns and pouts his mouth and flips the vidi on his index finger immediately, aligning the mini camera to the sandwich in the sky, and takes multiple pictures.

"I'm gonna tell Rock." Scissor sounds excited. He quickly runs out of the chamber and returns a minute later, dragging Rock's shirt. Drops of water are falling down Rock's hand.

"Boys don't need to wash their hands after they pee, Rock. Because your private part is cleaner than your hands."

"I'm doing this out of respect for other people. So what's up? Where's the sandwich?"

Loulouthi has been staring at the sandwich for a while. But the moment Rock peeks through the window, the sandwich disappears.

"That's weird... It was just here!" Scissor scratches his head. He takes out his vidi to see the pictures taken. But there was nothing more than a huge unexplained shadow in the sky.

"This is the shadow of the sandwich! This is the proof of that it was here! Rock, believe me!" Scissor shouts.

Then he runs to the next chamber and asks people, “Have you seen the sandwich in the sky?”

“What? A sandwich in the sky?” A man looks at him, confused. He turns his head to his friend, “is he joking?”

“No, there was a real sandwich in the sky.” Scissor shakes his head so quickly that it looks like vibrating.

Scissor returns to his chamber and asks Loulouthi, “you saw the sandwich, right?”

Loulouthi nods. She is still staring at the place in the sky where a sandwich had been.

“Shhh, I think I’m hearing something.” Loulouthi says.

“What are you hearing?”

Loulouthi hears a faint voice.

“I’m doing NaNoWriMo and I need to finish this novel. Please, do something on your own! Tell me what you’re doing! Tell me what kind of person you are!” A voice comes from a hiatus of the wall.

“It’s a woman’s voice, saying she is doing something-rai-something. She needs to finish this novel. She said, tell me what you are doing. Tell me what kind of person you are.”

Loulouthi turns her head around and looks at Rock and Scissor, “Guys, I found out. We’ve in a novel. We’re in a sucking goddamn novel!”

“Someone has written us in a novel?” Scissor smiles.

“No. We are fictions, we are not real. We don’t really exist, when we get off the train. And our lives before the train do not exist either!”

“I don’t think it’s affecting us in any way, so why not accept it? Accept that we are made up, we are fictions.” Scissor says.

“See? It doesn’t make sense. How I had a crush on this boy and suddenly the feeling disappears. How I am labeled traditional, but does not seem traditional at all. We’ve got an immature creator. She is even younger than me, than most of you. She does not have much experiences creating a world like this.”

“Where did you get your thoughts from?” Rock asks.

“Maybe she is right. She saw the sandwich with me. She is trustworthy on this issue. She may be the prophet!”

“Suck the prophet, it just means that I’m a main character.”

“Why don’t I get to be the main character, Rock?” Scissor asks.

“You don’t even have a name. We appeared on the train as Rock and Scissor, not as Robert and Samano. A main character needs a name.” Rock answers. Then he gets amazed, “How peculiar I’ve never thought about this before. It just makes sense now. It’s like the effect of people centuries ago using marijuana. I’ve got so many interesting thoughts!”

“Hey, what if you hid your handicapped grandma in the chest of drawers from when you’re 6 till you’re 18 and when she gets out she wants to rape you? And people from UNICEF has found out that you’ve violated her basic human rights and want to persecute you? What’d you do, Rock?” Scissor asks.

“I would tie her to the ceiling and hit her like a piñata, and spit out a snake from my mouth, chop the snake and cook the meat and stuff it in her mouth. Haha, this is so funny!” Rock laughs.

“You know what I would do?” Loulouthi smiles, with light shining in her eyes, “I would put her back in the drawer and use extra firm band-aids to seal it, and burn the house and run as far away as possible.”

“No, no, you’ve gotta bury her ashes under the digital tree.”

“And what did she do all those years in the drawer? Playing with her vidi? She does not even have arms, nor legs. And how did she survive?”

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is that we are having fun now.”

“Yeah! Thank God we are having a wonderful time here.”

“Thank her,” Loulouthi points to the hiatus in the wall, “*She* made us. Not God. Not our mothers. She. The mysterious woman.”

“You mean, we are like teddy bears in her mind?”

“Exactly. We are like teddy bears that she seeks comfort in. We exist for her, not for ourselves.”

“But we’ve gotta live for ourselves. At least, we need the illusion that we are living for ourselves. No matter how long this lasts. Though we will never be equal with our creator, we deserve the same respect that she does.”

“True. Now what? Let’s just pretend that this never happened?”

“Sure. We don’t know that we exist in a novel. At least, we are not sure yet.”

“We’ve gotta live like Sisypha. Carrying one large rock up the hill and expecting it to fall down eventually. We are all doing futile jobs, so why not enjoy it while we are doing it?”

“Yes. You’re right.”

Loulouthi suddenly recalls a novel idea that Konstantin told her. Konstantin wrote the beginning of this novel when he was 13.

A boy found a moving brick. He opened the brick and saw a message, letting him go to the river in the woods. He went, and saw a thing that functions like a mirror but is not. He could not go on the other side of this thing. In the mirror he saw a girl behind him. He turns around and saw no one.

He visited the mirror often, and talked with the girl in the mirror. She said she was one of the sacrifices from the next village. The village has an annual sacrifice, sending a pair of young girl and boy into the cave, for the monsters to eat.

He fell in love with her gradually, but then he realizes he could only love her reflection in the mirror; her true self does not exist. She is dead.

He decided to be the next sacrifice and see what’s really happening in the cave. Since he knew he was the main character in a novel, he knew he was not going to die.

He went into the cave and faced many challenges staying alive. The cave had haunted tunnels, and the girl who went along with him was captured by one of the ghosts. Now he was alone. When he went to the final 关, he saw many skeletons, and a lot of mice 蹿 around. Then he saw the same mirror.

He held his torch tight but it was still taken away by a swirl. Then he felt the touch of a girl. He knew it was her.

Then he hears a loud laugh. “Yet another innocent boy!” He realizes that the girl is actually the final boss in the cave. And he got enslaved. He thinks it’s too dangerous to write a memoir about this, so maybe he would write a novel when he gets out.

It’s interesting how Loulouthi now knows that she is in a novel, she thinks about a novel in a novel. Her creator thinks about a novel inside a novel inside a novel. And if her creator is herself inside a novel... Then there is this infinite regress. It makes Loulouthi think of the annoying eternity again.

19

The Death

Loulouthi receives the message of Konstantin's death. She calls her brother and her best friend to confirm the message.

Background music: ???

Loulouthi's vidi suddenly glares. That is a sign of an important notice. She takes it off her index finger and spins it in the air to unlock the important message.

The vidi then projects a screen on the wall:

R.I.P. KONSTANTIN

This is a message about the death of Konstantin Sainkhog'nizz. He just died five minutes ago by over-bleeding. Condolences to his friends and families.

Konstantin's Vidi will soon be recycled and turned into a digital tree. According to his written will, he would like his ashes to be buried under an olive tree in Delphi, Ellatha. He would like to donate 100% of his property to his fiancée, Loulouthi Reginag'nunn. Before his death, he left a message: "see you in hell."

*Yours sincerely,
Vidi*

This astonishes Loulouthi. Konstantin is dead? What? And overbleeding? Did he get hit by a car or something... And he has a written will? He never told her about having written a will. Most people their age haven't written a will. And Loulouthi is not his fiancée but his girlfriend. Plus, the weird thing is that he chose a place right next to Castalia—Delphi. Maybe he knew all along.

Ironically, the first person she wants to call is Konstantin. She loves sharing things with Konstantin. But now she could no longer share any news with him. She feels bad for not having said more on the phone call with Konstantin. It was their last phone call!

Loulouthi's family must have received a similar message about her after she

set her studio on fire. Loulouthi wonders what their expression would look like.

Maybe Konstantin hacked his death too. That would be possible, Loulouthi thinks. Maybe this is just his revenge on me, on being left alone by me. Maybe he just wants me to feel as bad as he feels when he is left alone. But what now?

She then scroll down the page to send a message. But when she types in the name Konstantin with her voice, there is no one in the contact list named Konstantin. He must have hacked his death better than Loulouthi had, or maybe he is really dead.

Loulouthi turns the pages on the projected screen, until she no longer knows what she is doing this for. She is just robotically repeating this action.

Finally she speaks to the vidi microphone, "Call Sid."

Sid answers the call immediately.

"Loulouthi? Oh I know you're alive! What's up?"

"My vidi pops up a message that says Konstantin is dead. Have you received that one?"

"No, I'm not technically Konstantin's friend so I didn't received that one. Um, I'm sorry for you loss, sis." He sounds so smooth.

"You're not even surprised! I may have just lost my boyfriend!"

"What do you expect me to be like? I was not surprised either when the message saying that you are dead pops up. I know you are both a fighter and a lover, you always fight to get what you love."

"No, this time I'm just running away... from all of you."

"But I'm not surprised that he is dead. It's hard working out there in Amharic Queendom, you know? And I heard that there's a lot of air pollution."

"How dare you speak of his death so lightly."

"I'm sorry, sister. But now you are not sure that he died, right? Maybe he is just joking with you and asked someone to send this message out. Have you looked whether the message has the silver lining yet? I heard that you can't imitate that silver lining. If it does have one, that means the message probably is real."

"I forgot whether there was a silver lining or not. But what if he is really dead? And how does he know that I'm heading to Cas..."

“You’re heading to Castalia?” Sid speaks in a wondering voice.

“No, I’m heading to Casablanca. Don’t tell others. I’m planning to stay there for a few months, then travel around the world.” Loulouthi doesn’t want her brother to know that she is heading to Castalia. She doesn’t want any one of her family or friends to know. You’d never imagine how much people asks of a castalian to do. There were castalians who came out of poor family backgrounds, whose whole family depended on them, who overworked themselves to death. She wouldn’t want to be one of them. Moreover, she just likes keeping such a big secret her privacy. It makes her feel cool and protected.

“Ahhhhh... Not good. Thought you are heading to Castalia.” Sid speaks with disappointment.

“You are making this so light...” Loulouthi speaks with a concerning voice.

“You can find out yourself. You are computer science major. Though you are not in viditecture, you can probably figure out the gist of the problem.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Take care of yourself, my big sister.”

“Yes sir!” Loulouthi tries to giggle but she can’t. Tears come out of her eyes. Then she calls Oluwa, who must have known that she is alive.

“Hey, Oluwa. It’s me, Loulouthi. I’ve been feeling bad since... since Konstantin died.”

“Konstantin died? Wait. I haven’t unlock the message yet. Just wait a sec,” Oluwa seems to be eating something.

“You see it?”

“Yes. It says Konstantin died twelve minutes ago by overbleeding... Lemme see... Ashes buried in Delphi, all property to you... Wait, you and him got engaged? Congratu... Oh no. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. And why does he say see you in hell?”

“Does the message have a silver lining?”

“What silver lining? I don’t see one, uh-uh.”

“Thank God. It’s a fake message.”

“You mean he faked his death? Like what you did?”

“Probably. I feel so relieved right now. Thank you, Oluwa.”

“Wait, don’t hang up. How are you, Loulouthi? You know how worried I was until Sid told me that you’re fine? Why did you fake your death? Where in the world are you right now?”

“I’m on a ferry, about to arrive at Casablanca.”

“What are you doing in Casablanca?”

“Well, just to relax for a while, and then I’m going to Amharic Queendom to visit Konstantin. Glad that he is alive, otherwise my plans would fall flat.”

“Well, I would love to talk to you more, but I’m busy. Be careful in Africa, especially in sub-saharan Africa. They discriminate against light skinned people.”

“Well, I’m not white.”

“But you are yellow, which is close to white.”

“Hey, I always considered myself brown. What are you talking about!”

“Well you are yellow. Which means you are white compared with my black skin. Haha!”

“This is nonsense.” Loulouthi shakes her head lightly while hanging up the vidi. She feels slightly happy right now, now that she knows Konstantin has just been faking his own death. Maybe he wanted to convey a message through this. “He hates me maybe? He wants me to go to hell with him,” Loulouthi thinks.

“Konstantin is not really dead, is he?” Loulouthi asks her vidi happily.

“Yes, he is, unfortunately.” Her vidi answers.

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?”

“He is dead. 100% dead.”

“How did he die exactly then?” Loulouthi wants to test her vidi.

“You killed him,” vidi responses.

“Well, I’m not in Amharic Queendom, apparently.” Loulouthi justifies for herself.

“But you killed him.” The vidi says firmly.

“You did.” It echoes.

“You mean, I did something that... caused his death?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Well, I guess I shouldn’t have told him that I’m dead. But he knows I am alive, since he sent the message, ‘see you in hell’. And his act of giving all his property to me... It is a declaration to the world that I am still alive. Oh no. I’m screwed. Now people know that I am alive! What am I gonna do?”

The vidi does not answer her.

Part V

Mountains, valleys, tunnels

20

The Shadow

Mood: similar to US, Regina Spektor

The little bitter melon boy wanders around on the train, and sees Asano's mother's body, which scares him.

Background music: Extraordinary Machine, Fiona Apple

The little bitter melon boy climbs down from his bed and wanders around. A step here, a step there, as he moves forward to the head of the train. His mother leaves him be. He stops at Asano's chamber. He must have smelled something wrong; kids are more sensitive than grown-ups.

His eyeballs roll like footballs as he stumbles through the doorway of Asano's chamber. Asano pretends to not see him.

"Hi," the little boy says, looking around uncomfortably. "Пахнет! Пахнет!"

Asano taps his vidi in circular motion, and it translates, "It smells." Quickly, Asano looks at his mother's body. It doesn't smell much to him, honestly.

The little boy gives him a creepy smile.

Asano automatically 整理服装, and talks to his vidi, "Who is him?"

He puts his vidi next to his ear and listens to its answer, "His name is Anatoly."

"Why is he here?" Asano keeps asking his vidi.

"He wants to make friends. His mother doesn't play with him." The vidi answers.

"You sure? I feel like he is here for... my mother..." Asano speaks to his vidi in the lowest volume possible.

The little boy stares at Asano, smiles, and waves his head around like a balloon.

"Как вас зовут?" Anatoly leans in.

"He is asking you what your name is." The vidi reminds Asano.

"Can I not answer him?" Asano asks his vidi. He feels weird that he is asking his vidi for opinion. He never did this before.

“You’d better answer him. Or I can answer for you if you want.” The vidi says.

“Okay. You speak with him.” Asano puts forward his vidi in the direction of Anatoly.

“Hi, this guy over here is Asano. He would not like to speak with you. So as his vidi, I can talk.” The vidi says this in English once and repeats it in perfect Russian.

“**Меня зовут Анатолий. Очень приятно,**” the little boy says, with his eyes still staring at Asano. Asano feels uncomfortable being stared.

“He says he’s Anatoly. Nice to meet you,” the vidi says, “See? Nothing harmful.”

“У тебя есть мама?” Anatoly asks.

Instead of giving Asano the translation, the vidi answers directly, “Нет.”

Asano feels betrayed. He does not understand a bit, except for the word “мама”. He frowns and takes back his vidi. He asserts to his vidi, “Tell Anatoly to leave.”

The vidi tells Anatoly, “**Он хочет, чтобы ты остался здесь.**”

After a few seconds Anatoly shows no sign to leave.

“What are you doing here? I told you to leave!” Asano almost begins to yell.

“Let him enjoy a little time here,” the vidi says.

“Why are you betraying me, vidi?” Asano slaps the vidi, then shakes it up and down, trying to make it function correctly.

“Thank you for taking me on a rollercoaster.” The vidi says.

“My vidi’s behaving really weird now... Is it because I asked it for an advice?” Asano thinks.

“I’m old and you don’t repair me. I’ve been on the earth for 14 years. I’m one of the oldest vidis.” The vidi says.

Asano stands up and pushes Anatoly on the shoulder, trying to lead him back to his mother’s place. Anatoly starts to shout, and Asano covers his mouth. Then Anatoly bites him.

“Ouch, you are such a stick!” Asano takes his hands back immediately.

Anatoly starts crying. Then 他一屁股坐在地上不肯动了. Asano 咂咂嘴, and walks away.

Someone from the chamber right in front of Anatoly walks out and asks, “Who’s son is this? So ugly, so 不修边幅. Who is this child’s mother?”

She then knocks each chamber’s wall and asks whose son is missing. But no one answers.

“Alright. Now you will stay with me until your mother comes.” She asserts.

“No!” Anatoly struggles to stay out of the woman’s touch.

“Little boy, look at poor you. Your mommy don’t want you any more right? Look at how ugly she made you look.” She rubs the child’s face, and gets a little block of excrement from his nose.

“Ew.” She frowns, making a disgusted look. Then she laughs and puts the excrement in her mouth, “the nose shit from a little virgin—one of the most wonderful meals on earth. 很滋补的!”

The little boy looks away. He still cries loudly, hoping for his mom to find him. But his mother is either asleep or too busy minding her own shit.

A few minutes later the woman gets too annoyed by Anatoly, so she drags him and asks door by door, “Who is his mother?”

To be written

“Why did you not take care of him, and instead, let him walk around?” The woman asks sharply.

Anatoly’s uncle keeps apologizing while his mother 鼻孔里出气, “男孩子又不值钱, 卖不了几个钱啊。爱怎么养怎么养, 你还管我了?”

To be written

Asano walks to the corridor to view the scenery outside. He takes pictures of the snow. When he turns around, he sees the little boy again.

“Why are you here again?” He asks.

His vidi then translates, “почему ты здесь?”

Anatoly answers, “сейчас мама спит. Она скоро умрет.”

“What does he say?”

“He says mother is sleeping. Soon she will die.”

“What the...” Asano sighs. Maybe Anatoly knows about his murder. But how come? Or is he talking about his own mother? He genuinely wishes his mother alive... He wouldn’t want to see another death.

21

The Utopia

Asano tells Loulouthi his story. Then they go on a heated debate about Castalia.

Background music: ???

Though sleepy, Asano keeps telling Loulouthi his story. How he was oppressed in Academia

“When I was to drop from high school, the principal came to me and told me that I’ve created too much drama in the school. And I told him I was just defending my rights as a human being. And she told me something I would never forget: You won’t be marriageable if you keep defending your rights. At that moment I felt so frustrated. I got good grades, I got As on all of my subjects. But who is she to tell me about my future personal life? Are we men only defined through our relationships with women?”

“And that’s why you got enlightened and started following masculinism?”

“Not exactly. That was a catalyst. The beginning was when I was four. When I started being masochist.”

“That’s early for discovering your sexual predilections.”

“Not for me. I wanted so much to show my naked body. Other boys have thought of showing off their naked body as a vulnerability, but I always thought of it as a privilege.”

“So that’s why you don’t want to become a cheater?”

“Don’t call trans women cheaters,” Asano pushes up his glasses, “they are people. People should be respected the same. Trans women are not cheaters.”

“But they want to get to the top of the gender ladder.”

“You have no idea how many people are forced into this. Like me.”

“Well, you could not listen to you mother. You are an adult now.”

“But in Nippon, a son is the mother’s property, until he marries and becomes his wife’s property. If he stays at home, he is always his mother’s property. At any rate, it is a woman who is the guardian of a man.”

“Fine. How do you feel about it?”

“I feel okay now, I guess. I’m gonna fight for the entire social class of men one day. No, I’m already fighting for it. I am rebelling.”

“How are you planning to rebel? I don’t think any women would stand with you. I personally kind of dislikes your stand.”

“I’m gonna do it anyhow.”

“You have to fight with your mother first.”

Asano sighs. Ah, his mother. It’s all about his mother. This coming here, the engagement, even his choice of clothes, nothing was his idea. He was not allowed to have his own idea. It is said by a proverb that the uneducated man makes the best husband, the best uncle, as well as the best father.

“I’ve already won the battle.” Asano asserts.

“What do you mean?”

“But I may lose the war.”

“How come?”

“I killed my mother.” He finally confesses.

Contrary to Asano’s belief, Loulouthi is not surprised. Her calmness startles Asano.

“Why are you not surprised, Loulouthi?”

“Remember when I told you I want to kill my mother? I was not joking. I really wanted to kill her at some point in my life. She was such a narcissist. I totally understand you.”

“That’s good,” Asano was about to say it but takes back his words. He doesn’t want to look weak in front of Loulouthi.

Instead, he says, “we are two awful people.”

“I’m not awful. I am a to-be castalian.” Loulouthi defends for herself.

“You are. Castalians suck.”

“You mean, Castalians have sex? Of course they would have more sex without men! Men don’t understand refined sex. You just love brutal sex.”

“Uh, no. I meant the word ‘suck’ in a traditional sense. It’s an ancient word which means to be awful.”

“I see. Did you learn the ancient meaning of this word from Ek?”

“Yeah. You know I don’t have many friends.”

“Have you talked with Ek since... Since your mom?”

“No, I can’t talk with him any minute. He’s got his stuff to do. And there seems to be some trouble connecting to him.”

“What does he do again? I mean, what’s his profession?”

“He’s a rapper. R-A-P-P-E-R.”

“Oh, yeah. You told me it’s a kind of ancient music. I thought I would know more about history than you do!”

“Well, you don’t know as much music as I do, so.” Asano says.

Loulouthi smiles knowingly. Unlike what she would be like a few years ago, now she feels glad that someone knows more than her. She needs a break away from her vidi, and here she is, talking with Asano.

“So what did Ek tell you about Castalia that made you hate it so much?”

“Basically it is the soil of matriarchal values that got spread across the world. And I hate the patriarchy. This world is **sick!** You know this world is sucked up when my mom and I had to live one my welfare, because I am an only child. You know it is sucked up when she sold me off to a woman in her forties, and dragged me out again to change my sex, just for me to have a better life. And people like you will be calling me cheaters, because you don’t understand the male perspective. You never cared about the male perspective of things. Yes, to you, men are just barbaric, animalistic walking dildos, but to me, I can’t say I am proud of being a man... I already feel lucky enough that I’m not a slave to anyone anymore.”

“You are always a slave. Absolute freedom does not exist. The closest we can get to freedom is Castalia, where the great minds meet.”

“No. The matriarchal values are way too entrenched in Castalia. In Castalia, you wake up everyday, and you breakfast, dine, and sup with women, you meditate and philosophize with women, you calculate and experiment with women, you love and have sex with women, and you exclude all males because you think males are subhuman. But males are not subhuman! We are as intelligent as females, and as emotional as females. We don’t need extra protection. And I hate that in Castalia you live off lies. You are not living the truth but lies! The truth is what Ek has told me, what he got from the dark net. Not what the gurus in Castalia tell you.”

“You say this all only because you speak from a male perspective, which is a limited perspective, because you haven’t received the same education that elite females have received.”

“Don’t you want a family? You can’t have a family in Castalia.”

“I think my responsibilities are way beyond my family. I am a servant of truth. I work for the future of the world. If I can benefit a thousand people with my creation and knowledge, why benefit only a handful of them?”

“Have you ever heard of the trolley problem? Where you are the driver of a train, and you have to decide whether to pull the lever or not. If you don’t pull the lever, the train will go on the original track, where five people stand; if you pull the lever, the train will be diverted to another track, where one person stand.”

“Then I will determine whether the five people make more contribution to the world than the one person.”

“How do you determine that?”

“With my vidi. Everyone has contribution points. You know castalians have the highest contribution points,” Loulouthi speaks without doubt.

“What if you don’t have access to their contribution points? And are you implying that human beings live just for contributing to the world? I mean, there’s no standard to measure if this person’s contribution is larger than that person’s.”

“There is. Castalia chooses those youths who are most probable to contribute greatly to the world.”

“How do you know Castalia’s method is correct then? What if they made a mistake?”

“Asano,” Loulouthi sighs, “Millions of people have tested their system. I don’t think they are wrong. Plus, if Castalia ever gets the system wrong... I mean, the mere existence of Castalia proves that it is perfect.”

“This sounds familiar. People say the mere existence of the Holy Kitab shows that God exist; otherwise, who could write a book as beautiful as itself? If something’s existence proves its perfection, it only means that that thing only exists in your mind.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“So I guess you also don’t know about existentialism, as opposed to essentialism.”

“What are these isms? I’m always happy to learn.”

“So you said the mere existence of Castalia proves that it is perfect. Why do you say that? If so, I can say that everything that exists is perfect.”

“Castalia is different from everything else, categorically. It’s not only a place for the most elite to study and live and invent, but also a concept that exists in every castalian’s mind. It is a paradox by nature. People all over the world who believe in different religions all believe that Castalia is on their side, but in fact, Castalia is on no-one’s side—it is areligious. But on the other hand, you can say it is religious because all its disciples—the castalians—have to follow a set of rites every day. Like meditation and philosophizing, in order to find the peace between emotion and reason. Now, I say that the existence of Castalia proves its perfection because it is the best possible social model calculated by the central AI that could exist in the world.”

“But the central AI belongs to Castalia. They could have propagandized Castalia to trap young women like you into slavery.”

“What do they want out of me anyway? I am replaceable. They only want me because I fit their criteria. They believe I am a part of them.”

“The thing is—they try to make away your emotions while you are in there. You know how since the last wave of strong AI died, emotions became important? The old people who live in Castalia—they are cold and nonchalant—they want newbies like you to fill their emotional gaps. They will put you on the FEMCA machine and rob you of your emotions. It’s similar to chapter 4 of Kristina Stipetic’s comic *Alethia*, in which a robot was put onto a machine to feel angry, because by being angry she could produce more oil.”

“What is FEMCA?”

“Oh you don’t know that? How innocent of you trying to go to Castalia. It’s Fundamental Emotions Machine of Castalian Authority. It takes your emotions away, in the name of purifying your soul to better serve for the greater good of the entire humanity. In fact it’s just the old Castalian sipping new blood.”

“What about the studies?”

“As I told you before, most of your current understanding of things are **WRONG**. They rewrite the history. And you know how Castalia is inspired by Plato’s *Republic*? They agree with Plato that all educational materials should be censored.”

“This is the outside world. They censor stuff only in the outside world. The Castalia I believe in is free, open-minded, diverse, and inclusive.”

“The Castalia that you believe in **does not exist**. You can’t always live in your dream.”

“You sound just like my uncle,” Loulouthi swallows her saliva, “who got very nihilistic because he felt sad for being a housebrother. He was trying to destabilize my mother’s life by trying to convince her that her life does not make any sense. You are jealous of me.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m not jealous of you. I’m just... I’m just... telling you the truth, because I think you are a smart person.”

“Fine. I’ll keep reading my diaries then.” Loulouthi walks back to her bed and grabs a diary out of her suitcase. She feels huge unease and her diary is the best comforter.

22

The Crime

Loulouthi finds out the truth about Konstantin's death. Asano hears the voices planning to kill him. He thinks and thinking is a crime.

Background music:

As Loulouthi goes through the entry of July 6th, 2214, she looks down at her vidi. It is her 6th vidi; it is newly built this year. In 2214 she was using her 5th vidi, which looked different, and styled, in a good way.

Loulouthi stares at her vidi. She can't believe that her vidi said that she killed Konstantin. How is it possible?

"Tell me, how did Konstantin die exactly?" Now she finally raises up the courage to ask.

"By overbleeding." The vidi answers.

"Stick!" Loulouthi curses, "I know that he died by over bleeding. But what caused him to overbleed?"

"That is a secret he keeps anyone from knowing." The vidi says.

"Damn it," Loulouthi sighs, "fine, I'll do it myself."

She walks through the corridor until she finds a corner between two carriages that is safe enough for her to operate. Then her vidi projects a screen on the wall and she starts checking the system.

"I've got to hack into Konstantin's vidi until it expires," Loulouthi thinks.

She manages multiple screens, and an hour has passed since she started.

"Almost there!" Loulouthi speaks to herself.

A few minutes later a huge screen displays on the wall:

DEATH OF KONSTANTIN SAINKHOG'NIZZ NILTSELÆG
NAME: KONSTANTIN
SEX: MALE
MOTHER'S NAME: SAINKHO
BIRTH PLACE: NIL
AGE: 22

TIME: 12:05, NOVEMBER 28TH, GMT+3
 PLACE: BED IN ROOM 118, DORMITORY
 REASON: OVERBLEED
 CAUSE: SLITTING LEFT WRIST
 LAST MESSAGE: "SEE YOU IN HELL."**
 VIDI RECYCLE TIME: 00:00, NOVEMBER 19TH, GMT+3
 PROPERTY ARRANGMENT: 100% TO LOULOUTHİ REGİ-
 NAG'NUNN NILTSELÆG

THE ABOVE INFORMATION IS PROVED TO BE TRUE BY UDA
 (UNIVERSAL DEATH ASSOCIATION). FOR MORE INFO PLEASE
 ENTER THE PASSCODE BY CLICKING [HERE]. FOR THE COM-
 PLETE WILL PLEASE CLICK [HERE].

Oh. So he killed himself. And it is true that he is dead! Even UDA confirmed that it is true. Loulouthi clicks the first "here" button and an interface like this pops up:

THE FINAL TREASURE BOX OF KONSTANTIN SAINKHOG'NIZZ
 PASSCODE:

HINT:
 WHO TAKES CARE OF THE FLOWER?

Loulouthi types "giantbroccoli" without any hesitation. And then the treasure box opens:

TREASURE BOX
 TYPE: SUICIDE PACKAGE
 WHO HAS OPENED THIS: REGINA, LOULOUTHİ
 GIFTS: [STAR +0.5] (TAKEN), [STAR +0.1], [STAR +0.1],
 [STAR +0.1] MESSAGE: [STAR +0.5] IS FOR LOULOUTHİ. THE
 REST, WHOEVER SEES IT FIRST GETS IT. MAYBE R, MAYBE C,
 MAYBE P. YOU ARE MY BEST FRIENDS AND I FEEL HONORED
 TO HAVE KNOWN YOU IN MY LIFE. SPEND MY CREDITS FREELY.
 BYE. SEE YOU IN HELL.

What? Konstantin gave out all the stars he could have given: 0.8. Originally he had 4.3 stars. At the moment of his death he only had 3.5 stars, which is not enough for him to go to heaven. People said that only those who get higher than 4.0 can go to heaven. And Loulouthi's mother must have

taken the 0.5. Why? How does she even know Konstantin enough to get into this treasure box? Why would Konstantin give up the opportunity to go to heaven, even though heaven is just a myth? Did he know about the afterlife long before this?

Oh my god so her mother knows about her plans! She knew all along. And she selfishly took the gift that was supposed to be given to Loulouthi...

“What does she have? A 4.9 now? What’s the point of having such a high rating? I only have 4.1 and I’m fine with it, really.” Loulouthi thinks.

It’s funny how a TV show in 21st century have predicted this rating thing. It’s called *Black Mirror*, and one of its episodes depicts a world where everyone is rated on a five-star scale. People who have lower ratings are social outcasts, not being able to find a job or live at home. People who hang out with people with a certain ratings will have similar ratings as them. In that way, social mobility is possible but highly restrained. It is similar, now that the world has become a single unity, regarding politics.

Then Loulouthi goes back to the first interface and clicks on the second “here” button. But as soon as she opens the page, someone walks by and she has to close it down.

After that person has left, she reopened it, and sees the will:

LAST WILL OF KONSTANTIN SAINKHOG’NIZZ

I, KONSTANTIN SAINKHOG’NIZZ NILTSELÆG, A RESIDENT OF THE REPUBLICAN OF MIEZHDUSTAN, DECLARE THIS TO BE MY LAST WILL, AND DO HEREBY REVOKE ALL FORMER WILLS AND CODICILS MADE BY ME.

I HEREBY APPOINT MY MOTHER, SAINKHO SIBERIAG’NUNN, AS THE SOLE EXECUTOR OF THIS WILL.

I AM NOT MARRIED, BUT AM ENGAGED TO LOULOUTHİ REGİNAG’NUNN. I DON’T HAVE CHILDREN.

I OWN FOLLOWING IMMOVABLE AND MOVABLE ASSETS:

1. ONE APARTMENT NO. 5169 IN SAKURA TOWNHOMES, 83 QWERTY STREET, NIL, ZENITH, MIEZHDUSTAN
2. JEWELRY, ORNAMENTS, CASH IN HAND AND ALSO WITH CERTAIN BANKS.

I HEREBY GIVE, DEVISE AND BEQUEATH ALL MY PROPERTIES, WHETHER MOVABLE OR IMMOVABLE, WHATSOEVER AND WHERESOEVER TO MY FIANCEE, LOULOUTHİ REGİNAG’NUNN, ABSOLUTELY FOREVER.

...
 KONSTANTIN SAINKHOG'NIZZ

“It’s interesting how he refers to me as his fiancée,” Loulouthi thinks, “I did propose to him but it was with a paper ring. We always referred to each other as girlfriend and boyfriend.”

“And why did my mother have a personal connection with Konstantin? Why did she stole my 0.5 star? Even though I wouldn’t have wanted it.”

Okay. At least she knows about the apartment, where she and Konstantin lived during the summer. It was originally Konstantin’s mother’s property, but she supposed that she gave it to him.

It’s nice that in Miezhdustan men can own property, not like in Sunorigin where men *are* properties of their guardians, their female relatives.

Loulouthi wonders how her automatically generated will would look like. She doesn’t really have much property left to people.

“Oh, Konstantin screwed up my plan. With his life. No, his death. How pathetic that is.” Loulouthi thinks of how now everyone who knows Konstantin will find out that she is alive, because the system won’t grant property to a really dead person.

“But I have received that invitation letter, so they would still accept me into Castalia, at least. Was going to break up with him anyway. It’s just sad that it costed his life. But what exactly was on his mind when he suicided anyway? Was it because I lied to him? No, it couldn’t be, because he is not that weak. He always told me to respect those who killed themselves, and those who are going to kill themselves. ‘Don’t judge those who are already judging them too hard and need a way to finally let go’, he would say. But I always think that only saving their lives is truly respecting them. I don’t think anyone deserve to die unless mother nature, or God, calls her to go.” Loulouthi thinks.

Then she starts to think that maybe her move to go to Castalia and leave everything behind is a selfish, thoughtless act. She did not tell anyone, not even her brother. She had to leave her brother guessing. She did plan everything beforehand, but she was just probably way too nervous when she started out on this escape—or I guess you can call it a pilgrimage.

Just like how Loulouthi’s character arose out of my imagination of a mix of silver and white, Asano’s character arose out of my imagination as a mix of red and orange, and the sound of Jun Togawa. Asano’s love for the world

is so deep that he would like to devote his life for the masculinist cause. He sees how the people are hurting under the rule of matriarchy. He just haven't shout out yet. One day he will, and the world will be awake like a lion.

Actually I invented Loulouthi and Asano to reimagine what my 14 year old self would say when she meets my 19 year old self. At 14 I was so full of anger and life, and at almost 19 I feel so flat and boring. At 4 I was following a cult. There is a guy named Xin Lei who said that the majority of people are pigdogs, while only a few are true humans. I considered myself as a true human. I wanted to fight against all the ugliness in the world. I wanted my life to be measured against my contribution to the world. I wanted the extreme out of everything. I wanted to remain pure in spirit and have my mind burning like fire. But now I've taken a much more peaceful approach to life, and my previous self would probably say that I wasted most of my time. When I got into UWC, I thought of it as a utopia, just as Loulouthi thinks of Castalia as a utopia. But the truth is, utopia does not exist externally. It's the pilgrimage of mind that makes a place utopia.

Loulouthi is one protagonist of the oppressive matriarchy. She follows its values. She would become the pillar of her society. Asano challenges her. He is a bold young man fighting for his rights taken away by the matriarchy. Both of them think they hold the truth. Asano can be seen as selfish, but he is only doing what he could do to save himself, though it brings him into new trouble. Loulouthi is also selfish in a way—she left without telling anyone at the beginning. She follows her dream until the very end, though her beliefs were challenged by Asano. Konstantin also arose out of a part of myself; he is basically my truthful and painful part. Asano is my revolutionary part. Loulouthi is my peaceful part. Ubuntu is my unbound part.

Back to the scenes.

Asano is sitting on his bed, hearing all these voices plotting to kill him.

"If I am in a novel, the readers would be so interested in me," Asano thinks, smiling bitterly, "I'm a high school drop-out, a psychotic, a boy in a forced marriage, a to-be trans woman, a murderer, and what else? A"chosen one", as the voices say. I don't know why I have so much magic. Life's been unfair to me."

"Kill him, he is thinking again." One voice says.

"Here it goes again, my readers," Asano whispers.

"He is what?" Another voice says.

“He is thinking!” The voice answers.

“Wow! He is committing the largest crime ever then. No men are allowed to think.” Another voice comments.

“Are women allowed to think?” Asano asks.

“You are not a woman. You are forever doomed. You are the evil wizard in women’s eyes. Stop defending for yourself and surrender to us!”

“Do what we told you to do, Asano. Cut the flesh from your mother’s body, or suck her.”

“We are planning to kill you, Asano. You will be dead soon. This will be all over soon, and you will meet us in hell.”

“Yes, come and join us. You are born to be one of us.”

“You just committed a huge crime. Why don’t you regret it?”

“I don’t regret being wise.” Asano asserts.

“What a martyr! He said he is wise! How would a wise boy end up with us?”

“Don’t kill him. Torture him. Torture him until he kills himself.” The voice of the woman in charge says.

“And then maybe we can force him to grow his hair and eat his hair then?”

Asano feels a pull from the roots of his hair. “Ouch!”

“Why do you only think about his hair? His heart is better. We will get to know what the heart of a rebel tastes like.”

“Where’s Ek? Ek, come find me! Please!” Asano secretly calls for Ek.

But Ek does not come.

“Come on, I need Ek. Ek, I need you. Now.” Asano tries hard to summon Ek.

Still no reply from Ek. Not even a signal.

“Let’s get him off the train first. Let’s force him to go to Factory O and cut off his dick and balls. He would love to pee sitting down.” A voice says.

“Fried rocky mountain oysters! Yay!” Another voice hoorays.

“Let’s turn him to his opposite side, since he hate women so much. Aren’t masculinist those who hate women?”

“I don’t hate women. I just hate being oppressed,” Asano speaks quietly.

“Uh! He is thinking again. This bar is red. That means he is thinking again. He shouldn’t be thinking! Thinking is a sin, committed only by men. Especially petite, lower class, bad-smelling men like Asano.”

“Yikes! He smells so bad.”

“You can smell me?” Asano asks.

The woman on the upper deck asks again, “Who are you talking to, boy? I don’t hear anyone talking to you. is there something wrong with you? And your mother? She’s been there for like five hours, without moving a bit.”

Asano does not dare to lift up his vision and look at her. Her blackness reminds Asano of his own yellowness, a color similar to white. He is far down in the discrimination chain, being yellow and male. That woman seems too black to be wrong. “Blackness speaks truth,” as a proverb says.

“Have you heard of *lingchi*, an ancient Chinese way of killing? They slices your flesh bit by bit, from the least important parts of your body, until you are pretty much just a beating heart. Maybe we could do that to him.”

“To him? No, I think he needs some mental torture.”

Hearing about the voices’ ideas of murdering him, Asano feels very strong discomfort.

“Don’t let anything happen to me, I’m a good boy.” Asano secretly prays.

To be written

23

Ek

Loulouthi and Asano has their last conversation. Asano sees Ek for the last time.

(The train is going through mountains, valleys, and tunnels.)

The train rumbles as it travels through mountains, valleys, and tunnels. It has reached a land without snow but with sunshine. Soon it will reach the sea, and will stop there. They have finally come to the west of the continent.

Children are running around through the corridor, and as many people stare out of the window at beautiful sceneries, anticipating their trip or their return to home, they smell the aroma of Nūwajie, the festival celebrating Nūwa's creation of human beings. Nūwajie is just a few days away, and already the towns the train passes are decorated with ornaments in the five symbolic colors: white, green, blue, red, and yellow. These are the colors of the stones that Nūwa used to mend the sky.

(希腊山区景物描写, 细节描写, 入冬)

"It's so pretty out there." Loulouthi looks at Asano's face.

"Yes."

"My boyfriend died." Loulouthi tries hard to swallow back her tears.

"What?" Asano sounds shocked.

"Oh." He puts his eyelid down.

"Sorry." He stares into her eyes.

"This is sad. I don't know how to respond to this." He then says.

"You don't have to respond to this. It's my business." Loulouthi says.

"OK." Asano looks down at his shoes.

After a long silence, Loulouthi asks, "what are you gonna do?"

"I don't know. I'm just a piece of meat that belongs to no one now. I'm the pariah of the society."

"You gotta have your own life, your own goals. Why not come to Castalia with me? I can help you learn to become a woman."

“No, I’m not interested. I think I will just ask Ek to run away with me. I can’t go back to Nippon anyway... It’s too oppressive.”

“Hey, this might sound weird, but you can come to Miezhdustan. My brother will like you very much. My mother treats him well. Well, not really, but much better than your mother treats you.”

“I don’t have the money to survive in Miezhdustan. At least in Nippon I can survive on social welfare and my thin salary on repairing bicycles. I don’t speak Miezhdu.”

“Miezhdustan is a very welcoming country. It’s very international, and that’s why it’s called Miezhdustan—the word for ‘international’ in Miezhdu language is ‘miezhdunarodniy’. You will like it there.”

“No, I’d better die on my way to escape.”

Loulouthi thinks, “my escape is finally about to reach the end, while his has just begun.”

Then she thinks, “No. We have both planned our escape long before they happened. We always wanted to escape.”

Then she also thinks, “When facing challenges, you can choose to either fight or to escape. Both of us chose to escape. We are not really fighters.”

Then she alters her thought, “But we did not choose to escape either—I chose what I thought was better for me (it is a pilgrimage), and Asano won the battle against his mother. We are both fighters in this way.”

Then Asano interrupts Lououthi’s thought, “What do you plan to do when you arrive?”

“I plan to see that Magister Ludi and try to get into Castalia, and live there for the rest of my life.”

“Don’t you think that a later version of yourself would hate you for that? I mean, don’t you want to travel around the world and see things?”

“I think I will find my peace in Castalia.”

“But it is hell, you know.”

Loulouthi suddenly sees the point Konstantin was trying to make. Maybe he is not dead and is waiting for her somewhere near Castalia? If only...

Asano says further, “Any conceived utopia is a hell, because they don’t allow imperfection.”

“While imperfection is the key to growth,” Loulouthi continues what Asano says.

“We’ll see what happens. Maybe I will see you sometime later in life—who knows?” Asano says.

Loulouthi takes measure of the boy in front of her again. He looks like a man now, with his chest 挺胸收腹, 雄赳赳气昂昂... She sees the reflection of herself in his eyes through his glasses. The 4pm sun was shining through the window, lazily.

*Mr. Sunshine in the morning
In the morning light—
Won't you come down from the ceiling
Won't you stay the night—
Baby won't you stay—the night*

While Loulouthi is staring at Asano, he is thinking of this song that he heard somewhere. The voice of the singer was indeed lazy and quirky and whimsical.

Then things around him start to blur. In dizziness he sees Ek, standing in the center of a huge spider net. Asano is on the net too, the ropes are shabby and almost not strong enough to hold him on the net.

“Ek?”

“Asano, this is my last time seeing you.”

“Why? You’re leaving me?”

“You’ve breached a principle,” Ek walks closer, “You killed someone. That’s against categorical imperatives.”

“But I’m sure I’ve done many other things that are against categorical imperatives.”

“These do not count. You’ve done something that ties a knot on space-time.”

“What do you mean?”

“You started as a fertilized egg in your mother’s uterus. Then you separated with her and you grew up. Then you ended her existence.”

“So?”

“So you killed the one who gave birth to you. That’s not a paradox, but it almost is. My boss told me to stay away from you to not be affected by your disease.”

“You have a boss? Why haven’t you told me about this before? And you think I have a disease?”

“Yes, the act of killing one of their own kind is a disease.”

“But it is okay if the country does it under the name of love for people?”

“... It’s not the same. A country is not a person. A person cannot kill a person. A human being cannot kill a human being. At least not on my domain.”

“I thought the darknet is all about cruelty like killing.”

“No, it’s not. Anyway, I have to go.”

Then Ek disappears. He didn’t even gave a chance for Asano to say proper goodbye. The setting of the train starts to appear in front of Asano’s eyes.

“What happened to you, Asano? You were frozen. You did not even blink your eyes!” Loulouthi looks concerned.

“I just... saw Ek.”

“What did he say?”

“He’s leaving me.”

“...”

“I almost don’t have anyone left then. No sister, no mother, no father, no uncle, no wife, no friends.” Asano speaks with sadness.

“If you don’t mind... I can be your friend.” Loulouthi says.

“No... Nevermind. You are going to Castalia. Enjoy your life and don’t mess around with a criminal like me.” Asano sighs.

“But it is you who told me that Castalia isn’t what I thought.”

“Did you believe me?”

“No... Um. Yes, in a way. After I thought about it, what you said make sense.”

“Good.” Asano bites his lower lip. His lips are so dry that cracks appear.

“Thank you, for talking with me on the train.”

“Thank you too.”

The sun shines through the train windows. Loulouthi speaks to her vidi something indiscriminate. Then she sighs.

24

The Arrival

The train arrives. Asano gets arrested. Loulouthi gets on a taxi and talks with the driver. Then she has a conversation with the writer of the book, which is me.

Background music: Teinen Pushiganga, Jun Togawa

The train finally arrives.

It is a beautiful sunny day at Ellatha. You could hear the waves crash land at the bay; there is sand on the northern and sharp rocks on the southern side.

Two policewomen walk through the crowd, and came directly onto the train. “Nobody moves!” They send their order.

“Who is Asano?” The blonde police officer asks, with Asano’s picture in her hand.

The other police officer says, “Olympia said that Asano’s bed is 12A.”

They walk through the corridor. The whole carriage smells like death. No one is dare to move.

They are walking closer, closer, and even closer... Asano’s mind is blank.

Finally they are here.

“Are you Asano?” The blonde officer asks.

Asano stares at her firmly, as if he have something to say.

The blonde officer scanned Asano’s face and fingerprint with her vidi and then takes out the handcuff.

“You are under arrest, Asano. Σ .”

Loulouthi watches Asano being dragged through the corridor and feels her heart pounding fast. She keeps blinking her eyes and fidgeting. The train start to be noisy again. She grabs her bag but her bag falls down to the ground. She picks it up again, grabs her suitcase and waits in line to get off the train.

And she gets off the train, seeing seagulls flying low, and the sun lazily hanging in the southern part of the sky. People are hustling everywhere, speaking a language that she recently learned. She has succeeded, or has she?

The setting sun is not going to answer. The ocean smiles at her. Finally she is here. And what awaits her?

Everything is in the color of orange, with the sun setting. The scenery across the hiatus of the train platform from far away is as beautiful and still as an oil painting, with crowds of people enjoying the sun on the beach. There are also some buildings newly built this century on the other side of the train. The train dissects the land into left and right.

Loulouthi lifts her hand and speaks to the vidi on her index finger, “Lead me to Castalia.” Then the vidi calls her a taxi and she gets on a few minutes later. She closes her eyes, breathes slowly, and starts think that she would be blessed to die at this moment. This way she would never know what Castalia is like. Is it truly liberating or oppressive? Was what Asano was saying just to defend himself for killing his mother?

“Castalia, nice place, huh?” The taxi driver looks at her above his glasses, through the rear-view mirror. He has a dark moustache that makes him look like the main character from the movie *the Lobster*.

“Yeah.” Loulouthi looks out of the window and sees helicopters flying in the sky.

“You know I can kidnap you and I would be rich, because you castalians worth so much alive.” He looks serious.

“What? No..” Loulouthi frowns.

“Haha! Just joking! You know how the outside world’s portrait of castalia is inaccurate?” The driver laughs.

“These are just myths,” Loulouthi says, thinking about which version of “outside world’s portrait” he is talking about—the general version, which varies country by country, or Asano’s version, of Castalia as hell?

At least she’d taken a courageous move, no matter what destiny lies in front of her. Now she thinks of Asano, of the food trolley, of Konstantin’s death, of the huge sandwich in the sky... Nothing makes sense—she still feels pretty dizzy in her head, yet she has decided to go on with her life, just like anybody else.

Suddenly Loulouthi hears a voice again, from the crack in the car.

“I’ve exhausted all my inspiration, but I’ve still got ten thousand words to write. What about let’s have a conversation, Loulouthi?”

“Sure,” Loulouthi thinks.

“I can get into your head.” I say.

“Of course you can. You are my creator.”

“Don’t you ever want to rebel against me?”

“No, I just think that you deserve a lot of respect, because you can let anything happen to me. So it’s better for me to respect you so that you don’t abuse me.” She thinks.

“I’m so pathetic, trying to talk to you and shit.” 我用手撑着脸，没力气地说。

“I’m so tired, Loulouthi.”

“Do you love me, my creator?”

“I don’t... sadly. When I came up with the idea of this novel, I was only thinking about creating a world that is the extreme opposite of the world I am in, set in the future, and with a traditional woman being challenged by a masculinist man. I did not add all these deaths. I’m sorry for your loss, Loulouthi, although I’m not the one to say it because I wrote his death. But right? You did not see the blood as least. I did not write about the blood. I’m sorry if I sound so cruel. I’m just having a bad time, trying to come out of depression and the worst year in my life.”

“Could you try to love me? Like a God?”

“I thought you did not believe in God.”

“Now I do. You’re my God.”

“I never intended to be a God. I created you just out of self-interest, not out of my love for you. I did not create you so that I could love you; I created you so that I could use you. It’s a contradiction, like the mother-child contradiction—if a woman chooses to have a baby she deliberately wants something from the baby, but she by conscience should not want anything from the baby but only provide for the baby. It’s a mess... Maybe I shouldn’t have created you.”

“Now don’t feel bad. You don’t have to be sorry that you created me. I have to thank you for my existence, even though it’s just a short period on the train. At least I felt something. Um, what do I look like when you see me?”

“I don’t actually see you. You appear through words.”

“Yeah, right. Okay. Am I two dimensional?”

“I don’t know. You are just a concept through a bunch of words.”

“That makes me sound so... Never mind, we should all live like Sisypha, right?”

“That’s Sysiphus. Asano’s right. The world has not always been matriarchal.”

“Why did you introduce me first and make him right?”

“Because he is a rebel. He is a challenger, while you preserve the current order, you live in the current system and never thought about changing it.”

“I thought you need to act in order to be considered a contributor of the world.”

“Well, since you are in a novel and I know your deepest thoughts... I think your thoughts count as a sign of progress.”

“So do you know all my quirks then...?”

“What quirks?”

“Like... sleeping with mouth open. I’m always ashamed of that.”

“I thought you would say peeing standing up.”

“No, sleeping with mouth open is what I feel ashamed about. There’s nothing wrong with peeing standing up.”

“You know what? You actually don’t exist in the novel. You exist somewhere else. It’s just that I captured your image in the novel. It’s like 昆虫蜕皮。我抓住的只是你褪下来的皮，你的真身已经在十万八千里之外。You are, in a way, not defined by me, but merely captured by me.”

“That’s fair. But where do I cling to, if I am not defined by you? Do I just cling to thing air?”

“That’s where I’ve given you your free will. Now, enjoy it. Bye, Loulouthi. Have a nice journey in Castalia.”

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