

**Pandemonium**

by Liqing Li

The first day of middle school, first class in another country. You encountered another world, being the smallest animal in a zoo. A world filled with white, black, red, some with grey dots on their faces. Even though we were all kids, they all looked different. The teacher said, “comfortability”. Pairs of eyes on paper, heads down, hands moving. You have no idea, peeked at the paper next to you. Squiggly lines, ovals, scribbles, connected. I can do it. Drawn on paper. The teacher said, “honesty”. Repeat movement, glance, long short long short. Again, and again. Time’s up. Ding ling ling ling. I looked up, around, empty desks. Smiled, and gave the paper to the teacher. Happy as one can possibly be. Aced it.

The second class, numbers. I got this. I looked down at the test paper, shapes. Triangles, 3, squares, 4. Head down, hands moving. Fast. Ten minutes. Hand raised, smiled and gave the paper to the teacher. Looked up, pairs of eyes glaring at you. Face burnt red, looked down and played with your hands. Moments later, you looked up, everyone is still busy writing. Worried, missing something? Made eye contact with the teacher, head down, continue playing with hands, until ding ling ling ling. Relief, run out of the door. I ran away from the classroom down the hallway until I realized, why is everyone going the opposite direction? Looked around, lost. Looked around again, eyes on restroom, that's the destination. Hide.

Feeling surreal. Everything is bigger than me. Why am I so small and soft? Gone into the wrong habitat. My yarn, gone into wrong places, tightens up my body. Curl up. Hide. It gets so tight, finally it snaps when I get to a place that I feel safe. Threads disappear.

A couple minutes later, everyone was gone from the restroom. Lost. Go out of the door. A pair of eyes, serious, earnest, and yet kindly. Mouth, open and closed. Again, and again. "Why Are You Here? You Should Not Be Here? Go eat." Eyes, lost. Her hands clawed around my shoulder and moved me along the quiet hallway until I heard noises, loud ugly noises. That was a huge room filled with colors, white, black, red, scary. She looked at me, raised her eyebrows and nodded. I didn't respond. She sighed and then left.

Her furious eyes, yellow beak, and large claws, place me around noises. Noises, multiplying and dividing. Eating away every space around me. Squeezing away all that I want. Monsters. Where am I? Where are my own kind?

At that moment.

I was lost. The principle showed me a place where she thought I belonged. She was trying to be helpful, leading me to the right place.

I was scared. I wanted and needed to tell someone. I assumed this serious yet kind lady knew what I needed and would help me. Instead, I was abandoned in the wrong place.

She might have felt offended from my response, no smile, no thank you. I felt forced to go to a place where I didn't want to be.

Sometimes, communication is the key.

If I told her how I felt. Maybe, she would understand.

I was standing in line, waiting for food. I had no idea what I was doing so I peeked at the guy next to me. Repeat movement, again. Walked out of the line, lost. I then found a table with the last empty seat, sat, and ate my food. Eyes glaring at me, face burned, looked down and continued to eat. A girl, a black girl at the round table asserted, you from Asia.

“Asian. Yes, I am Chinese.”

“So, you are not Asian.”

“I am, I am Chinese.”

She scowled, looked away. Laughed. I gave her a cold eye. She looked at me, disgusted. Ding ling ling ling. Time's up, on to the next class. Repeat. Again and again.

Am I offended? Is she offended? Perhaps, both ways.

Black jaguar, yellow kitten. Felidae, we are in the same family. Why are you so scary? Why are you so weak?

At that moment.

Perhaps, when facing differences. We are all confused. How should we approach others? How to respond to others? Maybe, I should've responded to her with explanations, detailed explanations. Not a cold eye. Then maybe, she would realize she wasn't very nice and apologize. Then, maybe, just maybe, we could be friends.

*"Did you know?"*

*Chinese people come from China.*

*China is a country.*

*China is in the continent of Asia.*

*People who live in that continent are called Asian."*

*"Oh, I got it.*

*Sorry.*

*Didn't mean to offend you."*

The next day. First period, I was seated at the same seat. The teacher called out names and gave back the papers from yesterday. I looked at the girl next to me, the girl I cheated yesterday. *Smith, 100* with a huge check mark on the paper. You didn't get your paper until the very end. The teacher walked to your desk, handed you the paper face down. She smiled and asked, "Do you know how to write your name?". You nodded. "At least write your name next time", she looked at you and walked away. Everyone looked at you. You looked down, flipped the paper. 0. With a small dot next to it, as if there is something more to be said. Why zero? You didn't realize she was writing cursive, and you were writing scribbles. The teacher walked toward you and asked you to get up from your chair and sit in front of a computer. A website with the title of "Letters For Fun" appeared. She then said very slowly, "Sit here and look at this website every morning until class ends. Alright?" I was totally okay with this outcome, easy games. The rest of the class was fun, until a girl turned around and looked. She whispered to a person next to her. "Oh wow, that is the website I played in first grade! It was fun!" When she saw me looking at her, she awkwardly smiled, as if she felt really bad for saying that to her friend. Then she said, "Hey, sorry, your hair is pretty though".

Sorry. Pretty. Though.

I looked away, no emotions, no words.

At that moment.

She was trying to apologize, trying to compliment me. Yet, I was referred to as an object. Just pretty hair, as if I didn't have a brain or body.

I didn't know how to respond at that moment so, I didn't. I blocked myself from the world. As if I were an object. As if she didn't need to say that. As if she was talking to herself. I made her look ridiculous for apologizing.

We hurt each other. Made each other feel really uncomfortable.

Eyes suddenly appeared in the middle of the road. Full of innocence. Our eyes are so similar. I am comfortable. Everyone is too. Yet, both got hurt. Why? Hurt each other.

At that moment.

I was embarrassed, because I understood what she was referring to. My language level at the time was elementary level, and yet I was in middle school.

I wasn't embarrassed for cheating off her during the vocabulary test because I didn't understand what was going on around me.

Right? Wrong? No clear line. Shades of grey everywhere  
around.

Do cheating and fairness contradict each other? Maybe.

Do judgement and acceptance contradict each other?  
Maybe.

Ignorance.

Or, is it an excuse?

Is it okay to cheat just because?

Is it okay to hurt or kill someone just because?

Just because you didn't know?

Not knowing wrong?

I Sinned.



When it was time for the next class, I felt relieved at getting out of English class, but I feared the outcome of the next class. As I walked into the classroom, the teacher smiled at me and asked, “Hi, how is your day?” I felt nervous speaking to her so I simply nodded, wanting to get away from her. She then said, “How do you pronounce your name?”. I repeated my name three times. She repeated the same words three times before she finally gave up and said, “Can I just call you Ms. Li?”. I would only say yes.

*Oh that is finally over. Why did she only ask for my name? Not anyone else?*

*At that moment.*

*I was lost. First, people around me didn't recognize me as a person, only as an object with descriptions. Now, the label is gone. Only left with a partially smeared name.*

*Ms. Li*

*There was a degree of respect there, right? She was trying to treat me like everyone else, to have a first name. But, when that did not work out, she didn't offer me a chance, to ask*

*“What would you like to be called?”*

*Instead, she offered me a cold isolating label. One that is different than everyone else.*

*What would you like to be called?*

*Just Li please.*

*Are you sure?*

*Yes.*

*Alright then.*

When the class started, she told everyone that Ms. Li is the only one that got a close to perfect score. Then she handed out the tests. Pairs of eyes stared at you. Face burned. As you were looking down, the girl next to you said, "Can I see your test?" I nodded. After that, the teacher started to go over the test, and I didn't have my test paper for the rest of class. Ding ling ling ling, the class ended. When I finally gathered enough courage to ask for my paper back, the girl stood up and walked out of the door. I ran out behind her, grabbed her backpack strap and asked, "Hi, can I have my paper back?". She looked at me as if I were crazy, then she said, "Oh yeah, alright, here". After she returned the paper, she walked away. No thanks. No sorry.

At that moment.

The lack of communication caused us to have a mutually uneasy feeling. I was anxious for not having my paper throughout the class. She might have felt I invaded her personal space for not asking kindly and instead I ran behind her and grabbed her backpack.

As if. As if it is your fault. As if it is her fault.  
For not understanding each other.

They have long necks. So tall, reaching to the sky. Yet overseeing everything else. They feel me, yet can't build a connection. The distances between us, so close, yet so far.

To show up in another part of the zoo. You look alike, but different. Power.  
Powerless.

You are recognized. They are perceived. You are disregarded. They are irritated.

Ding ling ling ling ling

The sound of the bell repeats again and again at the end of an era, beginning of an era. Perhaps, it is a cycle. A cycle of misunderstanding. A cycle of hurt. A cycle of love?

A kitten. An eagle. A jaguar. A deer. A owl A giraffe.

They are random animals, but are they connected? They are.

Are they in a predatory cycle or symbiotic cycle? Maybe.

In reality, is it a cycle? Or actually just chaos?

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