

# **The Scared, The Scarred**

Manqing (Estella) Jin

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It was a cold autumn day when the howling wind flipped open a hidden page of my past.

Three years after I graduated from middle school, I went back for a copy of my transcript. Walking along the familiar school district, I found the small milk-tea shop: the name had changed, and the staff were all unfamiliar faces. I stopped by the shop for a second and decided to buy a drink. When I got the milk-tea in my hands, my fingers turned cold. I stared into the ordinary milk-tea: there was a bunch of ice floating on the top, clashing and emitting coldness to my fingers; I guess the tea was bitter, and the milk was opaque; I saw the bubbles spinning at the bottom of my cup, just like the curious eyes of school teens. Gradually, my vision blurred and brought me back to my middle school memories.

“Her mum is such a mad witch!” Angela grabbed my sleeves and whispered to me at the corner of the staircase, “Have you seen Xiaoke’s hair?” “What?” I was confused. “Shhh! Here she comes! Look!” She tightened her grasp at my sleeves and pointed towards the other side of the hallway. I saw Xiaoke’s hair.

Her hair had become a buzz cut left with some uneven “bushes.” She was walking alone slowly with her face towards the ground, making her hair even more obvious to be seen. When she walked even closer, I saw her eyes a bit red and swollen, and at the end of her hairline, I saw some red lines from scratches. To me, her head looked like a piece of burned field. I remember she used to have beautiful black curly hair tied tidily at the back of her head, and I could not imagine what had happened to her, so I asked Angela who was Xiaoke’s classmate.

“She was caught having a romantic relationship with the adult boy who works at the milk-tea shop near our school. Her mother locked her at home for one week and forbade her from any of her electronic devices to let her reflect on her fault. Her hair was also cut by her mother.

Her mother said that making her appearance ugly can help her to stay away from any more relationships. She grabbed her hair, bunch by bunch, and cut as close to scalp as possible. She was so crazy and brutal. I can't imagine how someone would do this to her own daughter, not to mention what a scholarly family that she was from," Angela said.

I knew Xiaoke from our shared interest group, calligraphy and guitar. She was in grade 8 while I was in grade 9, but our classrooms were on the same floor, so I often saw her around. She not only owned high level certificates in both calligraphy and stone-carving arts but also was one of the best students in her class. She was from an influential scholar family which was famous for Chinese traditional arts. However, she did not talk or laugh much at school ever since that semester when her closest friend went to study abroad, and we had not talked to each other for a long time.

The imagination about Xiaoke kept rolling in my mind. I could imagine her begging and crying to stop her mother from cutting her hair when her hair was painfully grabbed by her mother's hands. I could imagine her furiously beating on her room's door when she was locked for a whole week. I could imagine her fear of being seen by schoolmates coming back to the school and I could imagine how she missed her boyfriend. I could imagine how she shivered with emotional and physical pain at night. When she walked passed us without even noticing our existence, I could guess how she was detached from her sensory reality. Perhaps she was avoiding any pair of eyes around the school; or perhaps she was too broken to talk to us.

The second day, when Angela and I were walking along the hallway towards teachers' office, we suddenly heard a sharp screaming sound from the eighth-grade teachers' office before we arrived at the door. Certainly, it was not an appropriate time for entering. So we

peeked inside the room and saw a furious woman stood in the middle of the room. “Defamation! These are all defamations! I did NOT inflict domestic violence upon her!” It was Xiaoke’s mother. The middle-aged woman was shouting at the class teachers, director of teaching and discipline and the headmaster, denying any act of domestic violence when she was called to school by Xiaoke’s class teacher. “She was a liar. Don’t you educators know that teenagers are best at lying? All I did was warning her about that rabble. Then she locked herself up and caused the bruises herself! What kind of person do you think I am?” The scream was so loud and sharp that I had to take a step back from where I stood. To my surprise, I realized that I accidentally stepped on someone’s foot. When I looked backwards, I was stunned: behind where Angela and I stood, another twenty students were standing in front of the office door with their necks held high. More and more students joined peeking when they walked by, and the crowd became larger and larger until a teacher whose face turned from exaggeratedly respectful smiles into furious glare at us: “What are you doing here? Go back to your classrooms immediately!” Before the voice settled, the huge crowd suddenly dismissed and disappeared into every classroom on both sides of the hallway. My heart kept beating fast restlessly for that whole day.

My mind could no longer be settled. I felt as if I was shouted at and scolded as soon as the teacher’s piercing glare reached my eyes. But the huge crowd of schoolmates seemed even more scary. Why would so many people come to overhear the conversation between Xiaoke’s mother and the teachers? Perhaps they are just curious after hearing the loud and high-pitched voice of the mother, just like Angela and I was. I speculated that they must have held their own opinions and judgements in their silent stares, and ended up solely listening to the voices of the

teachers and the mother. Perhaps they were taught from a young age that children should never interrupt the conversations of the elders, or perhaps they were taught not to rebel against the opinions of the authority, and instead were trained to obey. Perhaps the silence of the crowd is not malicious, it was just a part of the product of education. Perhaps it was malicious, because the schoolmates felt comparatively lucky that they were not in trouble that day. If the majority was holding similar opinion as mine, I speculate that most of them were scared of being the bird that pops out from its nest under the aiming of a hunting rifle. Perhaps everybody there knew the consequence of a rebellion—punishments await. I could not read the minds of the crowd, but I could hear my own whisper: “You don’t want to be in trouble just like Xiaoke, do you?” Under the grand order constructed by the authorities from the elder generations, unconformity means punishment, a very harsh one.

What was the real cause of Xiaoke’s wounds and scars? I clearly saw the scratches on her forehead near her hairline, so there might possibly have been a violent fight between she and her mother when the mother was cutting her hair. According to Angela, the brutal mother beat Xiaoke up, but the mother kept claiming that Xiaoke did the harm to herself. There might be a possibility that Xiaoke hurt herself to escape from her mother’s confinement. Perhaps the mother refused to negotiate with Xiaoke, and the only way for her to “speak out” her mind was through physical actions, even at a cost of pain and scars on herself, not unlike the many adolescent suicidal behaviors documented by Xianchen Liu, et al. Perhaps she was experiencing so much stress from her family and personal relationship that mental illness started to erode her mind, causing her to do harm to herself. On the other hand, it was also known from social studies that because Asian culture, especially Chinese, puts strong emphasis

on school achievement, early involvement in heterosexual activities is indeed discouraged by Chinese parents. (Cheung, et al.) Perhaps the mother was an extremely conservative keeper for the so-called “Asian culture” and locked her daughter up (mentally and physically) so that she could not act against her will. Perhaps her freedom was constantly restrained during her growth when she was forced into doing everything that her parents wanted her to do. Perhaps she was raised as a property of the family for all her life, instead of a living individual who deserved equal human rights as adults; perhaps they “built” her as a golden trophy made of flesh and blood, displaying in the splendid showroom inside her family’s house. I could not stop myself from all my imaginations about what was happening in the big house of the Hwangs where Xiaoke’s family lived. I could imagine the mother’s spluttering scolding: “You are such a shame for the Hwangs! I have told you to stay away from the rabbles for a thousand times, but were you listening to me? You are already stained at the age of 15! How are you possibly to win the face back for our family when you grow up?” Typically, the relationship of girl, especially in families with high social status, is a big decision of the whole family instead of the girl’s own. In the old times, the marriages of the younger generation were viewed as tokens which influential family members utilized as an opportunity to win the power of other “big” families. “*Meng Dang Hu Dui*” (the pair of the doorknobs should made of similar material), a very common Chinese phrase used to describe “perfect match”, as perfect as the shiny round metal doorknobs on the doors of rich families who have kept this order by endless generations. In the traditional language context, door represents the public face of the family, while drawing the equal sign between two young people and two cold metal doorknobs is a perfect example of objectification of human that is imposed on younger generation of the family. Under the

shiny roof of the Hwangs, Xiaoke was just a property of the house, lifeless as a piece of metal doorknob. A property could never be owned by someone else; a trophy could never leave the showcase; and she was neither allowed to escape nor to have her own rebellious thoughts (which most 15-year-old teenagers have). Perhaps she tried to break away from the family order by secretly having a romantic relationship with the young man at the milk tea shop. During the days when I witnessed Xiaoke's encounter, I was still too young to understand that no matter how much Xiaoke adored the young man, their relationship would never be approved.

Perhaps the romantic relationship between Xiaoke and the guy at milk tea shop was the sweetest in the world. The young adult who who worked at the milk-tea might be financially strained, but he had an unconstrained smile on his lips. To her, he was as sweet as the drinks that he sold. She probably started chatting with him a few months earlier when she asked about a song playing in the shop. They probably read the same book when apart, during Xiaoke's lunch break, and during his recess from work. They might have shared a music list with each other. He might have secretly prepared her favorite drink when she finished school every day. His fingers might have slipped through her beautiful black hair when they kissed (if they did). She might have played some love songs on her guitar, which are different from the classic pieces that her parents wanted her to practice everyday. Then her parents might recognize her unusually happy face everyday when she came back home. Perhaps one day, the curious mother opened Xiaoke's drawer in the bedroom when she was at school and picked up her secret diary. The mother then became furious and Xiaoke did not know what was awaiting her until she went back home.

Even till today, I still do not understand what was extremely wrong, but I remember that

the school kept “educating” us that having “early relationship” was unforgivable. At the weekly meetings of school faculties, the director of education and discipline commanded to all the class teachers, from the 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 9<sup>th</sup> grade, to “seriously discuss the consequence of early relationship” with their students, especially female students, using Xiaoke’s case as an example. After the class teachers had conducted their education, more and more students rushed to our floor just to have a glance into Xiaoke’s classroom to watch her as if she was some exotic animal at the zoo. I saw people popping their heads into the classroom to find the “buzz cut girl”. “There she is!” “Look!” The atmosphere on our floor seemed like a public execution in the medieval times. I encountered Xiaoke when she was crying at the hallway after she escaped from her classroom; I, stunned, for a second in an ambivalent emotion, eventually sneaked away—I was too afraid of the sights from the beastly crowd.

Our school’s “warning” to us was successful, undoubtedly. I became scared about romantic relationships ever since the incidence of Xiaoke. I also had relationship when I was 15: if I was also “caught”, what would happen to me? The fear was so tightly stuck at the back of my mind that I was and remain reluctant to tell any others about my romantic relationship as if it was something shameful or disgraceful, even when I am now far away from the miserable middle school days. After I witnessed what happened to Xiaoke, I abandoned all my teen novels about school romance. My imagination of beautiful and sweet love disappeared at the age of 15. Love became something shameful, dirty and sometimes unforgivable, something that needs to be hidden, and something that is **wrong**. A question that was marked wrong on my exam always had a definite reason, but a relationship could be wrong while anything could become an accusation. Even when I am 19 years old now--a legal adult--I still feel nervous and insecure



when I was holding hands with my partner as if we are going to be “caught”. On my social media posts, I kept blocking the access of the “adults” from my pictures or online diaries about my relationship even when my generation grew into adults. I constantly laugh at my silly insecurity, but my memory about Xiaoke has turned me into a bat that always wants to hide away. My boyfriend who did not know about the story was very confused when I was reluctant to walk with him in public. He asked me what I was afraid of, and I could not answer. He joked about me and said I was such a coward about relationships. Yes, I am. I was admitting my own “crime” without anyone to accuse me because of the shadow of what I witnessed at the age of 15. I knew that my parents were nothing like Xiaoke’s, but mistrustfulness involuntarily grew at the distance between me and them, and I never openly talk about my relationship with them because I am afraid of being judged to be “wrong”. I could never build any healthy and open relationship: my skin was intact, but my mind was scarred just like Xiaoke’s wrist.

Towards the end of the the semester, the wounds gradually disappeared from Xiaoke’s skin. I remember she was the only student who wore a long sleeved uniform in the summer. Then I left middle school after graduation. Angela told me that Xiaoke did not attend school the next autumn. She told me that Xiaoke had transferred to another school far away from this district. Some told me that she was in the mental hospital, but no one knew the exact ward she lived in (so probably no one visited her). Some told me that she refused to go to school again and “wasted her youth”. All the voices ran past my mind like a cold wind in the winter that penetrates my bones.

My memory was interrupted by the sudden outburst of music above my head. The school bell rang; the school day was over. It was time for me to enter the school to get my transcript

copies. Back to reality, my fingers became painfully frozen by the cold drink in such a chill weather. I switched hands and took a sip.

The bubbles smoothly slipped by my tongue, hiding away all the sweetness and bitterness. The black and round bubbles reminded me of the bright eyes of the “curious” teenagers who overheard at the office door and who peeked into Xiaoke’s classroom. Mine were part of those.

I started to realize the deep root of my cowardice about relationships. Afraid of suffering the same kind of punishment to Xiaoke, I did not step forward to set out my value of right or wrong. Instead of choosing bravery, I chose cowardice by complying to the world of “order” constructed by the authorities or elder generation. I could have opened the office door and said “Madame, I believe that Xiaoke was not doing anything wrong, but you certainly were.” I could have driven the gawkers away by clenching my fists and glaring at them. I could have passed a pack of paper napkin to Xiaoke when I saw her crying at the hallway. I could have done so much, but those commitments are only done by my imagination. I was the one who hid away in silence.

Now, I feel the accusation as an ever-lasting emotional burden because I did not seize the opportunity to justify what’s right or wrong. With my silence, I accepted (or connived) the wicked order, so the judgements captured me and imprisoned my mind whenever I am in love.

I heard the bubbles bursting between my teeth.

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