

Three Chances to Explode

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“Why can’t I find those important pieces?”

Rolling over, the man got up from the floor of the room. He soon turned his attention from the unfinished work, a large puzzle, to the window. “Here you are,” He opened the window “Hungry today? Here’s something delicious for you.” No answer. A cat showed up by the window; however, it didn’t look like paying any mind to him, who was leaning over to get the food in the drawer. It’s a female tabby cat with grey stripe on its body. It didn’t wait until he put the plate in front of it as usual; it jumped into the room, went to the door which was at the end of the room, and knocked on it by its tiny paw. “You have something to show me today...?” The man opened the door for the cat, followed it passing by the hallway of the apartment, going down stairs, and finally stood by the mailbox.

The cat stared at him. The blue eyes were same as that day it first came here, but looked deeper at the moment. He got a mail from the mailbox, “What does this mean?” The cat didn’t give any answer. It just meowed like any other cats and walked around. “**Three Chances to Explode.**” Only a few words written on the letter, they are all in bloody color, as if being afraid that it would not be noticed by anyone. He heard the timer in his mind had started counting.

Another day, after work, he met the cat again on the way home. “I’ve got something to ask you. It’s about the letter.” He walked behind the cat, and said, “You must know everything about it.” They passed by the most bustle part of the city. It was a public square with a small water fountain in the middle. He slowed down his path, at the same time kept looking around, carelessly. A lot of students gathered in front of a doughnut stand on his right side. His high school memories came to mind

with the smell. When he was still a teenager, he had got one freshly made in his hands, the steam in contrast with the cold winter, sweet but strange. He remembered that he used to pass by this square after school. The school moved to the south of the town, a few years after he graduated. The old one, at the direction he was looking would be torn down by next year.

The sky turned dark early in autumn, so he decided to speed up. The cat followed. He considered about the mystery in the mail box. *Could that really happen?* Actually he was a normal person. Graduated from a public university, he found a normal work, repeated almost the same works every day, and lived on the little pay. He used to have a dream, but he knew that's for people more stupid or outstanding. As a "normal" person, he was not allowed to have any. After work, he seldom hung out with his co-workers; he worked on those unfinished puzzles. He enjoyed the process which he called "reconstruction"—messing up all the pieces and trying to build it up again. It seemed that through the process, he was building himself gradually.

There was a little alley to the live-house. He usually went there when he was in high school. After becoming a college student, he seldom did. He met the cat there. That was a raining Saturday night. He saw the cat right after he went out the live-house at the intermission of the performance, for breathing some fresh air. The cat was wet and wounded, quivering under the eaves. He knew this cat. It often showed up on the street in the town. It might be too dark to see its color clearly but he could never forget its eyes. So transparent. He sometimes wondered that if it could show him the picture of his mind through the crystal blue eyes. He looked around, "They always behave like this, you poor little cat." Broken bottles and cigarette butts spread all over the ground. He felt little fire sparkles scattering in his mind, but soon extinct because of the rain. He followed after the little victim, held the umbrella for it, and at the same time led it to his home, the safest place he could think of at the moment.

After that, the cat came and visited him sometimes.

The wind was getting stronger. He held the collar of his jacket tight. They walked down into the entrance of the underground city. The place he lived was one station far from the center of the town. After he said goodbye to the cat, he started to walk much faster to take the subway. The whole city was bustling, making noises, but he was quiet. He was like a stone in the middle of the river; the water flowed by him, separated, and gathered again. From the beginning to the end the water kept running; it didn't matter at all whether there was a stone. The melancholy feeling in his mind told him he didn't belong to this place. Suddenly, a red flag caught his eyes from the dim dark crowds. It was a flag beside a vendor. When he saw the color he felt the blood rolling in his pulse. The space seemed shifting. The vendor became near, the crowds were fading, and the ground he faced at the moment was rising. The voice of people went louder and louder; however, the meaning of each word turned obscure. The risen ground opened, and, a red, little button showed up. When he noticed, his finger was already on the button. "Boom!" Then there was the vacuum. He felt himself no distance with those spreading red patches. He lost his balance. And before he found something to grab on, he saw the shocked face of the peddler. Other faces, also, became very clear around him. All the eyes opened wide, filled with astonishment. He could hardly breathe, until a scream ripped the stillness of the time.

A girl screamed. He was drawn back to the reality. And then she cried. Near by the girl there were many pieces of broken balloons. The color of those balloons was the same as the color of the vendor's flag. People didn't freeze for more than a second, the shock on each of their faces soon submerged, and left only the calm water. The man has grabbed on one side of the vendor. He closed his eyes, wait until everything went away. "Want some doughnuts?" The vendor smiled to him.

He chose to walk home instead of taking the subway. Didn't he notice the cat

walking beside him again, quietly. They went out of the underground city; he decided to walk upstairs. The sky was dyed into several colors. The heat came from far away shone upon their faces, though it was the last for the day. The cat looked gleaming against the setting sun. In its eyes, he hoped he could be as bright as it was.

The puzzle was half-finished. It was a large one with over 1500 pieces. He worked on a little every day, from the edge to the middle. Nevertheless, he had stocked for several days. After counting he realized that some of the pieces were really missing. Three pieces are gone. Without those little things, it is more difficult to finish the whole. He felt anxious, so the afternoon he decided to go for a walk.

He went to the high school which he graduated from. The building hadn't been used for more than four years. He crossed through the courtyard. The withered flowers were waving in the wind. He can hear the rubbing sound of those dried-out leaves and petals. He walked on the hallway, passed by classrooms, and tried to figure out the parts he was familiar with. He looked into the window. The black board and broken desks were covered with a layer of dust. He fell deep into his memories.

A person in suit interrupted his recalling. "What a coincident! I've never seen you since we graduated from here!" He came and patted the man on his shoulder. At the place he just stood, was a camera.

"Hi," the man squeezed a smile from his face "William! What are you doing here?"

"As you can see, I'm now a ruins photographer," William pointed at the camera.

"Yeah. I remember you went aboard." He can see the weaving texture clearly of his old friend's suit. William constrainedly tidied up his collar.

"That's really a long story. By the way, where do you work now?"

"In the office nearby the station." The man became absent minded.

"I remember that you were an interesting guy at that time. So...besides work, what do you do at other times?"

“Nothing. If must say...I’m now working on a large puzzle.”

“That’s nice.” He looked at his watch with brass case and leather strap. Every time he moved his wrist the dial shined.

“Hey did you hear about Jimmy?”

“Yeah, I know he became lead vocal of the popular band. I go to the life house and listen to their performance sometimes.”

“Life house? The one where we usually went?” William opened his eyes widely.

“yes.”

“Wow I miss the place so much. Remember? We used to have our own band, also with Jimmy. We hung out after school, played those stupid songs... maybe they were not so stupid at that time.” They laughed.

“We had drinks after practicing. Sometimes we argued and fought.” William’s voice showed his excitement.

“You always won Jimmy.”

“Yeah. But I didn’t at the last time. He persisted in his idea to play something more popular. After the fight he left us. And a few months later I started preparing for the entrance exam to study abroad. We were over. I know he was more gifted. But I definitely didn’t like the way he lead us. To make it clear, I was the director.”

They fell into silence for a few seconds, and soon the one in the suit looked at his watch, which glistening under a streak of sunlight shining through the ruined building. “I’m going to finish the rest.” He adjusted the lens of his camera. “To tell the truth, it is the time for you to live practically. Try to plan for your life! Forgive me. You’re neither staying awake nor pursuing your dream now. You have to choose one. Invest in something more useful. ”

“That’s nice.”

He left the classrooms where they just had had a short talk. Those withered flowers

in the courtyard kept bending. He sat with his back to the parterre. He recalled the color of those flowers in his youth. They were scarlet. He put his hand on something, trying to calm down himself. When paying attention on what he was supporting on, he realized that it was a mail box—of course, it was red. Suddenly, the corner of the building exploded. The ground was shaking. Rubbles fell from the eaves and some ejected from the exploding. Soon the corner of the building turned into a pile of ruins. “Damn! My camera!” He heard William cursing. “I’m going to accuse the contractor... do they know how much I had spent on these photography equipment?” The man walked away. He didn’t feel pity about his old friend, but about the lens in the dust.

He got himself a cocktail, found a seat. “Excuse me.” He said to a lady, but the music of the live band covered his words. Jimmy was in the middle of the stage. Stage lights glared down on him. Those lights were too dazzling, especially those purple, flicking ones. The man would rather pay his attention on those instruments than on Jimmy because looking at him had made him dizzy, he was too shiny, colored by those flashing light. Located underground, the life house had been rebuilt from an old basement. The paint on the wall was already mottled, instead of the paint the wall was covered by many graffiti and posters. This place was too noisy to him, he thought, but it was too quiet outside.

He chose to come back to the place at 3 a.m. People for the performances had already gone. When he was about to get out from the alley, he heard the sound he was familiar with. It was the cat, and it was surrounded by three young guys who looked only twenty or less. “Give it back to us! The thing you stole from our place!” The cat humped its back in defense. “Hey... hey! What are you guys going?” He roared, but nobody answered. Those young people soon caught the cat and went away. When he finally reached the end of the alley, they were already gone. He had never been so

nervous since he was a teenager. He wanted to find it immediately. However, he was stopped by a pentagram lacquered on the metal side door. The specific color was imprinted in his mind; he shook his head, trying to ignore the signal. But this time all the things in front of him were dyed with that color. He looked down on his body, and noticed that the cardinal glow came from his left chest, at the place of heart. He felt something in his clenched fist, and he knew the thing must be the trigger. But he shouldn't press it this time. The cat could be in any place, and it might get injured in the explosions.

"Boom!" Followed by firelights, the door he just stood by exploded. The impact made him fall down on the ground. *No, I didn't! I didn't press the bottom.* He thought. And there were several smaller explosions followed one after another. "You stupid cat! What are you doing?" He heard someone shouted, distantly. "Catch it! Catch it! Hurry up!" Another person said. *They're inside!* He struggled to stand up. He had to save the cat. He gripped the trigger in his palm, running by windows to windows that fragmentized because of the sudden heat, trying to find the entrance in such a chaos. A streak of bloody light cut through the night. There was a split made of fire in the middle of the sky. Under the galaxy the glass fragments twinkled. He saw the cat's eyes when he could feel the heat at short range. He stunned.

The cat didn't stand safely on the ground after surpassing. Instead, it lied weakly when the fire died out. The man rushed to its side. He felt something wet and warm when he touched its body. Some dark color was on his fingertips after the touching. *Thank God.* It was still alive, and didn't have serious wounds. He wiped the tear which fell from his eyes and saw something in its mouth. He moved its head and got the thing. Three pieces of puzzles! Many question marks came into his mind. He couldn't understand the things which had happened these days, however, he felt sorry about the cat's injury. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," He said. The cat opened its eyes a little

bit, staring at him. It started to rain. Before he heard the tramps of those young people, he had already run far away from the life house.

The sunlight shone into the narrow room, the room was flooded with orange, cozy light. The man packed up his suit case. He walked to the window, ready to close it. Then he saw the cat lingering there. "I thought you won't come here today," he pointed at his package. "I've got to go."

They looked at each other. His face was full of emotion at that moment. "There's some food I put at the windowsill. You can come and have your meal if you want." He added some food into the plate, "I will come back someday, I promise. Hope you will still be here at that time. I have had many questions in mind these days, about the mail, the explosions, and the puzzle." The big puzzle was still unfinished. It was put into a small box, under lots of stuffs.

"But they are not that important now. I'll regard the whole thing as a lesson, a lesson you want to teach me. You don't know what had happened in my life before, but I'm glad that not many people got hurt because of me.

And, to finish the whole puzzle or not doesn't matter anymore. What I need is to go on my own journey. I won't feel pity to give up what I had already done; instead, I feel happy to give my soul a chance to rebirth. I've never feel so free." His eyes shone.

At that moment, he could see through its crystal blue eyes. The cat and the man seemed to understand through each other. The cat didn't answer him. Next second, it came to him, slightly rubbing against the hand which was holding the food plate. Then, it just meowed and walked away as usual. "See you soon." He finally said.

When he walked up the stairs of the subway, he saw the underground city gradually getting out of his sight, and the scenery of the street became clearer and clearer. He liked the feeling of getting up stairs, because he could always anticipate what would

come into his view. Some lights of hope break through the clouds in the rosy sky. He stepped forward to the horizon.