

## **Cycle (Fiction)**

Flowers bloom and wither, winter departs and spring returns. No matter how things change, the laws of this world never escape the cycle of reincarnation. Life is born only to meet destruction, yet new life sprouts anew from decay. Everything in this universe revolves within this circle. As time flows, we all eventually return to our starting point...

I was born in a small county hospital. People crowded around me, chattering endlessly. Some said my phoenix-like eyes destined me for wealth and glory, others said my full forehead foretold an official career. In these praises, my mother named me Qi Tian, which means "Equal to the Heavens", and rival the sun and moon in brilliance.

Time flashed by, and soon I started kindergarten. Under my family's encouraging gazes, I took my first trembling steps into that world of strangers. To my relief, the children are kind and the teachers gentle. Here, I first held a paintbrush, and turning my imagination onto paper.

"I love your painting," they said.

This was a new universe where I could run, jump, and unleash my mind. Only while painting did I feel my feet grounded and my head touched the sky. Those were my happiest days, now blurred like a beautiful dream.

But dreams eventually shatter. During my final kindergarten year, the illusion dissolved like soap bubbles becoming distant stars. My once-gentle mother turned cold, chanting mantras of ambition as she cast me into despair.

“We have to win at the starting line. If you don't start working hard from this point on, how will you go to a good college when you grow up?”

I later found out that my mom didn't go to college, not even high school. She didn't know why she wanted me to, she just knew that everyone did, so it was best to go with the flow. My paints vanished into the highest cabinet, suddenly as unreachable as the moon.

"I must work harder," I vowed. "If I don't win at the starting line, others will outpace me. I'll make Mother stop feel sad, stop being so tired. If I try harder, she won't need to find me a new father, right?"

I entered my ideal elementary school, thinking nightmares ended. Instead, true hell began. Sentences swimming like fish across textbook pages, they are not words to me, but incomprehensible symbols for me. I studied intensely, but the only thing I received was teachers' scolding.

At eight o'clock in the evening, I finally finished the day's lesson. Looking at my mother's increasingly hunched back, I feel very sad, but I can not do anything, the only thing I can do is to pick up the books in front of me, study harder.

Years flowed like sand through clenched fists. As studies intensified, my grades keep slipping. Mother's eyes hardened with each report card, constantly complaining about how hard it was to work alone, and how I never improved my awful grades. I don't know what to do, I should try harder, a little harder, then I can make my mom happy, right?

The results of the exams weren't good, I ended up in an ordinary junior high school, and my mom's temper got more and more irritable, and I started to avoid going home, always making

excuses just to stay out there for a little while longer, and I even started to look forward to that nightmare school life.

“Even if I try, it won't do any good, right?” With such thoughts, I finally surrendered. I stopped studying hard, took the dusty paintbrush from its high shelf. Sketching in class, sleeping through lessons, my scores cratered. Classmates ostracized me, they sneered at me: "No wonder his father left. Who could stay for this?"

When fists finally flew, the principal's office echoed with condemnation. Mother bowed endlessly, apologizing for my reasonable violence. Returning home, I found my drawings shredded, paints tossed out windows – all destroyed by her hands.

"Please, Mom... I really love painting. Let me live for myself..... just once."

“I.....”

She just walked away, with eyes that seemed to have lost her soul. That midnight, I heard her weep, that's the first time I heard my mom crying, but also the last time. Since then, my brushes never moved again.

In the endless ostracism and bullying, high school arrived with crushing pressure. Countdown numbers on blackboards ticked like execution drums. People around me are desperately trying, looking at the countdown constantly receding, the sense of urgency I lost finally returned to the body.

We shouted that the “Mountain of books is the path of diligence”. Keep modeling tests, keep hitting high scores, and it's like there's a wolf behind me that keeps catching up, and if I stop, I'll be torn to shreds and lose all hope.

I barely passed the college entrance exam. My mother spent savings on a banquet. Relatives materialized, praising me like at my birth. They strategized like generals, deploying me to distant battlefields. Following my stock-trading cousin's example of success, I chose Economics. No objections, my brushes were dead, youthful passions buried. This was destiny, right?

Graduation brought no fortune. I didn't become a millionaire, and my cousin landed in jail; I became an office drone, smiling through forced toasts and empty chatter. Days blurred into machinery. I married without love, having a son named Qi Feng, which means "reach great heights ". His pond-deep eyes observed birthday crowds.

Time passed slowly, he grew up and I grew old. I lost all my teenage spirit, and only when I was drunk did I brag to my kids, about my glory back then that was never exist.

He grew clever but never studied in school, always scribbling in notebooks. One day online, I found "Qi Feng" serializing an unpopular Monkey King novel. My rage ignited, does this mean blood-sweat pays for this nonsense?

I was disappointed, very disappointed, I rushed into his room, madly searching, searching for that book full of sins, my children were crying on the sidelines, my wife pulling me, only to be mercilessly knocked to the ground by me.

I found the book and tore it frantically, the stories inside were like snowflakes flying in the air, as if I saw the Great Sage of Qi Tian picking up the golden rod in his hand and defeating all kinds

of demons again and again, no matter what kind of demons and devils, they couldn't get through a single move under him. But now, he is dead.

I looked at the scraps all over the ground, and my son was crying on the ground, constantly collecting the scraps, I suddenly felt that I had forgotten something, but that didn't matter anymore.

"Please, Dad... I really love writing. Let me live for myself just once.

"I..."