

The person cleaning the glass

written by

yan zhexuan

Address
Phone
E-mail

EXT. OLD STREET OUTSIDE BOOKSHOP - DAWN

THE SKY IS BARELY LIGHT, THE DAWN THIN. A LIGHT LAYER OF WHITE MIST SPREADS ACROSS THE ENTIRE OLD STREET. THE OLD STREET IS SILENT, NO PEDESTRIANS, NO VEHICLES - ONLY THE OLD, MOTTLED SHOPFRONTS STANDING STILL.

THE WALLS OF THE SHOPS ON EITHER SIDE ARE PEELING AND BLACKENED IN LARGE PATCHES. THE ROLLER SHUTTERS ARE RUSTY. DUST AND DEAD LEAVES HAVE ACCUMULATED IN THE CORNERS OVER THE YEARS. EVERYTHING SPEAKS OF AGE, NEGLECT, AND DERELICTION. ONLY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET DOES AN OLD-FASHIONED SMALL BOOKSHOP STAND OUT. ITS WOODEN DOORFRAME IS FADED, BUT THE ENTIRE GLASS SHOPFRONT IS SPOTLESS, DUST-FREE, BRIGHT AND TRANSPARENT - SO CLEAN IT LOOKS OUT OF PLACE IN THE GREY, OLD STREET.

Chen Jingshan bends down, wiping the glass repeatedly, his movements careful. He deliberately turns his face away to hide a birthmark. A little girl, Xiaoyu, skips past and stops, curious.

XIAOYU

Grandad, you wipe the glass every day?

Chen Jingshan is startled and instinctively shrinks back.

CHEN JINGSHAN

Mm. Looks bad if it's dirty.

XIAOYU

But this glass looks pretty clean.

Chen Jingshan doesn't answer. He keeps wiping the glass seriously, his manner constrained. Thirty years of habit have become muscle memory. He treats this pane of glass more carefully and strictly than he has ever treated his own life. Chen Jingshan stares at the bright glass, looking at the tidy, empty bookshop inside. His gaze steadies slightly, and his tense shoulders relax a little.

EXT. OLD STREET OUTSIDE BOOKSHOP - LATE MORNING

Most of the shops have been vacated. Signs hang crooked or have fallen off. Cardboard boxes, broken furniture, splintered planks and rubbish are piled at the doorways. A removal lorry is parked at the kerb. The ground is covered with tyre marks and dust. The whole street is a mess - the chaos and desolation that come just before demolition.

Only Chen Jingshan's bookshop is still clean, tidy, and orderly - so clean it looks absurd and out of place among the dereliction. Chen Jingshan is still standing by the shop window, looking up from time to time to check the glass. As soon as he spots even half a speck of dust, he steps forward to wipe it.

A thirty-something demolition officer, wearing a work jacket and carrying a pile of demolition notices and documents, walks unhurriedly to the bookshop door. He looks at Chen Jingshan, who is wiping the glass with intense concentration, and speaks in a flat, formulaic tone.

DEMOLITION OFFICER

Uncle Chen, just confirming with you again. Today's the last day this old street can stay open, the last day anyone can be here. Tonight at ten, the whole street gets its power cut, and the buildings will be sealed and locked. Tomorrow morning, demolition starts properly. Please try to clear everything out of your shop today.

Chen Jingshan keeps wiping the glass.

CHEN JINGSHAN

No hurry. Let me get it clean first.

DEMOLITION OFFICER

It's all coming down, mate. Who cares if the glass is clean? Good enough's fine.

CHEN JINGSHAN

(stubborn)

No. The neighbours will see. I can't have them laughing at me.

The demolition officer looks at the stubborn old man. A flicker of incomprehension crosses his face, but he doesn't ask further. Seeing that Chen Jingshan has no other questions, he nods, turns and walks to the next shop.

Just then, Xiaoyu runs over again, clutching some snacks, and stands beside him.

XIAOYU

Grandad, nobody stares at the glass.

CHEN JINGSHAN
 (gently but seriously)
 You're too young to understand.
 Grown-ups care about appearances.

The little girl nodded understandingly, though not completely.

EXT. OLD STREET OUTSIDE BOOKSHOP - EARLY AFTERNOON

An autumn wind sweeps across the entire old street, carrying clouds of yellow dust, dry, withered leaves and fine grit. The gale hits the shop window. The glass, which had just been wiped bright and clean, is instantly covered with a thin film of grey dust. Fine grains of sand settle lightly on the surface.

Chen Jingshan's expression tightens. A look of panic flashes in his eyes. He steps forward at once, picks up his cloth and quickly wipes the glass that the wind has dirtied. He cleans a small patch, but the wind blows again, and more dust settles again. Wind blows, dust settles, wipe. Wind blows, dust settles, wipe again.

Again and again. Cycle after cycle.

The old man stands in the wind, stubbornly battling the storm of dust, arguing with the endless grime. The ruin and chaos and haste of all the other shops mean nothing to him. His whole world has shrunk to this one pane of glass - which must not be dirty, must not be messy, must not be imperfect.

Xiaoyu tilts her head and looks at Chen Jingshan's profile.

XIAOYU
 Grandad, you look fine. Why do you
 always hide your face?

Chen Jingshan freezes.

CHEN JINGSHAN
 (quietly)
 Grandad doesn't look fine. There's
 a big mark on my face. People will
 point and stare.

XIAOYU
 It's not strange at all! I think
 it's nice. Like a butterfly. I only
 remember that you're kind to me.
 Who would stare at your face?

Chen Jingshan is silent. The girl's innocent words hit the deep-seated insecurity he has carried for half a lifetime.

Still, he cannot let go. He stubbornly keeps wiping.

EXT. OLD STREET OUTSIDE BOOKSHOP - DUSK

The old street is almost completely empty now. Workers are leaving in ones and twos. The removal vans drive away one by one. The street grows quieter and quieter - only the sound of the wind whistling. On the whole, desolate, empty street, only Chen Jingshan remains, guarding his clean shop window. He has been wiping it all afternoon.

The street is deserted and silent. Xiaoyu is about to move away. She comes to see Chen Jingshan for the last time.

XIAOYU

Grandad, after this I won't see you making the glass shiny any more.

CHEN JINGSHAN

Grandad wants to leave it clean and proper. I don't want to let everyone down.

XIAOYU

Nobody's ever been let down by you, Grandad. Whether you're clean or a bit messy, we still like you.

Chen Jingshan's eyes sting slightly. For the first time, he wavers.

CHEN JINGSHAN

But if you're not perfect, people look down on you.

The demolition officer walks over slowly.

DEMOLITION OFFICER

Still at it, Uncle Chen? To be honest, with all these people on the street, who's got time to stare at someone else's flaws? Everyone's just getting on with their own lives. Who's got the time to judge you?

EXT. OLD STREET OUTSIDE BOOKSHOP - LATE DUSK

The demolition officer states the truth, flatly. One blow shatters a lifelong obsession.

DEMOLITION OFFICER

I've been working this street for nearly three years, out early and back late. I must have passed your shop eight times a day, minimum.

Chen Jingshan slowly turns his head.

In this moment, a tiny flicker of hope rises in his heart - a heart that has been tense for half a lifetime. The validation he has waited for all his life, the proof of dignity he has craved, seems about to arrive. He looks quietly at the demolition officer, his gaze constrained, earnest, waiting for a word of praise, a word of affirmation.

The demolition officer looks down, sorting the sealing notices in his hand. His tone is flat, utterly unremarkable.

DEMOLITION OFFICER (CONT'D)

I've never once noticed whether your glass was clean. Honestly. Not once.

DEMOLITION OFFICER (CONT'D)

Look at this street - it changes every day, it's chaos every day, people moving out every day. Everyone's busy with their own affairs - busy moving, busy finishing up, busy looking for the next job, busy just getting through the day. Who's going to stand in the street and stare at whether someone else's shop window is clean?

The demolition officer looks up, glances casually at the clean glass, and shakes his head.

DEMOLITION OFFICER (CONT'D)

Everyone only cares about their own life, their own problems, their own days. Nobody's got the time to stare at your perfection or imperfection. Nobody cares if you've got flaws. Nobody worries about whether you look respectable.

DEMOLITION OFFICER (CONT'D)

You're afraid people will laugh at
you, that they'll look down on you.
But from start to finish, nobody
ever really looked at you.

Xiaoyu gently tugs Chen Jingshan's sleeve.

XIAOYU

Grandad, you don't have to keep
wiping all the time. Just be happy
- that's enough.

Having said this, the demolition officer says nothing more.
He looks down again and continues fiddling with the seals,
completely unaware of the old man's turmoil.

In an instant - thirty years of shame, obsession, self-
torture, and walking on eggshells - all collapses. Chen
Jingshan looks at the little girl, then at the clean glass,
and is silent for a long time. A few careless, ordinary words
fall lightly to the ground.

Chen Jingshan freezes completely. His body doesn't move. His
gaze empties, loses focus.

Thirty years of obsession. Thirty years of tension. Thirty
years of self-criticism. Thirty years of tiptoeing around. In
these most ordinary, most everyday words, it all shatters in
an instant.

The imagined scrutiny, the imagined judgement, the imagined
eyes of the world - the prison he thought others had built
for him was entirely of his own making.

EXT. OLD STREET OUTSIDE BOOKSHOP - TWILIGHT

The demolition officer finishes sticking up the seals and
walks away. Xiaoyu goes off with her family, waving goodbye
to Chen Jingshan. The whole old street has only Chen Jingshan
left.

The sky has softened to full darkness. The evening wind has
died completely. The old street is utterly silent. The
dilapidated, deserted street is empty. Only that pane of
glass - wiped clean for thirty years - remains bright,
spotless, perfect.

Chen Jingshan stands where he is, stunned for a long time.
Dazed. Disoriented. Slowly coming back to himself. The body
that has been tense for fifty-eight years relaxes, inch by
inch, slowly.

The anguish, the anxiety, the fear, the inferiority - accumulated over half a lifetime - slowly dissolve.

After a long while, he looks at the clean shop window in front of him. The corners of his mouth lift slowly into a very faint, very light, utterly released smile. Not a bitter smile. Not a sad one. It is the relaxation and clarity of finally letting himself off the hook.

He speaks softly, his voice very light, but utterly clear, utterly released.

CHEN JINGSHAN

(quiet monologue)

So... all my life I've been wiping
the eyes of the world. And in the
end, my flaw - nobody saw it at
all.

He takes one last look at the clean shop window that has been his companion for half his life, that he has guarded for thirty years. No regret. No bitterness. Only complete release.

The camera slowly pulls back and tilts up.

WIDE SHOT:

The whole old street, ruined and deserted, empty of people. At its centre, one single, perfectly clean, bright glass shopfront. An old man stands quietly before it, having finally put down a lifetime's obsession.

CHEN JINGSHAN (CONT'D)

A child doesn't mind the flaw. But
a grown-up cares too much about
face.

CHEN JINGSHAN (CONT'D)

I spent a lifetime on guard against
their gaze. And there was never an
audience.

The camera pulls slowly further back.

CHEN JINGSHAN (CONT'D)

Everyone walks on, busy with their
own lives. No one watches you for
long. You imprisoned yourself for a
lifetime - nothing but a private
sorrow.

THE END