

Floating

By Florence Au

He saw them float again. With vigor bursting out from each body cell, assembling into an enormous force, pushing up to the outside world like zillion bubbles in a fizzy drink after a violent shake, they bounced off the ground like it was a trampoline. In a blink, they were bullets shot in the air a few meters high. Suspending the speed, they balanced their bodies, adjusted their direction with their arms raising high above their heads and hands clasping together. They were rockets. They then bended their knees for a while, awaiting the air to condense below their feet. All of a sudden, they advertently stretched straight their knees in surges of overflowing energy, their bodies further lifted up passing a few branches of the school tree, the Fountain Tree.

Following such a prelude was a gymnastic show showcasing what they had: they flipped their bodies, rolled and twisted in the air, double forward, triple backward, or sideways in multiple revolutions, a range of new, exotic somersaults flashing into the air, dazzling one's vision. It would not take forever. They needed a balance. They landed on the highest point they could reach and carved their names on the bole. Their names would then retain there, publicly known to others, growing with the tree. Receiving all the gazes of admiration and abhorrence from below, the champion, would dive down from the highest branch of all, join his friends floating in a floral pattern with him as the cynosure, flipping and rolling.

They were all floating. He could hear their exuberant laughter. He could smell the incense of joy and freedom. He could see their faces radiating in the sun, being tattooed the patterns of leaves, and their eyes shutting off the light a moment or two to enjoy the blowing breeze filling up their clothes like parachutes. Gliding in the air as the wind themselves, the champion and others whirled and whorled around the tree. He was not one of them. He had never been invited to join them. Perhaps he was not seen, standing at a far distant corner of the garden with envy, vexation and exasperation. Awkwardly, he was there all the time with them. He had lessons with them. He had meals with them. It was no difference as he was the difference. He could not float. The champion finally descended on the ground with a nice balance of his body whose feet were rooted to the ground without moving an inch.

In the class period which was the lesson he could pay more attention to, maybe

because the others did not but were busy with their preparation for the public examination, DSE, the class teacher talked about dreams. She showed a film of a blind student playing the piano, passing the entrance examination of a university and gaining a place in the music faculty, and a deaf one dancing gracefully, entering a dance competition and earning respect from the audience. He could not hear the dialogues of the characters as the teacher explained that there was a technical problem in the audio system. It was totally fine with him. He often told others he could not hear clearly what they said to him. Rarely did he say he could hear all other sounds and voices in his brain. He enjoyed the film despite his uncontrollably and vehemently trembling body, despite the devastating feeling gnawing his heart, despite the throat-cracking and ear-poking screaming, from the ward he had stayed in, now colluding with other urging and tantalizing noises to drown his whole being. Perhaps what was in the movie was true. Some day, he could float. Wasn't there a saying that when your door was closed, a window would be opened for you? He had been waiting patiently since the moment when he was conscious of his own existence, but not so patiently since he had developed more symptoms.

The result of the first school test was distributed in the second lesson. Other classmates who received their reports compared their performance but they never asked his. They sensed his problems and they were nice to him. But they had their own business to take care of. They needed to keep floating. After school, his classmates darted towards tutorial centers to have extra lessons to further boost their performance except him. They had chance which did not belong to him because he was in the SEN (Special Education Needs) group with complicated mental problems. He eavesdropped on the social workers and some other teachers who used the term in their conversation. The acronym was funny, SEN, which people pronounced as a whole and sounded like "cent", of course without "t" at the end. They were an incomplete cent. Perhaps such a cent was needed in some way in spite of his relentless thought that he was sent to the world mistakenly. "You are important to us," he suddenly remembered what his parents said last time when he was hospitalized.

He surveyed all his classmates in the room: they discussed elatedly, laughing heartily with their hands intermittently covering their tummies, heads bobbing up and down, words slipping from their mouths naturally composing pieces of eloquent speeches, exaggerating gestures doodling in the air and then pointing at their rainbow-colored profiles. Their drawings in the air were in different shapes, some of which were just

very simple oval, diamond, circular and triangular shapes but they became so real and vivid that they turned into hats, rings and crowns to put on while some others were like animals, mostly racing horses, leaping cheetahs, sprinting gazelles, carrying their artists on their backs, travelling around the world and then galloping to the sun. He saw all these as if he was a fortune teller, as if he was an outsider. Yes, they could float to the future.

He could not speak. He could not draw. Maybe he could write. There must be a balance. The class teacher explained the test paper to them, the reading passage, the *Haunted House*, by Virginia Woolf, he heard the first time. She had problems. He noticed. She could hear noises as he did. She was different as he was. Images flashed back and fro in her mind, disconnected yet connected some way. From room to room, from line to line and from word to word, she was a different person. He was too. The story was beautiful, which moistened his eyes with tears. He sniffed hard, pretending to clear some kind of nose congestion inside but attempting to suck his tears back. No one noticed. No one ever did to a non-floater but all busy checking answers.

He borrowed another short story by Woolf, *Kew Garden*, from the library. Garden! He smiled. He thought of the tree. He sat under the tree and read the story. Lots of words he did not understand. It didn't matter though for he was accustomed to unknowing, not knowing since when. Anyway, he could feel the story. He was the snail in the same garden with others, witnessing and recording their lives in his brain, but simultaneously they were in different gardens to seek their own balance. If there were no snails, would there be a garden? Could a snail float? Did it need to float?

A long, lean shadow approached his, gradually intersecting his world. He gazed up from his reveries. The janitor, who everyone was fond of, grinned at him and extended his arm with a paper cup of herbal tea in hand. It was icy cold, water beads rolling down along the smooth surface of the cup, staining the ground. He took a big gulp of the drink, the coolness penetrating his taste buds, sliding down to his stomach, lastly turning into bubbles of energy circulating in his veins. His head was clearer. His eyes lodged upon the janitor in his large straw hat resuming his work, sweeping the fallen leaves of the garden. He was a snail too.

He remembered every morning he saw the priest and the janitor, occasionally a few other teachers as well, sitting in the shadow of the tree, chatting leisurely, sometimes

laughing together, yet a few more times one or two teachers murmuring, wiping their eyes with their hankies and then bowing their heads, uttering words in a low and soft voice inundated with birds' and insects' chirping in the backdrop. He also remembered the janitor's clapping and yelling to encourage the students to float higher and higher, the herbal tea he prepared for them before and after they floated, the instructions he offered to adjust their positions and relax their bodies. The janitor was a snail and seemingly he was an expert of floating though he had never seen him float. He could float? He thought of the overlapping shadows.

A few days later or on the exact same day that he borrowed Woolf's story, thought of the snail, received a drink from the janitor, he started to take notes and make signs of the surroundings, and then he composed sentences and paragraphs. It was first about the tree. The tree which he heard was once planned to uproot because of developing the school but was eventually saved and it grew into an iconic figure of the school. Then he wrote about the float. He wrote about the snail. He wrote about the janitor and the morning sharing. In fact, he joined the morning sharing. He listened and he talked. He cried and he laughed. He read and he wrote, and wrote and he read. He was getting to know what he could do.

Some night, it was already 9:30 pm. The self-study room at school had to be closed. He paused his writing and pushed his book back into his school bag. Out in the corridor, he bumped into the janitor, who had finished cleaning the campus.

“Kid, want to look at the tree?”

He nodded. He had never seen the tree at night. He wondered how it looked. They strode into the garden. The air was still the thick mixture of soil, green and fragrance of flowers. Some invisible insects were buzzing somewhere in the bush to assert their existence. The whole garden was immersed in a mist of dark with a few sparkles up in the sky. The red, blue, yellow blooms and the hand-shaped, heart-shaped and tongue-shaped green all blended into one, into the same color, into the dark, intensifying it and rustling in the stronger wind at night stirring them unrelentingly. The tree still looked like a magnificent tower to him with voluminous umbrellas of leaves, incessantly pointing upward to the endless dark. It appeared to be bigger and taller than the day before. He pulled out the note pad from his pocket and scribbled what he saw.

“Kid, are you ready?” He was puzzled and looked at the janitor with questions in his eyes.

“Bounce!” The janitor smiled encouragingly.

He did not know why he took the jump. He did not know when he opened his arms. Nor did he know how he bended his knees and stretched them straight again. All he knew was it was his time. It came so natural like he was a born floater. He was floating in the air, letting the wind sustain his body. Then he suspended his speed and took the balance. He was ready! With the clapping and applauding from the janitor under the tree, he turned and twisted swiftly, flipped backward and forward flexibly, then lifted his body up and up until he reached the place belonging to him.

The tree top, where no one had landed before. He sat on the leaves. The sky had never been so close to him. The stars shining upon him, he felt he was glowing like one of them. Then he saw it. He saw his name, the word he had been avoiding. Sirius, the brightest star. His name was Sirius. He yelled it out loud.