**La Chute**

The intrusive thought of jumping overtook him again as he looked down from the roof. Perhaps I shouldn’t resist this time, he thought half-jokingly. A gust of wind came, causing him to shiver and back away from the edge of the roof. The Canadian winter is harsh and merciless, a single mistake in the choices made, such as the type of clothes worn or the duration spent outdoor, results in a cold.

I should probably go down, he thought, before someone comes up and catches me here. He took out his pocket watch: 12:35 pm, about time class started. So, like the good student he is supposed to be, he turned, holding the lockpick, walking towards the door leading inside, before stopping in his track.

Why?

He turned back to face the roof.

Oh no, now I’m late for chemistry again, he thought. Why did I even stop? The face of his chemistry teacher appeared in his mind with this last thought, and he almost shuddered just imagining it. She always hated him, and some would defend her: he’s really not the best chemistry student. Even so, he couldn’t figure out why she hated him so much in particular. Perhaps it was the fact that he cared too much about her class, like he always does, with everything. He could see her face squirming together to form her verdict: Late! Thus begins another hour of pure torture.

The cold wind of winter hit his face again. His eyelids are now struggling against the strength of Atlantic Canada. They quickly lost the battle, surrendering with tears flowing down his face. Why am I standing here? He asked himself, and it was a rhetorical question. He was being emotional for absolutely no reason again, and he was well-aware, just too ashamed to even admit it to himself.

He walked towards the edge. Students are flowing into the building now like ants into their colony, perhaps fearing their own versions of his chemistry teacher. For some strange reason, he thought of her. He shook his head violently to get her out of his head, and tried, again, to convince his legs to carry him into the chemistry classroom before the verdict becomes “Absent!”, but his legs won’t budge. Without anything better to do, his eyes were attracted by the edge again. A strange thought appeared in his head.

If I die here today…

He thought of his funeral. He thought of his parents, who scolded him countless time for many things. He thought of his grandparents, who loved him dearly. He thought of his paternal grandmother, who is now in treatment for cancer. He thought of his friends.

No, he told himself, not today, not right now.

But his legs stepped on the edge anyways. A person below looked up, but didn’t seem to have noticed him. He extended his arms out like the son of God on the cross two thousand years ago, or like the German soldier who was shot at the last minute of World War 1.

Jump, a voice said to him.

He recognized that voice. It was the voice of his therapist telling him he had depression; it was the voice of his father telling him his grandmother is in critical conditions; it was the voice of the recording he heard reporting statistics of poverty in China; it was the voice of his chemistry teacher; it was the voice of his mother yelling at him for scoring an 89; it was the voice of the announcer announcing the break list of the 2018 Debate National Championship in NSDA China, the one he didn’t break in because he lost one too many rounds; it was the voice of her saying she’s not ready for something serious at the moment; it was all the voice he heard at night, in his nightmare, of his countrymen yelling and cursing at him for leaving them back home; it was his own voice, cursing at himself in the mirror, telling himself how much he hates him.

Jump, and you’ll be free.

It was an enticing offer. He smiled bleakly and took one more step forward. More voices appeared. He heard his therapist again, it was her telling him that he was a great person, that he was doing brave things. He heard his friend in Maine. He heard his advisor. They were all telling him how important he was to them and how his integrity is respectable.

But they’re all wrong.

He knew they’re wrong because, naturally, he is the only one who knew what he truly wanted. He did not want to devote his life to some revolution. He did not want to help anyone, if possible. He just wanted to live peacefully, with someone he loved, in a secluded, beautiful place for the rest of his life, writing some articles and taking photos whenever he felt like it. But he just couldn’t avert his eyes when he saw people crying, or begging, or even just walking around with no soul in their eyes. Whenever he saw those soulless eyes, his anger always took over, but he could do nothing, and he did nothing. No, it wasn’t integrity, just cowardly, useless stupidity.

But I can’t die now, he thought. The image of his mother came back, he remembered her voice as he said he had depression.

What about me? She asked him.

He took one more step forward. Truly on the edge now, he thought. The front of his dress shoes is no longer touching solid ground.

What about me? Millions of his countrymen asked.

What about me? His reflection in the mirror asked.

More tears came out of his eyes, this time not from the cold wind. I don’t know, he said to the image of his mother like he did back when he told her he had depression. I don’t know, he yelled to the millions working in mines, fields, and factories. I don’t know, he cried to himself. I don’t know. I truly don’t know.

You see yourself as some sort of saviour, his friend told him at one point. You think it is up to you to save these people. It’s not.

He was silent for a while when he heard that. And when he spoke again, his voice was extremely coarse, making him sound broken and old. I just can’t help it, he said. He told his friend about the soulless eyes of his countrymen, but his friend didn’t care much for it. If you saw them, he said, you would do the same.

There was an ancient Chinese proverb: If you wish for something to not happen to you, do not do it to others. Confucious, one of the most prominent Chinese philosophers, said it. Perhaps the inverse was also true: you perform to others what you wish they would do back. It’s like how he finally decided to ask her out that one day. Or like how he wanted to save all these millions of people just from the look in their eyes.

I honestly find this complex of yours stupid and disgusting, his friend said, you need to go someplace where nobody is there so you wouldn’t try to go around forcing your mental sickness onto everyone else. And that’s the last time they ever talked. And for good reason, too, he thought. Not many people will talk to you after you jump up from your seat and punch them in the nose.

Albert Camus said the only serious philosophical question to consider was suicide. The question is finally in his mind. To be or not to be? He tried approaching the conundrum logically, with whatever mental capability he had left. Let’s see, he murmured to himself, if I die right now…

In his brain, he drew a cost-benefit chart of suicide. In the column of cost, he wrote: Family. Friends. Love. Teacher. Revolution. Truth. Beautiful sky. Dumplings. Video games. In the column of benefit, he wrote: Freedom. Lack of waste (of resources). No more pain. Afterlife (?). And he didn’t know what to write after that, so he wrote “Freedom” again, and again, and again.

Out of nowhere, he remembered her voice. “…And that’s why you need to make preparation when you’re not depressed. When you feel well.” She said to him in math class.

How is she always right? How is she yet to be wrong? I wish I was never in love with her so I could wholeheartedly feel jealous about her intelligence, he thought. We have math class together, he thought, and added that into the “cost” column.

The last student entered the building. He looked at his pocket watch again, it’s 12:40. About time to choose. He took a deep breath and searched in his head for the cost-benefit chart he made of suicide, before he was interrupted by a loud shout.

The janitor found him. What are you doing here? The roof is off limits, he said.

He made up some bullshit reason about how he forgot something here when looking at the stars for astronomy club, and that the door was unlocked.

Well, did you find it? The janitor asked, and he nodded his head, but then was skeptical and shook his head instead.

Then get to class, the janitor said impatiently.

He nodded rapidly this time and, without hesitating, lowered his head and ran into the building. Now he’s certainly late for chemistry class.

-Tony Su, Vancouver Canada, 2024.1.4