

## Fiction – Group 4 WINNER

# The Wind Full of Colors

*St. Mary's Canossian College, Lau, Alicia - 16*

I hold my hand steady, but it will not stop trembling. It could not, since the day I escaped. Not since the day arrived here, a silent, hidden place, grottoes, full of colourful paintings and murals. Not since last week, when I was handed a brush and ink for work.

Not now, when I sit down in my dark little cave, the walls thin and bare with nothing but shadows.

*I will walk along the wind full of colours.*

Colours. Where? There were none, not on this canvas. Not in anything I have ever drawn. After all, it's not that I could find any to draw with in the first place. Aunt's voice drifts, reverberating in my skull. I wish she were here to tell me.

I watched as the diluted blackness of liquid threatened to fall off the tip of the brush. It would stain the empty canvas, diffusing through, like tears would. I let it fall. It blooms through the paper, darkness spreading out.

Then I paint. I paint of my lost aunt, on her features a rare tilt of her crooked smile; the sister I had left behind, the rough calluses on her young hands; the wells of nothingness curling deep beneath my heart, coiling upwards to devour a little bit of me every day. I paint two monsters, monsters that look painstakingly like me. I feel them yanking on my hair and slapping me and kicking my ribs and shoving me into water and tearing my art and breaking my brushes and I hurt and hurt and hurt—

But no. My brush strokes halt. My chest heaves, and I clutch my brush so tight that it feels like it might break any moment. My right hand still trembles, and I drop the brush. "It's not real, I'm free, I survived," I whisper. My voice echoes from the dry walls of the sandy cave I am in.

*Survive, survive, survive...*

"I'm safe here. I survived them, I escaped marriage. I'm at the Mogao Grottoes, among monks and artists. I can live now." I say out loud, voice trembling and barely audible. Master Zhong said it would feel better like that. At least, I think that's what he said. I never managed to pay attention.

It doesn't, so I tear my art to pieces. Black shreds fall onto the sandy ground, and I don't bother to clean them up. The floor is filled with them, anyways.

They don't hurt when I step on the ground.

The floor is sandy and rocky and pricks my skin when we sit down cross legged. Alone I sit, among the shadows. Master Zhong is halfway through the class, but as usual, everything passes from my left ear to the right. My eyes stray to the walls of the cave we were in. It looks different from last week, somehow. I let my gaze wander, and I realise that it is the black

swirls at the edge of the cave entrance that is new. I cannot see what exactly it is, but I can tell that the strokes are full of untold stories. They stretch out through the height of the cave, as tall as three people: Unfinished linings of clouds I have never fully glimpsed, silhouettes of people dancing in silks, light streaming onto clouds floating in the sky...

The more I look, the more familiar they seem. In those strokes, I see my own. So similar, yet at the same time so different. I think of the painting last night, black and bleak.

Before I can do anything, Master Zhong stands up, and I know that it is the end of the lesson. I slink away, lest the master catch me for another inspirational talk. I don't want to waste his time. But I cannot help but take one more glance at the painting.

Night again. At least, that is what the sky outside tells me. The darkness outside seems to seep into the cracks and crevices of my cave. It engulfs me, so that I am void both inside and outside. The great, shadowy thing in me, baring its teeth, clawing towards my soul.

But it is so quiet. I am still not used to the odd absence of a constant fear— of my parents, of the thing of a life I had. And every night, I still imagine the last day at “home”.

*“Zhen! The study is unclean, and there is ink on the table. What is it you have been doing in the house? Huh? We give you food and a roof above your head and this is how you repay us? You useless girl!” Mother hisses. She is careful not to scream, lest she wake up any of her fourteen perfect sons. They have to train and study well to serve the country well, she prides.*

*“We’re offering you something. To get married with Aunt’s husband. Your aunt disappeared five months ago, and her husband requests we send a younger and prettier girl. Sick of that witch, he is too.” So that is why I have not seen her. Father appears next to Mother, smirking, yet a hint of desperation in his tone.*

*He needs to keep the alliance for the drugs, but my mind is too sluggish to think straight.*

*“No,” I plead. My voice breaks, and I go onto my knees, as I always have. I cannot. I’ve seen Aunt, the despair and vacancy in her eyes the day after she was married. The one I see every time after her marriage. Mother slaps me, as if it is what she is programmed to do whenever I kneel. “No,” I continue pleading and begging, but I know it is useless. They don’t even bother to hit me anymore.*

*I am left there kneeling, hair uncombed, face streaked with red hot tears. The wedding is tomorrow, they said.*

*I don’t even get to live another day.*

But the next day, they cannot find me. Someone showed up at my window, handing me a small strip of paper. ‘Follow me. I walk with the clouds, along the wind full of colours.’ It said. My heart had skipped a beat, because I know who that sentence came from.

“Aunt?” I whispered. But the figure did not reply, and I knew that the figure was too short to be her. So I had no choice but to follow her, through rivers and valleys, until we reached here. Then she disappeared. I never caught a glimpse of her face, obscured through weeks by her orange hood. But I knew that my aunt was part of it.

Something nags at my brain now. I think of the painting I saw on the cave walls, black and beautiful yet incomplete. I wanted to see it— I needed to see it. I think of the resemblance its technique holds with mine, the one which Aunt taught me.

I am sunken too deep into my own pits of darkness to bathe myself in another. But something takes hold of me, and I step out of the shadows of my cave. Silently, I glide along the corridor until I reach the cave where the artist is silhouetted against tiny candles. My heart drops when I realise that the silhouette is not thin and bony. No, it is not Aunt— foolish hopes. Yet disappointment is weakened and despair eliminated as my gaze drifts to what the artist is painting.

The brush strokes are no longer black. Rather than shadows, they act as frames for the beautiful images that lay on the cave walls.

*That was what it seemed to be missing, I realised. Colours.*

Then the artist shifts to the right, and her shadows part to reveal a splendid chroma. My breath catches when I see it.

It was as if the clouds and winds were leaping out of the dreary cave walls: I could see the azure clouds lined with gold, as if the Sun glowed behind it; the mountains and hills lush and green; and though the artist outlined no wind, I could see the hues of red and blue and shining gold peering through the patterns of silk and cloud, and the women in them walking between. I could see tale weaving: that of a simple woman, draped in expensive silks and garments and vacancy in her eyes, in a world full of riches she does not belong.

But it is not the beauty of the life it describes that captures my attention. It is the similarity I see between it and my Aunt's work. And I inhale when a piece of memory tugs at me— that of a tale of a woman that, through putting behind materialistic matter, discovered the way to ease suffering. To find more than survival in life, but life itself. "*She gave up riches and extravagance to walk among the clouds. She saw beyond it all— the pain and suffering, the endless loop of survival we put ourselves into. Where people feel nothing but the breeze and the shivers they bring when the wind blows, she sees the colors in the wind. She walks among the brilliant colors— among the wind full of colours.*", Aunt told me. I didn't understand, I replied. She only smiled, and told me that I would, one day. Somehow, I knew that this painting would let me understand.

*Clank.* The artist puts her brush into her tin can. She turns, and I dart to the side of the cave. I cannot get caught. I need to be hidden, even if there is no reason for me to be. In a split second decision, I scurry back along the path. I try to quench the whisper in me.

*I will be back.*

The next night, I cannot sleep, as a mixture of my usual darkness and a strange new combination of hues fill my head. I try to pick up my paper and ink, to paint out the monster in me. But it growls less today, and I do not feel like splashing ink again. Instead, I look out to the sky. A few more stars speckle it today. Before I know it, I am again at the entrance of the cave.

More is painted today. The woman is now complete, and her features are worry, pain, desperation. Next to it, another figure is painted. Another version of her, in another time, I think, finding her path. More serene. Next to her are no longer sparkling gold beads and bracelets, rather, her accessories diminished, silk wraps more simple. And the artist, looking the same as yesterday, works her magic, weaving my Aunt's tale.

I don't know how long I stood there, just that I did the same for five more days. And on the fifth day, when I sat down to draw in my own tiny room, I realised that I could not face the endless black mirroring my soul. I would not let the monster take hold. In my head are images of colour and life, and before me a wall of a dark, empty cave.

*Winds full of colours.* I needed to paint that, like my Aunt had always wanted to teach me to.

So this time, I glide to the caves, then into it. The artist is humming, as she had been whenever she draws. Like I do always, I keep my steps light, bowing my head as I go, my body curved inwards. Trying to keep to the shadows, until I reached the pots of brilliant vibrancy just within a few feet's reach. So close—

*Clank.*

I kept to the shadows, but the shadows would not keep to me. At the sound of my foot hitting a stone pot of paint, the artist turns. Her eyes widen at first, her lips parting in surprise. I could see her features clearly. I don't know her, but somehow, I feel like I do. My fingers curl into a fist, and I clench my teeth. Curving my body inwards, I prepare for whatever repercussion I have for whatever wrong thing I have done.

Yet to my surprise, she grins. And laughs. *Laughs.*

How long have I not heard laughter?

“So you’re the one who’s been creeping around lately!” She chuckles. “Just come in and say hi! I’ve always wanted some company. It gets boring, sometimes, you know. I mean, look at these drab walls. The air— so suffocating! And no greenery! Not animals! Not counting insects, of course. So many bugs! How do you all even stand it?” Then she catches a glance of me, disheveled and eyes wide. Should I open my mouth? Am I supposed to talk? Maybe I should run. But before I can, she grabs me by the arm, leaning close to inspect the black marks. Ink.

“Woah! You’re an artist too! Do you want to paint? Is that why you’ve been lurking around?” Her face is alight and her eyes sparkle eagerly. I open my mouth and close it. I try to think of a meaningful reply, something that would not end up offensive or rude.

“I’m Zhen,” I croak, my voice raw and cracked from disuse. My hands wave frantically, gesturing to the general direction of the pot of brushes in front of my feet. “I— Can I— May I—?”

The girl laughs.

“Okay, Zhen,” she smiles, and hands me a brush.

Paint drips from its tip, onto my steady hand. I don’t wait for it to fall before splashing it onto the canvas.

For a few weeks, every night, when I am free from lessons and work, I come to the cave. The girl is still there. Hired to paint the caves, she said. “Originally looked for my *Shifu*. Couldn’t come, though. She sent me instead.” She told me. I nodded along, preoccupied with the pots of paint that lay around me.

Every night, the girl, Sheng, talks to me. I sit by and listen as she paints, occasionally taking a brush and sneaking in a few strokes on the wall. She tells me of her journeys across mountains and valleys, evergreen trees and the shafts of sunlight through its canopy; of rivers and something called the ‘ocean’, vast and blue and boundless; of animals and critters and exotic things I have never seen. She tells me of myths and stories her *Shifu* tells her, of the archer who shot nine sons, the goddess who created the world, the woman who sought peace. I had never heard any of it. All of this— so beautiful, so brilliant, so full of life and colours. Every day my breath is taken away by not only the art she paints, but the stories she tells me. So different from the dark and musty shop I was trapped in all my life. A slave, a survivor, a girl with darkness, void of colour. I had never heard things so enthralling, seen things so alluring.

One day, I take a few brushes and paint to my own cave. I could feel my pulsating as I ran towards my cave, forcing back the blackness reaching for it. When I reach my cave, I dip my brush into the paint, first blue, then red and yellow.

*I will walk with the clouds, along the wind full of colours.*

Something doesn’t feel right.

My mind is vibrant and my heartbeat roaring in my ears. In front of me, I see black obscured by patches of red, yellow, blue, gold.

But only patches.

I did not see anything, I could not see anything. Shapes, colours, but how could I, when I have never seen anything? Hiding and hoping to survive all my life, bathed in darkness, inside and out. I had never seen the world; not the mountains as tall as the sky, not the birds trilling a song, not myths and stories of magical things; not people.

I had survived. I did not live.

I drop my brush. The sky is peppered with so many stars tonight. I sprint towards the cave, one last time. *I need to live.*

“I’m leaving with you.” I yell to Sheng, who is working on her finishing touches of her cave painting. “I have to get out. I want to see colours, real colours,” I tell her. I will find my aunt. I will save my sister. *I will live.*

Sheng grins. “I knew it,” she exclaimed. “You can’t possibly be a monk. Not yet, at least. You have so much to see, so much to offer.” I laugh. A carefree, heartened laugh.

And so I leave a note on the floor of the cave. I take one last glance at Sheng’s cave painting. Then I turn away, striding out. I will do this, someday, I tell myself. After I see. After I live.

I have nothing to take as I follow Sheng out the next morning. I have nothing, but I will have everything. I do not turn back, because there is so much in front of me. The colours overwhelm my sight, no longer dimmed and darkened by the shadows in me. They are there, lurking. But I will fight them, harder than I did. I will not only survive.

When I go out of the Grottoes, I see someone. *Shifu*, I hear Sheng cry. But the wind whistles in my ear, singing a tune of colour all too familiar. I blink at the thin and bony silhouette. I think of the figure that led me to the Grottoes, her voice oh so similar to that of Sheng’s. I think of Aunt’s five-month disappearance. I think of Sheng’s Shifu.

I see the rare tilt of her smile and thin crescent eyes.

The thin silhouette steps out of the shadows, and her features lay bare to me, as clear as the day. Her lips part, and somehow, I hear her over the wind. *Do you see now?*