

Yu Hua. *To Live*. Translated by Michael Berry. New York: Anchor Books, 2003. Originally published in 1993. Zhang Yimou directed a film version in 1994.

That year, before the rice had had a chance to turn yellow, while the stalks were still a green color, a seemingly endless downpour began. It rained for almost an entire month straight. Although it cleared up a couple of times, it was never for longer than two days, and then the sky would once again grow dark and the rain would return. We saw the water in the fields accumulating, and as the level of rainwater increased, the rice started to droop. In the end, patch after patch of rice was completely submerged. The older people in the village cried, and they all said, "How are we supposed to get by?"

The younger generation wasn't as pessimistic. They kept thinking that the government would save us.

"What's there to worry about?" they said. "There's always a way out. The team leader went to the county seat to get some grain."

Three times the team leader went to the commune headquarters and once to the county seat, but each time he came back with nothing but a few words. "Everybody calm down! The county magistrate said that as long as he doesn't starve, he's not going to let anyone else starve."

A heat wave lasting several days followed that month of rain, and all the rice in the fields rotted. When night fell and the wind blew, the stench was unbearable, not unlike that of rotting corpses. At first everyone hoped that we would still be able to use the rice straw, but because we couldn't harvest the rice, the straw also rotted. We were left with nothing. The team leader said the county magistrate would send us grain, but no one ever saw any. No one completely believed what the leader said, but then again no one dared not to believe. How could we get by if everyone lost hope?

It got so bad that people would count the grains of rice as they put them in the pot. There was barely any food left. No one would dare to cook rice; instead we'd all cook rice porridge—and the porridge was getting thinner and thinner. Two or three months later all the food supplies were gone, and nothing new was coming in. Jiazhen and I talked it over and decided to bring the lamb into town to sell her. We figured we'd be able to trade her for about one hundred ten *jin** of rice. That would get us through the season until the next rice harvest.

It had been a month or two since any of us had eaten our fill, but that lamb was just as fat as before. Every day you could hear her "baa baa" sound loud and clear coming from the lamb pen—Younging could take the credit for that. He had hardly anything to eat himself—every day he would complain about being dizzy—but not once did he shortchange his lamb when it came to her grass. He loved that lamb in the same way that Jiazhen loved him.

* A Chinese unit of weight equivalent to 1/2 kilogram or 1 1/4 pounds.

After Jiazhen and I discussed selling the lamb, I brought it up with Younging. He had just dumped a basket of grass in the lamb pen. The rustling sound of the lamb chewing the grass sounded like the falling rain. Younging stood to one side with his basket in hand, laughing as he watched the lamb eat her grass.

He didn't even notice me walk over. I put my hand on his shoulder, and he twisted his head around to look at me.

"She's famished!" he said.

"Younging," I said, "Dad has something he wants to talk to you about."

Younging nodded and turned around to face me. I continued, "Our grain at home is almost gone. I talked it over with your mom, and we've decided to sell the lamb. We can trade her for some rice; otherwise, our whole family will go hungry."

Younging lowered his head and didn't utter a sound. He was unwilling to part with his lamb. I patted him on the shoulder and said, "Wait until things get better and I'll buy you a new lamb."

Younging nodded his head. He had grown up. He understood much more than before. If it had been a few years earlier, he would have cried and made a scene. As I walked out of the lamb pen, Younging pulled my shirt and pleaded pathetically, "Dad, please don't sell her to a slaughterhouse."

I thought, during a time like this, who can afford to raise a lamb? Other than a slaughterhouse, who else would buy her? But looking at Younging's expression, I could only nod my head.

The next morning, with an empty rice bag slung over my shoulder, I led the lamb out of her pen. As soon as I made it to the edge of the village, I heard Jiazhen calling me from behind.

Turning around I saw Jiazhen and Youqing approaching. Jiazhen said, "Youqing wants to go along."

"There's no school on Sunday," I said. "What does he want to come for?"

"Just let him go," said Jiazhen.

I knew that Youqing wanted to spend some extra time with his lamb. I was afraid if I didn't agree Jiazhen would say something. I thought, what the hell, if he wants to come, let him come. I waved him over, and Youqing ran and took the leash right out of my hand. He lowered his head, and we walked off together.

The whole way there Youqing didn't open his mouth once, but the lamb on the other hand wouldn't shut up with her "baa baa." As Youqing led her, she would from time to time bump her head into Youqing's behind. The lamb was practically human. She knew that it was Youqing who fed her grass every day, so she was affectionate with him. The more affectionate she was, the sadder Youqing became. He bit his lip as he struggled to hold back his tears.

It was difficult to watch Youqing continue with his head lowered the way it was. I tried to find something to say that would cheer him up.

"Selling her is better than having to slaughter her," I told my son. "Let me tell you, lambs, they're animals. From the time they're born, this is their fate."

We got to town, and just as we were turning a corner, Youqing suddenly stopped. Looking at his lamb he said, "Dad, I'll wait here for you."

I knew that he was unwilling to watch me sell the lamb. I took

the leash from his hands and led the lamb forward. Before I could walk more than a few steps, Youqing called out from behind, "Dad, don't forget your promise!"

"What promise?" I turned to ask.

Youqing got anxious. He said, "You promised not to sell her to a slaughterhouse."

I had already forgotten what we had talked about the day before. It was a good thing Youqing didn't go with me or he definitely would have cried. I said, "I know."

I led the lamb around the corner and headed off in the direction of the meat shop. When I got there I found that the hanging meats which normally filled the shop were gone. During hard times like these, there wasn't even a rump hanging.

Inside sat a listless-looking man who didn't seem at all excited to see me bring in a lamb. His hands wouldn't stop shaking as he weighed the lamb.

"I haven't got any energy," he said. "I'm starved."

Even the people in town weren't getting enough to eat. He said it had been over ten days since his shop had had any meat. He extended his hand, pointing to an electric pole twenty meters away.

"You just wait. Within an hour they'll be lined up all the way over there to buy meat," he said.

He was right. By the time I left, there were already more than ten people lined up there, and they were lined up outside the rice shop, too. Originally I thought I'd be able to get around a hundred ten *jin* of rice for that lamb, but in the end I only took home forty. As I passed a small store on the way home, I took out

two *fen* to buy two pieces of candy for Younging. He'd been breaking his back for the last year, and I figured he deserved an occasional sweet.

As I walked over carrying the forty *jin* of rice, Younging was pacing back and forth in that old spot of his, kicking small pebbles out of his way. I handed him the two pieces of candy. He put one into his pocket, peeled the wrapper off the other, and popped it into his mouth. Younging held the candy wrapper in his hand, folding it carefully as we walked. He then raised his head and asked me, "Dad, do you want one?"

I shook my head. "You go ahead."

I carried the forty *jin* of rice home, and as soon as Jiazhen saw the size of the bag she knew exactly how much rice was in it. She sighed but didn't say a word. Jiazhen was in the most difficult position. How was she supposed to feed four mouths every day? She was so worried that she couldn't even get a good night's sleep. But no matter how bad things got we still had to find a way to pull through. Every day, Jiazhen would go out with a basket to search for wild vegetables. She was already sick, and having to endure daily hunger really took its toll on her. The doctor was right: Jiazhen's illness got increasingly worse. She needed a stick to lean on when she walked, and after taking only a few dozen steps her face would be soaked in sweat. When other people would dig for wild vegetables they would squat down, but Jiazhen would kneel. When she would try to stand up, her body would waver as if she had lost her balance. I couldn't bear the sight and said to her, "Why don't you stay home?"

But she refused. Learning on her stick, she started heading

back outside. I gave her a light tug on her arm, and she fell down. Jiazhen sat weeping on the floor.

"I'm still alive, but you're treating me like I'm already dead," she cried.

I was at my wit's end. There's nothing women won't say or do once they lose their temper. If I didn't let her work, she would worry that I thought she was useless.

In less than three months the forty *jin* of rice was gone. If it hadn't been for Jiazhen's planning and her collecting pumpkin leaves and tree bark, it wouldn't have lasted even two weeks. By then no one in the village had any grain, and all of the wild vegetables had long been dug up. Some families resorted to digging up roots to eat. There were fewer and fewer people in the village; every day more people grabbed alms bowls and took to the road to beg. The team leader went to the county seat a couple times, but before he could even make it to the edge of the village he'd have to sit down on the ground to catch his breath. The few people scavenging the fields for food would walk over to ask him, "Team leader, when will the county provide us with grain?"

With his head tilted to one side, the team leader would say, "I can't walk."

Seeing those taking to the road to beg, the team leader would say, "Don't go. The people in town don't have anything to eat, either."

Knowing all too well that there were no wild vegetables left, Jiazhen, leaning on her stick, would still spend her days staggering through the fields in hopes of finding something edible.

Younging would always go with her. At his age Younging was still growing, but without any grain he was as skinny as a bamboo shoot. Younging was just a kid, and Jiazhen was so sick she could barely walk, yet she'd still wander all over searching for wild vegetables. Meanwhile Younging would straggle behind her, complaining, "Mom, I'm so hungry that I can't walk."

But where could Jiazhen have gone to find something for Younging to eat? She could only say, "Younging, go and drink some water to fill yourself up."

All Younging could do was go down to the pond and slurp some water to allay his hunger.

Carrying a hoe, Fengxia would go with me to dig for sweet potatoes. God knows how many times that land had been turned over, but the village's people kept digging with their hoes. Sometimes after digging all day we'd end up with nothing but a rotten melon vine. Fengxia was also starved to the point of exhaustion. Her face was pale, and as she raised her hoe it looked as though her head was about to topple off. She couldn't speak; all she knew was work. No matter where I went, she would follow—which, after thinking about it, didn't seem like such a good idea. Fengxia following me around wasn't going to get us anywhere. It would be better if we split up and dug on our own. I made a hand sign to tell Fengxia to go dig somewhere else. Who could have guessed that as soon as Fengxia left me she would run into trouble?

Fengxia was digging on the same plot of land as another guy from our village, Wang Si. Wang Si wasn't really a bad guy. When

I was in the army, he and his father would often help Jiazhen do some work in the field. But hunger can drive people to do all kinds of wicked and immoral things. Clearly it was Fengxia who dug up that sweet potato, but Wang Si took advantage of the fact that she was mute. While Fengxia was using the edge of her shirt to wipe the mud off the potato, Wang Si snatched it out of her hands. Normally Fengxia was extremely well behaved, but given the circumstances her manners went out the window. Fengxia rushed at him, trying to wrest back her potato. And as she did, Wang Si wailed like a baby, making everyone around think it was Fengxia who was stealing from him. Wang Si yelled to me, "Fugui, doesn't your daughter have a conscience? Even if you're on the verge of starving, that's still no excuse to steal!"

Seeing Fengxia struggling with all her might to remove Wang Si's tightly wrapped fingers from the potato, I rushed over and pulled her away. Fengxia was so upset that tears rolled down her face. She used some hand symbols to tell me it was Wang Si who had stolen her sweet potato. The other people in the village also understood what Fengxia meant.

"Did she steal it from you?" they asked Wang Si. "Or did you steal it from her?"

Wang Si had an offended look on his face, as if he had been unjustly accused.

"All of you saw it clearly—she was trying to steal it from me," he declared.

"Everyone in the village knows that Fengxia is not that kind of person," I said. "Wang Si, if this sweet potato is really yours, then

take it. But if it's not, I hope you get an upset stomach after eating it."

Wang Si pointed his finger at Fengxia and said, "You let her say for herself whose it is."

How could he say such a thing when he knew damn well that Fengxia couldn't speak? He made me so furious that my body began to tremble. Fengxia stood to one side, and her mouth opened but no sound came out; instead, tears poured down her face. I waved my hand at Wang Si.

"If you're not afraid of the god of thunder striking you down, take it," I said.

Wang Si was guilty but he didn't even blush. Instead, he straightened his neck and said, "It's mine. Of course I'll take it."

Saying that, he turned around to go. No one imagined that Fengxia would pick up her hoe to hit Wang Si. If someone hadn't screamed out in terror, giving Wang Si a chance to duck out of the way, I'm afraid he would have been killed. When Wang Si saw Fengxia trying to hit him, he stretched out his hand and slapped her. Fengxia had nowhere near as much strength as Wang Si did, and that one slap knocked her to the ground. The sound of the slap went straight to my heart; it was like the sound of someone diving into a pond. I rushed forward and hit Wang Si in the face. His head bobbed, and my hand ached. After Wang Si came around he grabbed hold of a hoe and aimed it right at me. After jumping out of the way, I also grabbed hold of a hoe.

If the villagers hadn't restrained us, that day would have marked the end for at least one of us. Then the team leader came. After we finished telling him what had happened, he yelled at us,

"Fuck, if you kill each other what the hell am I supposed to say to the higher-ups?"

After having it out with us, the team leader said, "Fengxia's not the kind of person to do a thing like that. But then again no one saw Wang Si steal it, either. So this is what we'll do: We'll split it, and each of your families will get half."

With that, the team leader held out his hands to Wang Si, expecting him to hand over the potato. But Wang Si held on to it with both hands, unwilling to let go.

"Hand it over," the team leader ordered.

Wang Si had no choice. With a long face he handed the potato over to the team leader. The team leader borrowed a sickle from someone beside him, put the potato down on the ridge and with one swift swipe the sweet potato was split in two. But the team leader's aim was off, leaving one huge piece and one tiny piece. I said, "Team leader, how do we split this up?"

The team leader said, "That's easy."

With another swift swipe, he cut a chunk off the big piece and put it into his pocket—that chunk was his. He handed Wang Si and me the two remaining pieces.

"Are they about the same size?" he asked.

One piece of a sweet potato would never be enough to feed a family, but our way of thinking back then was different. At the time we were in dire straits. It had been a month without grain, and just about everything edible in the fields had long been eaten. Back then, if someone had offered a bowl of rice for your life, he would have had more than a few takers.

The day after we fought over the potato with Wang Si, Jiazhen,

Leaning on her little stick, made her way to the edge of the village. I was in the fields at the time. When I saw her I asked where she was off to. She said, "I'm going into town to see my dad."

It's natural for a daughter to want to see her father, and even if I had wanted to stop her I wouldn't have been able to. Seeing how much energy it took her to walk, I said, "Let Fengxia go along. She'll be able to take care of you on the way."

When Jiazhen heard this, she answered without even turning her head, "I don't want Fengxia to come."

Jiazhen had a short temper during those difficult days, so I didn't bother trying to argue with her. I watched her walk slowly toward town. She was so skinny it looked like she had no meat on her bones. Her once-stretched clothes had become loose and droopy, blowing back and forth in the wind.

I didn't know that she was going into town to beg. She didn't come back until near dusk, and by the time she got home she couldn't even walk. Fengxia saw her first. Fengxia tugged on my clothes, and I turned around to see Jiazhen standing on the trail. Resting against her stick, she waved to us. As she raised her arm it looked as if her head were about to tumble off her shoulders.

I rushed over, and just as I was about to reach her she fell to the ground on her knees. Clutching her stick with both hands, she cried out in a weak voice, "Fugui, come, come."

As I reached out to help her up, she grabbed hold of my hand and pulled it to her chest.

"Feel," she said, gasping for air.

As I touched her chest I was shocked. Inside her clothes I felt a small bag of rice.

"It's rice," I said.
Tears flowed from Jiazhen's eyes.
"Dad gave it to me," she said.

At the time, a bag of rice was an unheard-of delicacy. It had been at least a month or two since our family had tasted rice. The joy we felt was indescribable. I had Fengxia help Jiazhen to the house while I went to look for Youqing. Youqing was lying beside the pond, where he had just drunk a bellyful of water.

"Youqing! Youqing!" I called.

He answered me wearily and didn't even have the energy to hold his head straight.

"Hurry home for some porridge," I said quietly.

The second Youqing heard there was porridge, he summoned a burst of energy from who knows where. He immediately sat up and called out, "Porridge?"

He nearly scared me to death.

"Not so loud!" I said anxiously.

We couldn't let other people know that Jiazhen had brought home a bag of rice hidden in her clothes. Once everyone got home I shut and locked the door, and only then did Jiazhen take out the little bag of rice. She dumped half the bag into the pot and added some water. Fengxia started a fire, and before long the porridge was cooking. I had Youqing look out through the crack in the door just in case anyone from the village came by. As soon as the water began to boil the fragrance of rice filled the hut. Youqing couldn't stand it any longer. He ran over to the pot and took deep whiff after whiff. "It smells so good!"

I pushed him away, saying, "Go back to the door and keep guard."

Youqing took two more quick whiffs before going back to the door. A smile emerged on Jiazhen's face, and she said, "It looks like I'll finally be able to give you a good meal."

Tears fell from Jiazhen's eyes as she spoke.

"This rice came from between my father's teeth," she sobbed.

It was then that someone started to approach from outside. As he got to the door he yelled, "Fugui!"

We were so scared that we didn't dare breathe. Youqing stood bent over at the door, not moving a muscle. Only Fengxia, who couldn't hear anything, continued happily adding wood to the fire. I patted her to be quieter. Not hearing anyone respond, the person outside said angrily, "There's smoke puffing out your chimney, but nobody inside answers!"

After a while it seemed that the man had left. Youqing peered outside for some time before finally whispering to us, "He's gone."

Jiazhen and I could finally take a deep breath and relax. When the porridge was ready, the four of us sat at the table and ate it. Never in my life have I eaten with more relish than on that day. Just thinking about the taste makes me drool. Youqing was anxious and ate quickly—he was the first to finish. He opened his mouth wide and took big breaths to cool it down. But he still wound up with a bunch of little blisters in his mouth that were sore for a few days. Just as we finished, the team leader showed up, bringing along practically everyone in the village.

It had been almost two months since anyone in the village had

eaten rice. When we closed our door and smoke wisped out of our chimney, everybody saw. After we ignored that first guy who showed up, he went and told the others. Now a whole bunch of people were coming, and leading the way was the team leader. They figured we had some goodies, and everybody wanted a taste.

As soon as the team leader walked in, his nose twitched.

"What's that you're cooking?" he asked. "It smells great."

I giggled but didn't say anything. I figured if I didn't answer him, the team leader would probably be too embarrassed to ask again. Jiazhen asked them to have a seat, but a few of them were nosy and went about looking in the pots and under the mattress. It was a good thing that the remaining rice was hidden in Jiazhen's clothes; this way it didn't matter if they turned things upside down looking. After a while, the team leader put a stop to the snooping.

"What the hell are you doing?" he said. "This isn't your house! Leave! Leave! Get the fuck out," he cursed.

After the team leader drove the others out he got up to close the door. Then, without even trying to chum up to us, he turned right around and said, "Fugui, Jiazhen, if you've got something good to eat, let me in on it."

Jiazhen and I looked at each other. The team leader was normally pretty nice to us, and now here he was begging. How could we not help him out? Jiazhen reached into her clothes and took out that little rice bag. She gave the team leader a small handful, saying, "Team leader, that's all I can give. Take it home and cook some rice soup."

"That's enough, that's enough," the team leader repeated.

The team leader had Jiazhen put the handful of rice in his pocket. Then, clasping his pocket with both hands, he laughed out loud and went out the door. As soon as the team leader left, tears fell from Jiazhen's eyes—she was crying for that handful of rice. Seeing Jiazhen weeping, I could only sigh deeply.

The days went on like this all the way up until after the rice harvest. Although it wasn't a very strong harvest, at least we finally had some grain, and things suddenly started to look up. But who could have known that Jiazhen's illness would continue to get worse? By the end, she couldn't walk more than a few steps. It was that terrible year that had ruined her health like this. But Jiazhen still wouldn't resign herself to her condition. Even though she couldn't work in the field, she insisted on doing housework. Leaning against the wall, she'd make her way around the hut to dust and sweep. Then one day she fell down, and no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't get back up. When Fengxia and I got home from working in the field, she was still lying there with an open scrape on her face. I carried her to bed, and Fengxia got a towel to wipe the blood from her face.

"From now on you'd better stay in bed," I told her.

Jiazhen lowered her head.

"I don't know why I couldn't get up," she whispered.

I guess you could say Jiazhen was tough. Even at a time like that she didn't utter a single complaint or cry out in despair. While she was bedridden, she had me bring every piece of beat-up old clothing over to her.

"I'll feel better if I have some work to do," she said.

She unraveled the fabric and made new clothes for Fengxia and Younging, and after the kids put them on, they really did look new. It was only later that I discovered she had also unraveled her own clothes. When I discovered what she had done I got mad, but she just smiled and said, "Clothes don't last long if you don't wear them. I'll never wear those clothes, so what's the point of them rotting away with me?"

Jiazhen said she'd make an outfit for me, too, but who'd have known that before she could finish she would be too weak to lift even a needle? At the time Fengxia and Younging were asleep, but under the light of the kerosene lamp Jiazhen was still sewing my outfit. She was so exhausted that sweat dripped from her face. I kept telling her to get to sleep, but she would only sigh and shake her head, insisting she was almost done. After a while she dropped the needle, and as she reached for it her hand began to tremble. I saw her struggling to pick it up and bent over to get it for her. I handed it to her, but she dropped it again. Teardrops trickled down from Jiazhen's eyes; this was the first time she had cried since getting sick like this. She thought she would never be able to work again.

"I can't even get out of bed. What am I supposed to do with myself?" she asked in despair.

I wiped her tears away with my sleeve. She was so skinny that her bones were protruding from her face. I told her that it was just exhaustion, that even a healthy person wouldn't be able to do the amount of work she'd been doing. I tried comforting her by telling her how Fengxia had already grown up and was earning more work points than even Jiazhen used to. I told her that from

now on there would be no reason for us to worry anymore about money.

"But Younging is still young," said Jiazhen.

Jiazhen's tears didn't stop that whole night. She kept telling me, "When I die, don't wrap me in a gunnysack. You have to use a fast knot to tie gunnysacks, so I won't be able to undo it when I get to the other world. Just use a clean piece of cloth and that'll be fine. And before you bury me, remember to give me a bath."

Jiazhen continued, "Fengxia's already grown up. See if you can find her a husband—that way I'll be able to rest in peace. Younging's still small. There's a lot of things he doesn't understand, so make sure you don't hit him too much and scare him."

After hearing her go through all this, my heart felt waver after wave of sadness. I said to her, "Actually, I probably should have died long ago. So many people died during the war, but somehow I survived. Every day I told myself that I had to stay alive so I could come home and see you. And now you're just going to abandon us?"

My words must have had some effect on Jiazhen, because the next morning when I woke up I saw her staring at me.

"Fugui," she whispered, "I don't want to die. All I want is to be able to wake up every day and see you and the kids."

After a few days resting in bed, Jiazhen gradually started to get her strength back. Before long she could sit up in bed, and she said she felt much better. She was happy and said she wanted to try going back to the fields, but I wouldn't let her.

"From now on you can't risk wearing yourself out," I said.

"You've got to save your strength—we've still got a long road ahead of us."

That year Younging was in the fifth grade. There's a common saying that "Calamities never come singly." With Jiazhen as sick as she was, I was hoping that Younging would grow up quickly. His grades were terrible, and I thought I'd better not force him to go to middle school. After he graduated from elementary school, I'd let him go with me out to the fields to earn work points. How could I have known that just as Jiazhen was starting to feel better, something would happen to Younging?

That afternoon, Younging's principal, the wife of the county magistrate, lost a lot of blood giving birth in the city hospital—they said she had one foot in the grave. The teachers from Younging's school immediately called all fifth graders to the track and sent them to the hospital to donate blood. As soon as the kids heard that the blood was for the principal, they were so happy you would have thought it was a holiday. A few of the boys even rolled up their sleeves right there, ready to donate on the spot. As soon as they left the school gates, Younging took off his shoes and, clutching them in his hands, started running toward the hospital with four or five other kids. My son was the first one to get there, and was first in the line that formed once the other students arrived.

"I was the first one here!" Younging proudly told his teacher.

After which his teacher dragged him aside and gave him a lecture about abiding by the rules. Younging had no choice but to stand off to one side watching as, one by one, the other kids pressed up against one another on their way in to have their

blood type checked. More than ten kids were tested, but not one had the same blood type as the principal. Youqing grew increasingly anxious as he watched them. He was afraid he'd be the last one and that by then they wouldn't even need his blood. He walked over to his teacher and said shyly, "Teacher, I realize I made a mistake."

The teacher just grunted but didn't answer him. He waited until two more kids had gone in to have their blood checked. That was when a doctor wearing a gauze mask emerged from the delivery room, shouting over to the man doing the blood tests, "The blood? Where's the blood?"

The man responsible for checking the blood said, "None of them has the right blood type."

"Quick, send the rest of them in!" the doctor yelled. "We barely have a heartbeat on the patient!"

Youqing once again walked over to his teacher and asked him, "Is it my turn?"

The teacher looked at Youqing and waved his hand. "Go in."

Only when they got to Youqing did they find a match. My son's face turned bright red, he was so ecstatic. He ran over to the door and yelled to his friends outside, "They're gonna take my blood!"

If they wanted to take some blood, they should have taken only a little. But to save the magistrate's wife, the people in the hospital wouldn't stop taking Youqing's blood—they just kept extracting more and more. When his face turned white, Youqing didn't say anything. Only after his lips turned white did he finally say, "I'm dizzy."

The guy doing the blood work said, "You always get dizzy when you donate blood."

Youqing had already given more than his body could take, but out came another doctor saying there still wasn't enough blood. The fucking asshole doing the blood work extracted almost every drop of blood from my son's body. Youqing's lips turned blue, but the guy still didn't stop. Only after Youqing's head slumped and fell to one side did he finally begin to panic. He called a doctor over, who squatted down and listened with a stethoscope.

"I can't get a heartbeat," muttered the doctor.

The doctor didn't seem to think it was a big deal. He just scolded the blood technician. "You're really an idiot."

He then went back into the delivery room to save the magistrate's wife.

That evening as dusk fell, when I was just getting ready to pack it in for the day, a kid from one of the neighboring villages, a classmate of Youqing's, came running over. He rushed right over to me and shouted at the top of his voice, "Is Xu Youqing's father here?"

My heart jumped. It was getting late, and I had just begun to worry that something might have happened to Youqing. Before I had a chance to respond, the kid yelled again, "How about his mother?"

I quickly answered, "I'm Youqing's father."

Wiping his nose, the kid looked at me and said, "I was right, it's you. You're the one who came to our classroom."

My heart felt as if it was going to jump out of my chest, and

then he finally said, "Xu Youqing's almost dead. He's in the hospital."

My vision instantly went blurry. I asked the kid, "What did you say?"

"Hurry up and get to the hospital," he repeated. "Youqing's dying."

With my thoughts in disarray, I threw down my hoe and ran toward town. It just didn't make sense. Youqing had been fine that morning when he went to school, and now they were saying he was almost dead. My head buzzed wildly as I ran to the town hospital. As soon as I saw a doctor I stopped him and asked, "My son?"

The doctor looked at me and laughed, "How would I know your son?"

As soon as I heard this I was stunned. I thought, perhaps they made a mistake—how wonderful it would be if it was all just a mistake.

"They said my son was dying and that I should go to the hospital," I said.

Just as he was getting ready to walk away, that doctor suddenly stopped and looked at me.

"What's your son's name?" he asked.

"Youqing," I replied.

He extended his arm and pointed toward the room at the end of the hall. "Go ask over there."

I ran down to the room he had pointed toward and saw a doctor sitting there, in the middle of writing something. My heart was pounding as I walked over to ask, "Doctor, is my son still alive?"

The doctor raised his head and looked at me for a long time before asking, "Do you mean Xu Youqing?"

I quickly nodded my head.

"How many sons do you have?" the doctor asked.

Immediately my legs went soft. Standing there trembling, I said, "I only have one son. I beg you, please, save my son."

The doctor nodded his head to let me know that he understood, but then he asked, "How come you only had one son?"

How was I supposed to answer this? I got anxious and asked him, "Is my son still alive?"

He shook his head and said, "He's dead."

Suddenly I could no longer see the doctor—my mind went blank and my head began to spin. All I felt were the tears pouring down my face. Only after what seemed like an eternity did I ask the doctor, "Where's my son?"

Youqing was lying alone in a small room on a bed made of bricks. When I went in, night had not yet fallen, and I could see Youqing's small, frail body lying there. He was wearing the new outfit Jiazhen had made for him. My son's eyes were tightly closed, as was his mouth. "Youqing! Youqing!" I kept calling to him. Only after he didn't move did I know that he was really dead. I went to hug my son, but Youqing's body was stiff and cold. That morning when he had gone to school he was alive and well; by evening he had become stiff and cold. I couldn't understand it—the body before me seemed like a different person from the one I'd seen that morning. I looked at Youqing and caressed his skinny shoulders—it was really my son. I cried and cried, not even noticing the arrival of Youqing's gym teacher.

When he saw Younging, he cried too, as he kept repeating to me, "How could it be? I can't imagine . . ."

The gym teacher sat down next to me, and we cried together. I caressed Younging's face; so did he. After a while I suddenly realized that I still didn't even know how my boy-had died. I asked the gym teacher, and only then did I learn that he had died from having too much of his blood extracted. At the time I wanted to kill somebody; I put my son down and rushed out. Charging into the patient ward, I grabbed hold of the first doctor I saw—I didn't care who he was—and hit him in the face. That doctor fell to the floor and started screaming for help.

"You killed my son!" I barked at him.

I lifted my leg to kick him, but someone grabbed me from behind. Turning around, I saw Younging's gym teacher.

"Let me go!" I demanded.

The gym teacher said, "Don't do anything crazy."

"I'm going to kill him," I said.

With the gym teacher restraining me, I couldn't get loose from his grip. Crying, I begged him, "I know you've always been good to Younging. Please let me go."

But no matter what, the gym teacher wouldn't let go. All I could do was elbow him, but he still wouldn't loosen his grip. He gave the doctor time to get up and run away; and by then a whole crowd had surrounded us. I saw that there were two more doctors in the crowd and said to the gym teacher, "I beg you, please let me go."

The gym teacher was really strong—with him holding me I couldn't move a muscle. I kept trying to elbow him, but he didn't

seem at all afraid of getting hurt. He just kept saying, "Don't do anything stupid."

It was then that a man wearing a Sun Yat-sen-style tunic suit walked over and told the gym teacher to let me go. He asked me, "Are you Xu Younging's father?"

I ignored him, and as soon as the gym teacher let me go I rushed over to pounce on one of the doctors. The doctor immediately turned and ran. I heard someone address the guy wearing the tunic suit as the county magistrate and I thought, oh, so *he's* the county magistrate—it was his wife who took my son away. I raised my leg and kicked the magistrate in the stomach. He let out a groan as he fell to the ground. Younging's gym teacher grabbed hold of me again and yelled, "That's Magistrate Liu!"

"The magistrate's just the person I want to kill!" I said.

I raised my leg to kick him again when the magistrate suddenly asked me, "Aren't you Fugui?"

"I'm going to kill you!" I screamed.

The magistrate got to his feet and said, "Fugui, it's me, Chunsheng."

As soon as he said that I went numb. I gazed at him for a while, and the longer I looked at him the more he resembled the Chunsheng I once knew. I said, "Chunsheng, is it really you?"

Chunsheng took a step closer and looked me over.

"Fugui, it's you," he said.

Seeing Chunsheng seemed to quell my anger. Through my tears, I told him, "Chunsheng, you've gotten tall and gained weight."

Chunsheng's eyes also turned red.

"Fugui, I thought you were dead," he said.

I shook my head. "I survived."

"And all this time, I thought you'd died the same way as Old Quan," Chunsheng added.

As soon as he mentioned Old Quan the two of us began to cry like children. After crying for a while I asked Chunsheng, "Did you ever get your hands on that flatbread?"

Wiping away his tears, Chunsheng said, "No, you still remember that? Just as I went out to look for some I was taken prisoner."

"Did you get to eat steamed buns?" I asked him.

"I sure did," he smiled.

"I did, too," I said.

Saying that, we both laughed. We laughed and laughed until I remembered my dead son. I wiped my eyes and began to cry again. Chunsheng put his hand on my shoulder.

"Chunsheng," I said, "my only son is dead."

Chunsheng heaved a deep sigh, saying, "How could it have been your son?"

I thought of my son lying all alone in that little room—the pain was unbearable. I said to Chunsheng, "I want to see my son."

No longer did I want to kill anyone. Who could have guessed that Chunsheng would suddenly appear? I took a few steps and turned around to say to him, "Chunsheng, you owe me a life. You'll have to repay me in your next lifetime."

That night I carried Younging home. I kept stopping from time to time on the way. When my arms got tired from carrying him,

I'd put him on my back for a while. But each time I placed him on my back I'd instantly start to panic, so I'd hold him again in front of me. I couldn't help but look at my son. When I saw I was approaching the village, it got more and more difficult to go on—what was I supposed to say to Jiazhen? Jiazhen was already so sick. I knew that once she found out Younging had died she wouldn't be able to go on much longer. I sat down on the ridge just outside the village with Younging resting on my leg. As soon as I looked down at him I couldn't hold back the tears. After crying for a while, I started to think about how to break the news to Jiazhen. After going through everything in my head, I decided I should keep Younging's death a secret from her for the time being. I put Younging down on the ridge and snuck home to get my hoe. I then picked Younging back up, headed over to my parents' gravesite, and started digging a hole.

I had to bury him, but at the same time I couldn't bear to part with him. I sat down before my parents' graves and embraced Younging, not letting go. I let his face rest up against my neck. Younging's face felt like it was frozen stiff—it felt like ice pressing on my neck. The night wind whisked against the leaves above our heads, and Younging's body was dampened by the dew. The image of him going to school that morning wouldn't leave me. I remembered his backpack bouncing up and down as he ran off to school. When I realized that Younging would never again utter a single word or go off running barefoot, I felt waver after waver of pain—it hurt so much that I couldn't even cry. I kept sitting there until I saw the sky beginning to turn light. I had to bury

him. I took off my clothes and, ripping off my sleeves, used them to cover Younging's eyes. I used the rest of my clothes to wrap his body. I placed his body down in the pit I had dug and told my parents, who were buried beside him, "Younging's coming. You'll have to take care of him. When he was alive I was never good to him. You'll have to love him for me."

The longer I looked at Younging lying in that hole, the smaller he looked. He didn't look like someone who had lived thirteen years; he looked more like he must've looked as a newborn, just after Jiazhen had given birth to him. I pushed the dirt into his grave with my hands. I made sure I picked out all the little pebbles and rocks, afraid that the coarse pebbles would press against him and make him uncomfortable. As daylight broke, I finished burying Younging. I slowly made my way home, but after taking a few steps I turned around to take one last look. As I got to the door of our hut, I realized that I would never see my son again. I couldn't help crying a few more tears, but fearing Jiazhen would hear, I covered my mouth and squatted down. After squatting down for a long time I began to hear the sound of people heading out to the fields to work—only then did I get back up and go inside. Fengxia was standing next to the door, staring at me with her wide-open eyes. She still didn't know that her little brother was dead. When the little kid from the other village had come to give me the news, Fengxia had been right there with me, but she couldn't hear. From her bed, Jiazhen called me. I walked over and told her, "Younging's had an accident. He's in the hospital."

It looked like Jiazhen believed me.
 "What happened?" she asked.

"I can't say for sure," I said. "During class Younging suddenly fainted and was sent to the hospital. The doctor said that this type of illness might need some time to cure."

A sad expression began to appear on Jiazhen's face, and tears began to trickle from the corners of her eyes.

"It's exhaustion," she said. "He's been working too hard ever since I got sick. It's all my fault."

"It's not that," I said. "Even if he's tired, exhaustion doesn't cause someone to get sick like that."

Jiazhen looked me over.

"Your eyes are all swollen," she said.

I nodded. "Yeah, I didn't sleep all night."

I cut our conversation short and hastily made my way outside. Younging was dead—I had only just put his body into the cold earth—and there was no way I'd have been able to control my emotions if I'd kept on with Jiazhen like that.

For the next few days I would work the field during the day, and then when night fell I would tell Jiazhen that I was going into town to see if Younging was doing any better. I would slowly walk toward town, and as it got darker I would turn back around. When I got to the western side of the village, I would sit down in front of Younging's grave. The night sky was a dense black, and the wind would waft against my face as I spoke to my dead son. My words were carried away by the wind; they didn't even seem to belong to me. I would sit there until the middle of the night before finally going home. The first couple of days Jiazhen would be waiting up for me, and as soon as I stepped through the door she would ask if Younging was any better. I would be forced

to make up some stories to keep the truth from her. But after a few days Jiazhen would already be asleep by the time I came home, lying there with her eyes closed. I knew that going on lying to her wasn't going to solve anything, but that was all I could do—take one day at a time. As long as Jiazhen believed that Youqing was okay, that was all that mattered.

One night, after arriving home from Youqing's grave, I climbed into bed next to Jiazhen. I thought she was asleep, but she suddenly said, "Fugui, I don't have much time left."

My heart sank. As I went to caress her face, I realized that her cheeks were covered with tears. Jiazhen continued, "You've got to take good care of Fengxia. I'm worried most about her."

Jiazhen didn't mention Youqing, and I immediately started to worry. I couldn't even think of anything to say to console her.

The next night, as usual, I told Jiazhen that I was going into town to see Youqing, but Jiazhen told me not to go. Instead, she asked me to carry her around the village for a walk. I had Fengxia pick up her mother and put her on my back. Jiazhen was getting lighter and lighter—she was so skinny it felt like there was nothing but bones left. As soon as we got outside, Jiazhen said, "I want to go to the western part of the village to look around."

That was where Youqing was buried. I said all right, but no matter what, my feet didn't want to go in that direction. After trudging along, we ended up at the eastern end of the village. Jiazhen whispered to me, "Fugui, don't lie to me. I know Youqing's dead."

The moment she uttered those words I stopped walking, and

suddenly my legs began to feel weak. I felt liquid dripping on my neck, and I knew that it was Jiazhen's tears.

"Take me to see Youqing," she said.

I knew I couldn't go on deceiving her. As I carried her to the western side of the village, Jiazhen whispered to me, "Each night I heard you returning from the west, so I knew that Youqing was dead."

When we got to Youqing's grave, Jiazhen wanted me to put her down. With tears streaming down her face, she climbed atop Youqing's burial mound. She placed both her hands upon the earth above his grave as if she wanted to caress Youqing, but she had so little energy that all she could do was move a few fingers. Seeing Jiazhen like this, my heart hurt so much it felt like it was all blocked up. I really shouldn't have buried Youqing—I should have let Jiazhen see him one last time.

Jiazhen stayed there until dark. I was afraid the night dew would make her sick, so I picked her up and put her on my back. Jiazhen had me take her over to the edge of the village. By the time we got there my collar was soaked.

"Youqing won't be able to run down this trail to school anymore," Jiazhen said, crying.

I gazed at that narrow, twisting trail that led to town and heard the sound of my son running barefoot. The moonlight was shining on the trail, giving the illusion that a layer of salt had been sprinkled along it.