

Happy

by Jia Pingwa

Translated by **Nicky Harman**

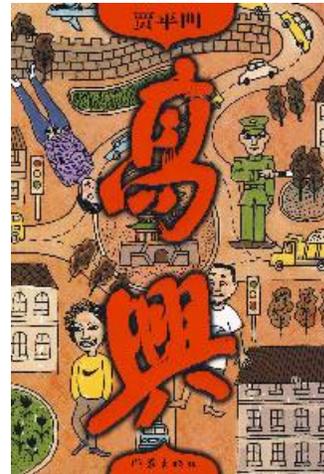
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Dramatis Personae

'Happy' Liu and Wufu are migrant trash collectors in Xi'an.

Meng Yichun is Happy's girlfriend, and a prostitute.

Wei Da is a businessman and also one of Yichun's johns.

Han Dabao, originally a migrant worker from Happy and Wufu's village, is now a prosperous businessman. He fixed Happy and Wufu up with a job when they first arrived in Xi'an.

Chapter 1

Name?

Happy Liu.

On your ID card, it says your name's Hawa – how did Hawa turn into Happy?

I changed my name. Everyone calls me Happy Liu now.

'Happy' are you? Hawa Liu!

You've got to call me Happy Liu, comrade.

Happy Liu?!

Yes, sir!

You know why I'm handcuffing you?

Because of this dead body?

Make a proper confession!

I shouldn't have been getting on the train carrying my friend's body.

Well, if you know that, why did you do it?

He had to go home.

Where's home?

Near Qingfeng Town in Shangzhou.

I'm asking about you!

Right here. I'm from Xi'an.

Uh?

I'm from Xi'an.

Really?!

Well, I should be from Xi'an.

Tell the truth!

I am telling the truth.

Then what do you mean by 'should be'?

I really should be, comrade, because...

It was 13th October 2000, and we were outside the barriers at Xi'an Railway Station East. The policeman was taking a statement from me. It was blowing hard, and leaves floated down from the ginkgos, catalpa and plane trees at the edge of the station square, covering everything with brilliant reds and yellows.

Never mind the *baijiu* liquor, I blame the white cockerel. We always believed that if people died away from home, their spirit might get lost on the way back. So you had to tie a white cockerel to the body. The cock was supposed to help Wufu's spirit get home but in the end it wrecked everything.

The cock weighed two pounds, two and a half at most, but the woman selling it insisted it was three pounds. I lost my temper. That's rubbish! I said, I can tell the

weight of anything! Do you know what I'm buying it for? (Though of course I didn't tell her that.) The old bag kept shouting: Put it on the scales again, you can put it on the scales again! So then the policeman stopped pacing up and down and came over to see what was going on.

He saw the roll of bedding tied with rope. What's that? he asked, jabbing it with his baton. Noisy Shi went as pale as if he'd had a bag of ash emptied over his head. Then the stupid fucker opened his big mouth, and said it was a side of pork. Pork? went the policeman. You wrap pork up in a quilt?! He carried on poking and the corner of the bedding roll began to come undone. That was when Noisy Shi dropped the bottle of *baijiu* and scarpered. What a coward! The policeman immediately pounced on me, and handcuffed one of my wrists to the flag staff.

Could you handcuff my left wrist? I asked with a polite smile. I pulled a tendon in my right arm digging ditches.

This time, the baton jabbed me in the crotch, and when a man's jabbed in the crotch it goes numb. Don't joke around! he shouted. So I didn't joke around.

My eyes felt sticky, as if they were full of bogey, and everything looked blurred. But I didn't panic. I had to stay calm whatever happened.

The ink wouldn't come out of the policeman's pen and he kept shaking it. The pimples on his neck had gone all red. I stretched out one foot towards the plane tree leaves, and gave them a nudge. I'd never seen a young man with so many teenage spots. He was just a kid, in fact he looked just like a young billy goat before it gets the snip!

Click, click. Someone was taking photographs.

That reporter was over 30 but she was dressed in little-girl clothes with a fringe to match. I took an instant dislike to her. When I noticed her, I smoothed down my hair, and straightened my clothes, and presented my profile so she could take another picture. But the next day in the paper, they used the one with me having my statement taken, with the flower-patterned bedding bundle tied up with rope in front of me. Wufu's foot was sticking out, and you could see the yellow plastic shoes stuffed with wadding. Dammit, that picture was no better than an ID mugshot - full face, and ears showing. They make everyone look like a criminal. It didn't look like me, no way! I've got a prominent nose and a well-defined mouth, but she wouldn't take me in profile, the bitch!

Once Wufu's body had been taken to the undertakers, they let me go. I had to go back to the station to wait for Wufu's wife, but there were lots of people in the station square looking at the newspaper, pointing at me and saying: Look! That's the man who tried to carry a corpse onto the train! They called out: Hawa Liu! but I ignored them. Then they shouted: Shangzhou chowmein-eater. In Shangzhou, the land is so barren that last year's grain doesn't last till the next harvest, and at the Spring Festival,

all there is to eat is fried noodles, which we make from persimmon mixed with rice husks. It was a pretty demeaning thing to call someone, so of course I wasn't going to pay any attention at all. What I needed was time to have a good think. It occurred to me that Wufu's body had been taken to the undertakers, but his spirit must still be around here in the square, maybe perched on the traffic lights or sitting on the piles of roast chicken, hard-boiled duck eggs, steamed rolls and bottles of mineral water on the peddler's push-cart. My back felt sore and tired now, and I pushed my hand against it. Then I had another thought: you judge a car by its engine, not by what it looks like. Well, wasn't a kidney a fundamental part of your body? My flesh was from Qingfeng, and was Hawa Liu, but I had sold my kidney in Xi'an, so that obviously meant I belonged in Xi'an. I really was from Xi'an! I was proud of myself for working this out. It made me feel proud, though a bit lonely too. I held my head high and began to stride along. And as each step rang out, it proclaimed: I'm not Hawa Liu. I'm not a Shangzhou chowmein-eater. I'm Happy Liu from Xi'an. HAP-PY LIU!

When I first met my girlfriend Yichun, she said: Happy, you don't look like a peasant. I disagreed. Mutton always smells like mutton, I told her. But she said she'd met a lot of so-called officials, businessmen or professors in Xi'an, and most of them were really just peasants. Her words went right to my heart. I always thought I was different from the people around me, at least different from my friend Wufu. I couldn't put this into words, but I knew I really was a cut above them.

I can give you some examples: first, I'm really good at mental arithmetic. When I had to do maths as a little boy, I could give you the answers without having to work out the sums on paper first, even if they were three- or four-figure numbers. Of course I had my own ways of working them out, but I didn't tell anyone. Second, I'd walk ten miles, and go hungry too, to get to a show in the county town. Third, my clothes are old, it's true, but they're always clean. I don't have an iron, but I pour boiling water into my enamel mug and use the bottom to iron the creases into my trousers. Fourth, I can play the flute. Back home, lots of people could play the Chinese violin, but only I played the flute. Fifth, if I have a problem, I don't tell anyone about it. If it gets really bad, I just make a joke against myself, and have a laugh, and that's it. Six, I hate foul-mouthed people. What have you got against heaven, or your parents? What's the point of cursing them? The man who bought my kidney off me said it was going to a big Xi'an businessman, so he had to check I didn't have any other diseases. Go ahead, I said, and the only thing he found was haemorrhoids. I was putting on weight, he said, and like the classic Chinese essay, 'the form wandered a bit even if the spirit was still sharp'. I got annoyed at that, but not for long, and when he left I gave him a basket of pullets' eggs. Seven, I was born with upturned lips, so I'm happy by nature. Four years ago, when Mother Wang was looking for a wife for me, I ended up playing the flute for

three days and three nights. Mother Wang had said I had to build a new house, so to raise the money, I sold my blood. I did this three times, until I heard that people from Dawanggou had caught Hepatitis B from selling their blood, so I didn't do that again, I sold my kidney instead. I used the money to build the house, but then the girl went and married someone else. OK, so she married someone else. I still played the flute for three days and nights, and then I went out and bought a pair of women's leather high-heeled shoes with pointed toes. You bunion! I said. I'm going to marry a woman who wears leather high-heeled shoes with pointed toes!

And of course a woman who can wear leather high-heeled shoes with pointed toes must be a city girl from Xi'an.

I can't explain why I have such strong feelings for Xi'an! After I had sold my kidney, I had a few dreams about Xi'an - its city walls, the archways and their solid wooden gates, the studs on them as big as rice bowls, and the bell tower with its gilded roof. In my dream, I was sitting on a white rock under a crook-necked pine outside the city walls. When I arrived in Xi'an, the gates in the city walls and the bell tower were exactly as I'd seen them in my dream, and outside the walls there really was a crook-necked pine tree with a white rock under it. That made me ask myself a few questions: why was I never physically strong enough? Wufu could wade a river waist-deep in water with a load of firewood weighing 150 pounds on his back. Why couldn't I? Wufu could eat ten pounds of cooked sweet potato in one sitting, so why did I burp acid after I'd eaten three pounds? Wufu was such a dope, but he married ages ago and had kids, so how come I was still a bachelor? What was the reason? The reason was that I was destined to be a city man, from Xi'an!

Chapter 2

I really did turn into a man from Xi'an. If human life can be divided into seasons, then the way I see it is Qingfeng was the season of wheat straw piled up in a messy heap, scattering whenever the wind blew, and the new season for me was city life.

I'd better explain about my friend Wufu, hadn't I? If it was anyone else, I'd let it drop. But with Wufu, even though he was extremely ugly and extremely common, I can't just leave it at that. In the station square, and then in the local police station, I kept saying that my destiny had been linked to Wufu's for my whole life. I must have been repaying my debt for sinning in a previous life, and it was my debt to him, not his to me.

He was five years older than me, so in the normal way of things, I should have been tagging along after him, but actually it was the other way round. Han Dabao said I was only good to Wufu because of his young wife, but this was an insult to me. Why would I fancy a woman with such big breasts and an arse as broad as a bamboo sieve? Wei Da was surprised at my taste in women. He said that peasants were primitive in love, and liked women with big breasts and hips, because they were good for child-bearing. Fine, then that was just another way of showing that I was no peasant! Well anyway, Wufu's wife gave birth to three sons. They ate and drank like a trio of brigands, and Wufu had a terrible time feeding his family. There was so little farmland around Qingfeng, and after they'd built a rail track here and a highway there in the 1990s, there was even less of it. Anyone who could, went off to the city to get a labouring job. But Wufu was stupid and no one wanted to take him with them. So I took him with me. We did all sorts of work in and around the county town: house-building, grave-digging, making sun-dried bricks and building the brick surrounds for kitchen stoves. We hardly earned any money, and as soon as we'd gone back home, we had to turn round and go back again. Back and forth, back and forth, for years. Every time we went home, I'd say: Wufu, while you're having a good time with your wife on the kang, all I ever get my leg over is the edge of my bed. It's not fair. Wufu used to say: What can I do? Once I said: Don't go home. Stick around tonight. So Wufu really didn't go home, and spent the night drinking with me instead. And that really touched me.

No one in Qingfeng knew that I'd sold my kidney, only Wufu. I swore him to secrecy: Button your lips, Wufu! I said. He was completely loyal. During the Cultural Revolution, he said, I was a Little Red Guard and I scratched Chairman Mao's head on my chest. I'll do the same for you. And he got a safety pin and made scratches on his chest until it bled. I grabbed the safety pin off him but it still left him with two scars on his chest.

Han Dabao was the first to leave Qingfeng for Xi'an. We heard he hadn't got on

that well at the beginning but then we heard he was making shedloads of money. Han Dabao was the yeast that stirred us all up, and lots of people headed for him when they got to Xi'an. I tried to encourage Wufu to come with me. But Wufu said: In the county town, everyone else eats and dresses pretty much like us, so I don't feel out of place. But I'd stand out like a sore thumb in Xi'an, I haven't got the guts for it.

I couldn't stand Wufu being so timid – making out Xi'an people were superhuman, man-eaters! I was sitting on the pavement having a fag. There was a dog chewing on a bone right near me. The bone hadn't a scrap of meat on it but it kept on gnawing. I kicked the dog away, and threw the bone up onto the roof of the building opposite. Two rooms, that what my home is now, I said. If I let those two rooms trap me in Qingfeng, they're nothing better than a coffin. At that moment I realised that it was a done deal – I had to go to Xi'an. My kidney was calling me. Wufu just said: If you're really not coming back, you'll leave the rooms to me, won't you? I was furious. I've got these shoes too, I shouted. Do you want them? And I took one off and whacked him on the head with it. He just smiled at me. Well, that was Wufu all over. Get up, get me a bowl of noodle water! I said. We took our flat breads to the noodle café. We wanted some of the liquid the noodles had been cooked in to dunk our flatbreads in. Wufu had a clean bowl with him, but of course the owner wouldn't let us have the liquid if we weren't buying noodles too. I told him to get hold of a bowl someone had been eating out of. That way the owner would think we'd bought our noodles and finished them. Wufu hadn't thought of that, the blockhead.

I used to ask Wufu questions like: If someone's life is saved, and then they go and save someone else's life, and one of the two has to die, who should it be? Wufu couldn't answer that one.

Me: The one who was saved shouldn't die.

Wufu: Why?

I sighed, and refused to tell him.

Then I tapped him on the head with my flute. Knead my neck, I said, and straight-away he did. He knew exactly how much pressure to use, and got right to the acupuncture point.

I didn't save Wufu's life, but I really did need him all the same. It wasn't just that he went along with everything I said, it was that I needed to expend the energy, and money too, in looking after that dopy guy.

Wufu, I said, you're coming with me.

Pages 323-340: Happy falls in love with Meng Yichun, a young woman who has left her village to come and work in a salon in Xi'an as a prostitute. She is sending all her earnings home to pay the local police to go in pursuit of the

man who murdered her brother. One of her clients is Wei Da, a businessman who has befriended Happy. (Happy initially convinces himself that this is the same businessman who received the kidney he sold when he was still home in the village. However, he is disillusioned when it turns out that Wei Da received not a kidney, but a new liver because he drank too much.)

When he hears that the police have raided the salon and Yichun is in prison, Happy turns to Wei Da for help.

Chapter 53

Dinner was over and Wei Da's friends were leaving. I said: Director Wei, there's something I want to talk to you about.

Wei Da smiled, urbane as ever: Didn't Meng Yichun tell you all about it? I asked her to. Come back in a week. We'll have started work on walling-in the Fengyukou site by then.

Fengyukou? asked Wufu. Didn't you say you'd give us a job in your company?

Fengyukou was a gully 12 miles south of Xi'an, in the Qinling Mountains. Pigman had told us that a lot of holiday villages were being built up there, and a hot springs resort, a golf course and a wild-life park too. The villagers who lived in the gully really fancied themselves because they'd made a fortune just from selling rare-breed hens' eggs. Xinghu once said to me: Any time you want, I'll take you up there to have a look. If I can't make money from trash collection, I'm going to settle up there and raise hens too! But Xinghu would say something one day and by the next, she'd forgotten it and we never went to Fengyukou.

Wei Da: This is my company. We've just bought some land in the mountains to build a villa complex. It's 5,000 acres or so, spread over five peaks. Once you're there, your task will be to raise the red flag from the five mountain tops each morning, and lower them again in the evening...

Wufu: Like the Chinese flag in Tiananmen Square?

Wei Da: It's not the Chinese flag, it's our company flag.

Wufu: Just raise the flags?

Wei Da: Just raise the flags!

Wei Da had the wrong end of the stick - this wasn't what I wanted to talk to him about at all. And Wufu was going on and on... I interrupted him: Give your mouth a wipe, Wufu. Then I whispered: Put a sock in it! Don't you remember what I came for?! Wufu grunted and went off downstairs. I said to Wei Da: Did you know Meng Yichun's in prison?

I thought he might go pale, slump down onto the sofa or even burst into despairing tears, but he just went and shut the door, got himself a toothpick and started to pick his teeth. I know, he said, without looking at me. He actually knew! He'd known all the time, but he still invited his friends to a restaurant, talked and laughed with them - and here he was answering me, as cool as cucumber!

Me: You knew?

Wei Da: The beauty salon boss called me. Oh dear, Yichun's such a good girl, how could she do a thing like that?

What on earth was he talking about? As if he'd only just found out what her work

was!

Me: You didn't know what....what she did in the beauty salon?

Wei Da: I only found out when the owner phoned me.

Me: So you and her...

Wei Da: Me and her what?

Wei Da flatly denied going with Yichun. Had Yichun lied to me then? Had my own eyes been lying? After all, I'd seen him drive by and pick her up a few times. If Yichun hadn't been in trouble, I would have loved Wei Da to deny it but she was in trouble. I couldn't believe my ears!

He was probably embarrassed that anyone should find out the big boss visited prostitutes. OK, Wei Da, I'll go along with you on that one. I took a deep breath and said: Never mind that, Director Wei. We've got to save Meng Yichun. Wei Da: Of course we have. You go and see her. You ought to go and see her. I'll get some cigarettes ready. Yichun smokes, so the next time you see her, you can take them to her from me.

Me: With 5,000 *yuan*, we can get her out. Her boss told me. We only need 5,000 *yuan*!

Wei Da: Don't listen to that old tart, she lies through her teeth. You can't spring someone from prison with money.

Me: Yes, you can. She got herself out that way. Go and try. We only need 5,000 *yuan* to save Yichun!

Wei Da: Happy Liu, you don't understand. You've got to have principles in business.

Was this really Wei Da speaking? Yichun had been his closest friend. When things were quiet and he was looking for pleasure, he was one kind of Wei Da, but as soon as there was a problem, he turned into someone else, and put his own interests first. You can hire two men just to raise the flags every day on your mountains, but you won't fork out 5,000 *yuan* for Yichun, I thought. You wouldn't know a principle if it hit you in the face!

Director Wei! Please! I begged.

A young woman, probably his secretary, pushed open the door and came in with a glass of water and three pills. She stood between me and Wei Da and urged him to take the pills. Wei Da popped them in his mouth, washed them down with water and said to me: Happy Liu, I'll sort this out. You go home, sell the tricycle and come back to the company in a week's time. I'll write you a chit and you can take it straight to Personnel...

You take your pills, Wei Da. I left him to it and went downstairs. Where the stairs turned the corner, there was a glass partition. I went to open what I thought it was a

door, cracked my head against it and shattered the glass. The doorman came running.

Me: How much is it? I'll pay for the glass!

Doorman: It's our fault, I'm so sorry, Sir.

He supported me with one arm and looked to see if I'd hurt my head. I immediately puked and up came a whole lot of bile.

Wufu was waiting for me downstairs. The wind had got up and his face was grey with dust. Seeing how grim I looked, he asked anxiously: What's up? I told him: Wei Da won't fork out the money to get Yichun off.

Wufu: I told you, rich folk are just not like us. You kept on saying that Wei Da was a good man. Good, my arse! How much longer is he going to live now he's had the liver op? What a mother-fucking miser!

Me: You're just the same as Huang Ba, you are...

Wufu: What's wrong with swearing? Are you telling me I should talk nicely because he paid for my dinner? OK, I'll puke it up! He hawked and spat but nothing came up. So then he stuck his finger down his throat and vomited everything up. That's better, he said: Like killing a goat in the Yellow River and the water washes the knife clean! I don't owe him a thing now.

On the way home, the wind got up till it was blowing a gale and the sky started to turn yellow. I didn't say anything, Wufu didn't say anything either and we walked as fast as we could.

It was fate, wasn't it? Radish seeds grew into radishes and cabbage seeds grew into cabbages, never into radishes. To get the law to work on her brother's case, Yichun had had to break the law. I was Happy Liu, not Wei Da. In fact, I'd only ever be Happy Liu. As I walked and thought, I started to laugh – Ha-ha...ha, ha.

Wufu: What are you laughing at?

Me: A good thing I didn't sell the tricycle and go and work for Wei Da.

We'd only gone one street when the sky turned really black and the wind blew harder than ever.

Me: Is it dusk already?

Wufu: We've only just had lunch.

Wei Da had made me so angry I couldn't think straight any more.

Me: Well, if it's not dusk, then the weather's turning bad.

But I never imagined that a sand storm was getting up. We'd get three sandstorms a year back in Qingfeng, but I didn't expect them in Xi'an, or at least not as bad, because the buildings were tall and there was a green belt on the outskirts. But I was wrong. We'd got as far as South Street, near the Bell Tower, and the sun disappeared. The air was full of sand and we couldn't see the buildings in the distance. The whole city seemed to be fading into nothing. The traffic was bedlam, pedestrians scattered, and

in half an hour the streets were deserted. Even the police had gone. There was just an unearthly howling noise, and leaves off the trees, waste paper and sheets of plastic staggered and rolled drunkenly all over the road. You see, Wufu! I said, the gods are angry!

Wufu wasn't listening. He was running after trash, trying to collect anything he could. When he couldn't catch it he cursed, but you could only hear half the curse, the wind whipped the other half out of his mouth.

I stood in a shop doorway. The shop was shut and I pressed myself hard against the door, screwed up my eyes and looked up. In the stormy skies, I seemed to see Meng Yichun. Yichun, I'm so sorry, I can't get you out of the Re-education Centre, no one can. You'll just have to serve your time like a good girl. Besides, it might make you give up on your brother's case. Then you won't have to degrade yourself dealing with those johns. At least you can get away from that. If that's your fate, and it's God's punishment, then you'll have to put up with it. It's only three months, after all. And when you're out, you'll find out who your real friend is. Not Wei Da, with his new liver, he's not my rival. I've only got one woman in this city, and she's only got one man, and that's the truth. And that man's Happy Liu!

I looked up, muttering to myself. It was only when a plant pot came crashing down from the second floor that I felt tears on my cheeks. The plant pot had missed me by a foot, but I didn't care. I bent down and picked a flower from the wreckage. It was a rose.

Crash, down came another pane of glass and shattered on the ground. Wufu ran up with an armful of trash and yelled at me to get away from the building. I didn't move. He put down the trash and grabbed me. Has the wind turned you into a block of wood? Do you want to get yourself killed?

Meanwhile his pile of trash was carried off again by the wind.

I pulled myself together, and told him off for making such a fuss. It would take more than that to kill me. I'd just got settled in Xi'an and had so many things I still wanted to do. Even if the whole building came down, I'd survive! Wufu didn't bother going after the trash he'd collected. Let it blow, he said, the harder the better. Let it tear up the streets and turn Xi'an into one big trash tip!

Wufu, I said, we've got to get home. Run, see who can run fastest!

We started to run, raced each other, and our coats ballooned out, then the buttons flew off and the coats blew behind us like wings. I was still carrying the rose but it was losing its petals so I put the last one in my mouth and swallowed it. Wufu was running like mad, but the gusts of wind were blowing him off course. There was a lamppost in his way. Lamppost, lamppost! I shouted, but he couldn't stop and slammed straight into it.

Chapter 54

That evening, as the dust storm raged, I got together all the old suits Wei Da had given us – the ones I'd worn and the ones Wu Fu, Huang Ba and Pigman had. I was going to give the whole lot to Han Dabao. This was how I explained it to Wufu: Han Dabao was the person we'd gone to see when we first arrived in Xi'an, so going to see him again now was like making a new beginning. When you've had a bit of grief like this, you learn from it. It's like when you're a kid - you start by learning how to add one and one and make two, and then you grow up and get knowledge and wisdom. Of course, then you get old and you know you're going to die, so you really hope that your kids will take on board all that knowledge of yours when they start to learn. They don't, they have to start from one plus one as well. But make no mistake, Wufu, the Happy Liu you see before you now is not the same as the one who'd just arrived in Xi'an. Now that I (and you too of course) have accumulated a wealth of experience about city life, we're going to make a fresh start.

We got to Han Dabao's door and I thundered on it with my fists.

Han Dabao (from inside): Who is it?

Me: Happy Liu!

Wufu wiped the snot from his nose. He'd had a runny nose ever since we got back home, and he wiped his hand on the door jamb and shouted: And Wufu!

Inside, Han Dabao was trying to open a bottle of red wine by using a knife to prize the cork out. It wouldn't come out so he got a chopstick and whacked the cork down into the bottle, grumbling: Fancy giving someone wine without giving them a corkscrew! He looked at the big bundle of suits I'd brought and inspected the labels. Then he began to try them on, one by one. He asked me where I'd got them from. I assured him they weren't stolen goods, I hadn't picked them up in the street and they hadn't been taken off a sick person or a corpse. You can trust me, I said, you know I'm an honest man. Remember when you left for Xi'an? The streets were full of people wanting to beat you up because you were leaving the village. Except me, I gave you a steamed bun, and helped you make a get-away.

I didn't want him getting cocky and giving us a hard time. It worked. He gave a wave of his hand and said: Even a big rat's still a rat and even a small cat's still a cat! Han Dabao, the dickhead of Qingfeng, is that right? That's a joke!

Now that I'd put him down, I had to talk him up again: Well you're the trash king of South Xi'an now!

You think that's all I am? he asked.

Me: Not just that. If you threw your weight around a bit, you could make us into your Shangzhou Trash Gang!

Han Dabao: OK, OK. You and I see things differently, Happy Liu.

Wufu: We're just tadpoles swimming with a big fish.

Han Dabao, giving us each a fag: Swim too hard and you'll lose your tails.

Wufu: Then we'll turn into toads!

Han Dabao: I'm a toad that lost its tail. Chairman Mao's a toad too, a big one!

Me: Don't talk like that!

Han Dabao: I'm not as educated as you. But I can recite a poem the Chairman wrote about a toad.

Squatting at the pond edge,
Under the shady willow it cultivates the spirit.
Spring will come tomorrow and then
Which toad dares croak?

Me: Good poem!

Han Dabao: Of course it's good! And all tadpoles turn into toads in the end.

I held up the mirror so Han Dabao could see himself. He had a paunch and the suits were a tight fit.

Like a toad! said Wufu, and we all laughed. I told Han Dabao I'd been given the stuff by a big businessman. He had the kind of money that could stone you dead. He had all kinds of suits too, so many he couldn't wear them all.

He gave me these but they're too fancy, I said, they'd be wasted on me and Wufu. But they'd look good on you.

Han Dabao: When you get to the city, it's a good thing to make rich friends, the richer the better. Some folks back home can't stand cities and rich people. None of them last long here.

Of course, I nodded agreement. Then I said: We've got something to report to you. Two trash collectors tried to move onto our patch in Xinglong Street. They said you'd sent them. Lying arseholes! Sheep-in-wolf's-clothing! Trouble is, you're so well known, anyone can say they've come from you. Needed their legs broken, they did!

Han Dabao: Did you break their legs? Wufu: We were about to.

Han Dabao: Then don't! It was me who sent them.

I acted surprised: You sent them? Really?!

Han Dabao: They came to see me. I couldn't see them starve. Xinglong Street has so many companies and rich people living there. There's plenty of pickings. Anyway, it will do them for a bit until I can find them somewhere else and get them out of your way.

Me: That won't work at all. Xinglong Street's too small for two more. If they get enough to eat, we'll be left with our mouths hanging open!

Wufu: All I've had to eat today is three bowls of soupy rice, no proper dinner.

Me: We're from the same village as you, Han Dabao. We should get special treatment.

Han Dabao: I'll be straight with you. Do you know who sent them to me?

Me: Not the mayor, surely?

Han Dabao: Now you're winding me up. The mayor steers clear of me, and I never go near him either. I've only ever made a living from trash. But I've got bigger ambitions than being trash king. I'm going into business with the biggest owner of recycling depots in South Xi'an – we're combining all these small tips into one recycling company. Those two were from his village, so you see, if he sent them to me, I had to help them, didn't I? Just put up with things for the moment, and when the company's up and running, I'll fix you up with a branch depot of your own.

OK boss, whatever you say, said Wufu straightaway.

I used to think I might get to be Han Dabao's number two after I'd done trash collection for three or four years. But what a great plan this was! The motherfucker might be stinking rich but I couldn't hold it against him. After all, I thought, if he really sets up a big company and leases us a branch depot, Wufu can bring his wife and child to Xi'an, and I can bring Yichun. Yes, I'll put a stop to her salon work, and johns like Wei Da can go to hell!

But Yichun was doing time. I mustn't think about her or it would really get me down again.

Me: Dabao, you've done us a pretty painting of a pancake but we're hungry now. Can you lend me some money? I'll pay it back after three months, with interest too.

Han Dabao: Lend you money? Brothers from my village don't borrow money off me! The other day, old Zhang – you know who I mean – wanted to borrow money. He wants to buy a shoe-repair machine and set up a stall. In principle, I don't lend money. I could give him some, I said, and I gave him 150 *yuan*. I told him I don't want it back. Why do you want to borrow money?

But I'd changed my mind. I told him a relative was in hospital in Xi'an and I'd been thinking of borrowing 5,000 *yuan*, but now Han Dabao was investing in a company and needed the money, I wouldn't ask him for any. I was lying, of course.

Han Dabao: Happy Liu, you never change, do you? But I've got to help you. How about I fix you up with another job – one where you can really rake it in?

I gave a laugh, but Wufu said: We can't even earn small amounts. How are we going to rake it in?

Han Dabao: Not everyone can do it. I wanted to send two men who'd only just arrived in Xi'an and they were too scared to go – said they wouldn't be able to find it. If you're up for it, the manager is here today, as it happens. I'll get him to talk to you.

I looked at Wufu.

Wufu: Shall we go?

Me: Just so long as I can earn 5,000 *yuan* as fast as possible.

Wufu: Then count me in. Wherever you go, I go too.

Han Dabao made a call on his mobile and soon a man appeared. He had a grease-proof paper bag in one hand, full of Xi'an soy-stewed beef, and wanted Han Dabao to down a few drinks with him. This was Manager Lu, Han Dabao told us. Could someone with such a toothy smile really be a manager? I wondered.

Wufu wasn't having anything to do with him and went off saying he needed a pee, so I talked to Lu, though I found it hard to make out what he was saying. Han Dabao said Lu was from Qishan County, a long way west of Xi'an. He was the ideal mix of northerner and southerner, he said, and his company was going from strength to strength. They had a construction site in Xianyang. The job was to dig trenches. Food and housing was provided and the pay was 15 *yuan* per metre of trench. If we wanted the job, we could get a lift there. A company truck would be passing through the day after tomorrow. So it was settled, and Lu roared at Han Dabao to have a drink. They wanted me to have one too, but I refused and went off to the toilet.

Wufu was sitting on the toilet, with a big smile on his face.

Me: What are you smiling at?

Wufu: I'm not smiling, I'm straining!

Wufu looked as gloomy as a pig most of the time, but now his face was wrinkled up into what looked like a smile.

Me: Do a proper smile then.

He did one, but it made him look even uglier.

Wufu: Is it happening?

Me: Yes, we're going to dig trenches, 15 *yuan* a metre.

Wufu: Five *yuan*?

Me: 15 *yuan*!

Wufu: What?

Me: 15 *yuan* for every metre we dig. I couldn't understand Lu's accent so Han Dabao repeated it to me twice.

Wufu: We could dig four or five metres a day!

He was so excited he jumped up to punch me with his fist, and his trousers fell around his feet.

Me: You have your crap, but mind you don't push your insides out.

I stood outside the toilet and wondered if this wasn't too good to be true. It was all just happening too quickly.

Wufu was out before long.

Me: Have you crapped?

Wufu: No, I've been bunged up for a few daysA man like Lu, do you think he'll diddle us?

He peered through a crack in Han Dabao's door and said: He's got a gold chain this thick hanging from his fucking wrist! It looks real.

And he sat down hard on the floor of the corridor.

This really might be our lucky break. It was time we had one. But I told Wufu: Calm down, don't get so excited. If Lu sees you, he might think he's done a bad deal and go back on it.

Of course, we never signed a contract. We didn't do things like that in those days. We didn't even think of it. It was only labouring work and wouldn't be for long. But I still kept my wits about me. We went in to say goodbye to Han Dabao and Manager Lu, who were washing down their soy-stewed beef with glasses of spirits, and I made a point of calling Han Dabao outside for a private word.

When this job's done, we'll be back to trash collection! I said.

Han Dabao nodded agreement.

Xianyang wasn't far from Xi'an but we'd never been there. My idea was to get Huang Ba and Xingfu to go with us. They could keep us company, they were our friends. And Xingfu wouldn't get tired if she worked with her husband. But Wufu was dead against it. You can't cut a radish into more than one piece, he said. You can do less if you like, and I'll do more. It's not like trash collection, no one will notice, this is just a construction site. I'll dig six metres a day on my own!

I believed Wufu. Or rather, I selfishly I decided not to ask Huang Ba and Xingfu. If you can dig six metres a day, you'll be digging a gold mine! I said.

Wufu started working out the sums. Dig six metres a day. 15 *yuan* a metre. 5 times 6, 30 1 times 6 makes 6. 60 add 30. Good heavens, that's 90! 90 *yuan* a day. How many metres of trench are there, 30? 50 metres? The longer the better, 10,000 metres!

Wufu stopped doing sums. He said to me: Lets keep cool about this.

Me: What do you mean, keep cool?

Wufu: Don't you tell anyone. Don't open the steamer if the bun's not done. If the steam escapes, it'll never cook.

I didn't need him to teach me that.

Back home, Wufu went into his room to get his clothes ready. Then he sat down in the corridor outside to do his shoes. The heel had come off one shoe and he nailed it back on again, lips pressed together and his face red with concentration. Huang Ba was sorting trash under the tree in the courtyard – wire and screws, Coca Cola and mineral water bottles, waste paper – all into different piles. Then there were aluminium window frames which he was smashing with a stone, clang – clang – clang.

Wufu: You're setting my teeth on edge. *Like a slaughtered pig's squeals, a scraper in a wok, a donkey's bray, a shovel on a rock.*

Huang Ba: So you can do doggerel?

Wufu: Of course. And you're deafening me with that clanging!

Huang Ba: These windows are aluminium.

Wufu: I bet aluminium ingots can earn you a lot!

Huang Ba: Oh yes. Too bad you didn't find any. Have you ever picked up copper pipes?

Wufu: You don't want to know how many!

But he didn't say any more. Huang Ba finished breaking up the window frames and got a brown paper bag out of the pile of waste paper. Wufu, he said, Look at this fat packet.

Wufu: That's not very fat.

Huang Ba: I'm a trash collector. This is a lot of money for me.

Wufu: What if you could earn big money?

Huang Ba: There's no 'What if' if you collect trash.

Wufu: What, not earn 90 a day, 900 in 10 days.... Three nines are 27.... 2,700 a month?!

He was getting carried away. I coughed and he shut up. Then he picked up a piece of iron pipe, used it to bang the nail into his shoe, and was starting again: Huang Ba... when he banged his finger instead, stuffed it in his mouth and sucked it. That time, he really did shut up.

Someone was shouting up the stairs: Happy Liu! I looked down and saw Old Fan, the landlord on the other side of the lane. He was wearing a big red sweater and holding a bunch of leeks in one arm. He came in through the gate and up the stairs. Old Fan usually spent his time standing at his gate holding a jar of tea. He never took any notice of us, just stared over the tops of our heads. What did he want now?

Wufu had his legs stretched right out, blocking the way.

Fan: Tuck your legs in, Wufu.

Wufu: That time I pushed the cart into the lane, you sat in the way and wouldn't tuck your legs in!

Fan: I don't remember anything like that.

Wufu: You may not remember, but I do!

Fan: Ai-yah! Wufu, what's made you so pig-headed all of a sudden?

I told Wufu to get out of the way and not to be such an asshole, but I meant Old Fan too.

Fan put a friendly arm round my shoulders and said he had something to ask me. Ask away, I said, you can do it here. But no, he had to pull me into the room – and

then asked if he could borrow money. He said his wife kept all their money under lock and key, she was a dragon. Now she'd gone home to her family, so could he borrow 200 *yuan* off me? I got it out and gave it to him straightaway. He wouldn't let me say anything more, just went straight off. As he went down the stairs, he ruffled Wufu's hair. Wufu jerked his head away.

As soon as Old Fan had gone, I jumped up in excitement and began to play a merry little tune on my flute about the people of the grasslands visiting the great Tiananmen Square...

Wufu: What's up?

Me: You know why Old Fan came?

Wufu: I don't want anything to do with him - unless he's got courtyard houses to rent out, of course.

Me: He wanted to borrow money off me.

Wufu: He wanted to borrow money off you?

Me: Yes.

Wufu: Did you lend it to him?

Me: Yes!

Wufu: Han Dabao wouldn't lend you any money. How come you lent money to Fan?!

Me: Why ever not? Even if I was down to my last 500, I'd still lend him 200.

Wufu: Because we're going to earn big money? Didn't you say we shouldn't get cocky?

Me: This isn't getting cocky. But do you know what it means when someone asks to borrow money off me?

Wufu: What?

Me: It means he thinks I'm rich!

Wufu gave me a doubtful look. I took my flute and knocked him on the head with it.

Wufu's hair had grown so it was all over his head now. It was coarse and curly. Oh well, stupid people are hairy...

Pages 399-410: In desperation, Happy and Wufu, along with Noisy Shi, have taken the work digging ditches. The working and living conditions on the construction site are appalling, far worse than the tolerably comfortable existence they have been used to as trash collectors in town, and Noisy Shi disappears.

Chapter 58

In the three weeks we spent working on the site, Lu the manager came by a few times. Every time he turned up, we did our best to get our tongues around that Qishan dialect of his and asked politely for our wages. But he just gave us bits and bobs - the first time, we each got five *yuan*, the second time it was 30, and the third time, he said he'd pay us everything we were owed all in one go at the end, but then he gave us another 60 each. That afternoon, I went to see him again and this time I wasn't messing. I told him we wanted our fares paid back to Xi'an and the pay for the three weeks we'd done. Even if he didn't pay us the 15 *yuan* per metre, we'd just make do with 20 *yuan* a day, which was what we'd earned as trash collectors. I wasn't taking anything less, and that was a threat. Then I waited. Lu said, in his slurred Qishan dialect, that there was no way he wanted to do us out of our wages, and we'd get it all when the ditch-digging project was completed. And he took something out of a cupboard, a plastic flagon containing a litre and a half of *baijiu* liquor.

He carried on in his terrible Chinese about how poor he was, but he wouldn't diddle even a prostitute, let alone us. Just get to the end of the work, he said, that will be good for me, and even better for you. 15 *yuan* a metre is better than 20 *yuan* a day. You're not going to turn up your nose at good money, are you? Have this *baijiu* - you just take it away with you and drink it.

I calmed down then, and went off carrying the flagon of liquor.

It was a still, moonlit night, and the birds twittered in the branches of the plane trees. Wufu and I sat drinking in the abandoned building where we'd been dossing.

Wufu: Lu's OK, isn't he?

Me: It's got nothing to do with whether Lu's OK or not. My luck's in, and everything's going well for us.

Wufu: I'm going to drink then!

Me: You can drink as much as you want!

It was such a long time since we'd had any *baijiu*. We downed three cups one after the other. It tasted so good and we were getting plastered. We were half-way through the *baijiu* already and Noisy Shi still wasn't back.

Me: Why's that beggar not back?

Wufu: So long as he's not dead, he'll be back. Why d'you want to invite someone else? I'm gonna drink it all before he gets here!

We started playing drinking forfeit games. We started with finger-counting but Wufu was hopeless at sums, so I beat him every time.

Wufu: I'll never beat you. Lets play Tiger Sticks.

But he was still losing more than he won and he got so drunk, his eyes were like

two slits and he could hardly open them. Then we heard footsteps outside.

Wufu quickly stuffed the flagon under the quilt, and said: The beggar's back! But the footsteps never came upstairs, and stomped away into the distance.

Wufu: The fucker's not come back, he's gone and died somewhere.

We got the flagon out again, and downed another cup each.

Wufu: Do you think the beggar's really gone and died somewhere?

Me: He's been sleeping rough for years! Why would he go and die now? He's got nine lives, that man!

Wufu: Tell me the beggar hasn't really ended up dead somewhere!

Me: Somewhere ... hasn't died ... that beggar...

Wufu's face suddenly crumpled. It made him look just like a pig.

Me: What an ugly face!

But he started to cry.

Me: You're pissed.

Wufu: No, I'm not... Am I going to end up dead on the building site? What would happen to me then?

Me: Noisy's not bothered about things like that.

Wufu: Noisy hasn't got a wife and kids. I have, and I'm bothered.

That annoyed me – after all, I didn't have a wife and kids either.

Me: Nothing you can do if you're dead.

Wufu: Yes, there is. You got to look after me!

Me: You mean I look after you when you're alive and I've got to carry on after you're dead?!

Wufu: I've got to be buried back home in Qingfeng. That's where my spirit belongs, nowhere else.

Me: You're just pissed.

Wufu: I'm not!

He downed another cup and said: You brought me here, you get me home. Otherwise, how will my spirit get home? You got to take care of it!

Me: OK, OK. If you die, I'll get you home, alright?

Wufu gave a great shout of laughter. Then he went on laughing and laughing like a maniac.

Me: You're pissed out of your skull.

But Wufu's guffaws started me off and I was laughing too.

Wufu: Have some more!

Me: Drink! Drink!

And we toasted each other with another cup of *baijiu*.

Wufu: Hey! There's two of you, two characters in your name, two of you!

He waved his finger at me, only he was pointing somewhere past my ear. Now I could see all these Wufus floating around the room. It was just like when Monkey cloned monkeys out of monkey hairs, all with exactly the same noses, eyes and mouths. Then Huangba, Xinghu and Noisy Shi were there too.

Me: You're Wufu and Huangba and Xinghu and Noisy, all at the same time!

Wufu: I'm you! Huangba and Xinghu and Noisy are all you!

Me: All me! All Happy Liu!

And we kept on like this, cracking up with laughter. Then suddenly Wufu, all the Wufus, flopped down in a heap, and Huangba, Xinghu and Noisy Shi went down too.

You're just having me on! I shouted. Having me on!

Then I collapsed like a sack of potatoes too.

The wind got up and blew out the newspaper pasted over the windows, and made the doors creak and groan on their hinges, but we were too out of it to notice. Then suddenly something heavy hit me on the back. I thought it was Yichun, standing there and kicking me with her high-heeled shoe.

You shouldn't be sleeping on the floor on a cold day like this, she said.

There was another kick on my arse. I didn't mind the pain, but there was dirt on her shoe and I wiped it off.

How did you get here, Yichun? I said. I never told you I was coming to Xianyang. I was trying to earn the money to get you out of prison. However did you find me?

Yichun's face turned coarse and broad, and with a start I realised it was the site foreman.

Me: You're not Yichun?

Foreman: You two still crashed out?!

Me: Eh?? What time is it?

Foreman: Get your lunch and start work. If you want to sleep, go home and sleep.

I crawled to my feet. Wufu was fast asleep on his back, fully dressed, in one corner of the room. He was covered in dirt, his mouth was wide open and he looked terrible. I gave him a quick push, and he muttered without opening his eyes: Huang Ba, there's another one over there

The foreman gave him a kick and shouted at him to get up.

Wufu opened his eyes and said: The money, where's my money?

This time the foreman kicked Wufu so hard in the back that his shoe came off. He cursed and hopped across the room after it, shouting: If you don't get working on those ditches, the only money you'll have coming to you will be funeral money!

That pissed me off. Me: Who do you think you're talking to? We've come to do a job of work, we're not your slaves!

I'd seen slave-owners beating up their slaves in films, and now I kicked his shoe further away. He was a cowardly little squirt when it came to it, our swaggering foreman, and he shut up.

Me: Come on Wufu. Do your trousers up and let's get to work.

Foreman: What about the other one?

Me: He stopped working here ages ago!

Foreman: Stopped working here? He's not getting any money then!

Me: He doesn't like money!

I wondered where Noisy Shi was.

Wufu put on all the clothes he'd brought with him, and then pulled some filthy cotton waste out of Noisy's tatty old quilt and stuffed it in his shoes to keep his feet warm. We picked up the pick, shovel, crowbar and club hammer and started down the stairs, purposely waiting for the foreman to leave first.

When we were outside, Wufu told me he'd been dreaming that he and Huang Ba were pulling their hand carts when they saw the police chasing a thief. The thief suddenly threw a handful of bank notes at the passers-by. The notes floated down on them like snowflakes, and everyone scrambled for their share. The police couldn't get through the crowd. Wufu, like an idiot, held a note up to the light to see if it was a forgery, and when he went to get more there were none left. Chairman Mao, where are you? he shouted. (Chinese notes had the head of Mao on them.) Just then, he saw a note floating away over the pavement barrier like a butterfly. He yelled to Huang Ba to get it, and the pair of them went to jump over the barrier. The crotch of his trousers caught on the wire, and he gave his balls such a bang that the pain made him sit down on the fence...

We had just gone down the front steps of the building when Wufu's left leg gave way and he collapsed against the wall.

Me: You still asleep?

Wufu: My leg, what's up with my leg!

Me: Isn't it still stuck to your body?

I pulled him up, but as soon as I let go, he went down again with a thump.

Wufu: This isn't my leg. I can't make it work.

Me: It's pins and needles from being asleep. I'll rub it for you.

I rubbed his leg but there was no reaction. His face had gone a sickly yellow and he was pouring with sweat.

Me: Talk nicely to your leg.

This was what I always did when I was in bed or resting and had nothing else to do. I often used to talk nicely to bits of my body, my eyes, nose, throat, arms and legs, and all my innards. I'd spent my life doing hard physical work on a half-empty stomach,

and my body parts still worked well for me, so I made a point of thanking them. I only had one kidney left, and that one had to do the work of two. It kept me nice and healthy, and that was why I was always polite to my kidney.

I leaned against the plane tree. Its leaves had coloured up since yesterday. The reds were blood-red and vermilion, the yellows were copper yellow and Buddhist yellow. There were dark greens and light greens, and blues – sea blue and a washed-out home-spun blue. The sun shone brilliantly and the leaves spiralled gently down to the ground.

Me: Talk nicely to your leg.

Wufu sat on the ground and said: Please move, leg. Please don't scare me. I'm going to die if you don't start moving!

Me, mockingly: Wufu, where did you learn to be so argumentative?

Wufu carried on talking nicely to his leg. After he'd had three goes at this, he made a huge effort and tried to lift it. He only got it four inches off the ground, and the effort made beads of sweat stand out on his head. I went to his side. Something was wrong.

Me: Is it really still not working?

Wufu: Happy, I'm really scared, my head aches.

Then he slumped back onto the ground. Things looked bad.

Chapter 59

I shouted for the foreman, but he had disappeared. I thought of carrying Wufu to the hospital on my back, but I didn't know where the hospital was, so I left him and ran into the village. At the village shop, I dialled for an ambulance, then I ran back to the abandoned building. Wufu was lying face down, and his face was the colour of the dust.

The hospital sent an ambulance straightaway and they got Wufu into it. Wufu could hardly hold his head up. I held him and said: Wufu, hang on. It'll be alright once you get to the hospital. Wufu's pupils suddenly rolled out of sight. That scared the hell out of me. I shouted his name and they reappeared. He looked at me and asked: Why am I going to the hospital? How can I afford it?

Me: Don't worry about that. You've got something wrong with you, we got to get you there quickly.

Wufu: Am I going to snuff it?

His pupils rolled into the corners of his eyes and disappeared again. I shouted his name again, but he didn't answer this time. Tears oozed down his cheeks, looking like beads of sweat.

He wasn't the only one to cry. I cried too on the way to the hospital. What on earth was wrong with this big, strong man? Wufu, who could eat and drink us all under the table, who could work harder than anyone. There hadn't been any warning that he was going to get so ill. It couldn't have been because the foreman kicked him. Was it the drink? But he'd sobered up by the time he got up. God, don't let anything be wrong with Wufu!

Faster, I begged the ambulance driver. Please drive faster. Once we got to the hospital, I was sure he'd be alright. That was always what happened to me. Every time I got ill and went and went to the hospital, I queued so long in the waiting room that I never got to see the doctor. My head or my stomach had stopped hurting by the time it was my turn. Illnesses don't like doctors.

But when we arrived, they diagnosed a cerebral haemorrhage. The young woman doctor asked: Whose patient is this? Mine, I said. I have to issue a terminal illness certificate, she said. I was so shocked I thought my legs were going to give way. As she was filling in the form, I did something I'd never done before. I knelt down in front of her and begged her to operate. She looked at me, and said she would go and consult a colleague. Clean him up! she said. Wufu had crapped and pissed himself on the way in the ambulance, and the crotch of his trousers was full of it. He stank to high heaven. I wiped him clean, and soaked a towel so I could wash him. A senior doctor came in, examined him and said: The cerebral hernia has already formed. I had no idea what a cerebral hernia was, but I said: Please don't let him die! Anyone else, but not Wufu! The senior doctor said: There's not much point in operating, but we can give maintenance treatment. And she told me to hurry up and pay the fees and get him admitted.

Rich people could afford maintenance treatment, but we had no money. The fees were 30 *yuan* per hour, and with other treatment, and drugs, that made 60 *yuan* an hour. The deposit on admission was 20,000 *yuan*. I found out all this from the doctor, but where were we going to get so much money from? Wufu, you never were any good at making money, how did you manage to get so ill?

The foreman had come with us to the hospital – he'd disappeared off to some far-off pit to do a crap, but finally turned up when I came back from calling the ambulance. Now he kept asking me stupidly: Did Wufu normally have high blood pressure? Is there a history of heart disease in his family? I knew he was trying to wriggle out of any responsibility. I said: You've got to go and see the boss, Wufu could die. He's got to do something about it! I didn't want to let him off the hook. The foreman gave me a packet of fags, and patted Wufu on the head. Don't go scaring me like that! he said, and went off to ask the boss what to do. He came back with 800 *yuan*, made me count it out note by note, and sign a chit for it. Then he said he was going to the toilet, and

vanished.

Luckily, Noisy Shi was with us too. It was pure luck that he came back when he did – he'd been gone for three days. Later he told me that he'd decided not to come back at all, but to go straight back to Xi'an. He was on his way to the bus station, and was walking down an alley when he heard someone shout: Stop that thief! Stop that thief! Someone was cycling towards him, with someone else running after the bike. I'm a clever sod, he said. I crouched down by a tree at the end of the alley, and when the cyclist came past, I grabbed a bundle of cotton rags and threw it. It caught in the wheel, the bicycle fell over and the briefcase hanging from the handlebars flew off. I scrambled after it and put my foot on it. The thief said: It's your lucky day, isn't it?! And he jumped on his bike and was off. I don't want your luck! I shouted, and spat. I kept my foot on the case till the runner caught up with me. You wouldn't believe the amount of money stuffed into that briefcase! The man thanked me, peeled off two 100-*yuan* notes and gave them to me. But I said that was stingy. He had all that money and he was only giving me 200. What did he take me for, a beggar? The man said sorry, and gave me another 100. I told him I *was* a beggar, but right now I was a hero doing a good deed! The man asked me: Are you really a beggar? And I swear that's the first time ever someone's been surprised at me being a beggar! He was OK, he said he'd take me to dinner and asked me what I'd like to eat. He told me that abalone and shark's fin soup was good at the moment, and said we should have some of that.

So they did. While he was eating, Noisy thought of Wufu and me – this was his chance to show off. So when he'd eaten some, he put a third in a plastic bag and took it away with him. When he got to the abandoned building, he saw the empty flagon of *baijiu* and started shouting and swearing that we hadn't left him any. The foreman was putting the tools away and heard him, so the two of them came to the hospital together.

Wufu started to foam at the mouth, and kept groaning. He was slipping in and out of consciousness. We couldn't pay 20,000 *yuan* for his hospital treatment, that was for sure. I talked it over with Noisy – there was no one else to talk to. We'd forget the maintenance care.

Noisy: But without the maintenance care, Wufu will die.

Me: The maintenance care will only keep him alive for a few more days.

Noisy: But at least they'll be looking after him, and then he'll die in hospital, and we can scarper.

Me: Scarper?

Noisy: Well when someone dies, they give you the corpse, don't they?

Me: And I've got to take his corpse home!

I remembered the conversation Wufu and I had had when we were drinking the night before. That was just what he'd asked, wasn't it? I knew it was the right thing to do. I put the 800 *yuan* away in my pocket. Then Noisy shouted Wufu's name, so loudly that Wufu actually opened his eyes.

Noisy: Wufu, Wufu, you fucking didn't tell me you were having a drinking session!

Me: What are you talking about?! How could we tell you when you weren't there?

Noisy: You never gave me a thought – but I thought of you. And he said to Wufu: Have you ever had shark's fin soup?

Wufu was a bit embarrassed about not having left any *baijiu* for Noisy, you could see from his eyes. What? What's that? he asked.

Noisy: Your life's not worth living if you've never had abalone and shark's fin soup! I bought some for you. Eat it up, it's a delicacy city folk eat!

Noisy undid the plastic bag from his trouser belt but there were no bowls, and no chopsticks either. I went out to look for some but I couldn't find any anywhere. There was a washroom down the corridor, with a bamboo broom in it. I tore off two strips of bamboo, but then I thought, they're dirty, you can't eat abalone and shark's fin soup with bits of bamboo from an old broom! I went outside and pulled a couple of twigs from the tree in the compound.

Noisy picked some bits of shark's fin out of the bag with them.

Want some, Happy?

I shook my head. I've had it before, I said, though that was a lie. Wufu opened his mouth and took some, but then he spat it out: It's noodles. You think I've never eaten noodles?

Noisy: You idiot! Those aren't noodles! They cost 400 *yuan* a bowl!

A piece of shark's fin had stuck at the corner of Wufu's mouth and he put out his tongue and hooked it back in again. He chewed and chewed it. He chewed again, and then he stopped chewing.

Noisy said: Nice, eh? Have some more, go on! Now you're the first person from your village to eat shark's fin! Happy, you haven't had any!

I ignored Noisy. Wufu lay still, and his pupils had disappeared again. I waved my hand in front of his eyes, but there was no reaction. I held my hand over his nostrils but no breath came out.

Wufu was dead.

People always say that you die with a rattle and a gasp, or a jerk of the legs, but Wufu died chewing away at his food. No last gasp or jerks. There was still a bit of shark's fin at the corner of his mouth. I went to wipe it off, and tugged a clump of shark's fin out of his mouth.

Panic.

Wufu's dead, Noisy, I said. Wufu's dead!

Noisy felt Wufu's head, then his chest, then down to his feet. He's dead! he said.

We never expected Wufu to die so quickly. I put my arms around him and cried. Just two sobs and I stopped. I wouldn't let Noisy cry either. We couldn't cry or the hospital staff would find out Wufu was dead and would take him to the mortuary. Once he was in there, he'd have to be cremated. I'd promised Wufu to take him back to Qingfeng when he died, so he could be buried next to his parents' grave. Then his wife and sons could do the memorial ceremonies, what we used to call 'the Sevens' – once a week for seven weeks. And every Winter Solstice and Qingming Festival after that, there would be somewhere to remember him and burn fake funeral money for him. So I had to get him home!

I said to Noisy: You can't cry. We've got to get out of the hospital quick.