

McHugh

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The Famine

Interactive Prose by

Raymond Liao

1.

"I've already told you, I cannot turn in crops any more. If you damn guys can find any intact wheat or maize in my fields, go ahead and take away!" LONG'RE shouts to three county officials whose bulks stand like walls in front of him. He pretends to be arrogant and indifferent, but his hands behind his back are trembling.

He did not lie. It is already in late autumn right now. However, Long's one hundred and forty Mu (Chinese unit of area) of fields are dying with crannied soil. Even after eight months of drought, those crops (which only left straws) still have a chance to survive, if not suffered from the plague of locusts. Gosh, you did not see the spectacle of these insects from hell sweeping tenant peasants' hope. Of course, Long'er has a road to retreat. His family has deposit.

"Long're, this is the ultimatum. We don't care if you turn in crops or antiques. Do you know our head of county is extremely displeased of you? You'd better know if he informs Commander Tang of Army of Kuomintang, to report you disobey the 'Tax-in-Kind' policy, no one can save you."

After sending the officials, Long'er immediately rushes into the huge dwelling. Consulting with his wife. Without doubt, they must leave. Almost Everyone is escaping from this dead province. Long'er paces nervously.

"ZHUANG should leave with us." The lady knows what he is considering. "He and his wife served us for more than seven years. You need to keep old relationship in mind."

"That means another two-hundred Ying Yuan. Do you know how expensive the train ticket is? How many times did I tell you DO NOT meddle in others' affairs?" Long'er always complains about his woman, the woman who knows him more than himself does.

So still, Long're goes to see Zhuang, his loyal servant. This tall man with ebony skin, although lucky enough and not emaciated as other peasants, is suffering both physically and

emotionally. His wife just died, not because of the hunger, but the cholera epidemic.

"Stop crying on the coffin. We're going to leave." Long're cannot stand a man crying.

"Leave? How?" This man in his thirtieth is too inconsolable to even glance at Long're.

"By train! I've already requested a friend in the city to get some tickets." Long're talks proudly. He expects the servant's tons of gratitude. At this period, train ticket equals life. Of course, you can escape on your feet. Most of the refugees do that, then become pye-dogs' food, or other refugees' food.

"I must take my wife with me..." Zhuang doesn't show any gratitude at all.

"Wha...what? Take with you? Are you crazy? Ha, are you gonna take the body?" Long'er seems irritated. Does Zhuang know he need to respect his kindness?

"I will carry the coffin."

"Wh... Who will carry it with you? Do you think I will?" Long'er believes this desperate guy is going mad.

"I will carry the coffin on my back." Zhuang seems to be sober. "If I leave her, she won't keep a whole body. Beasts eat."

"...Okay. I know you worked as a porter on Qinling Mountains. You had strength. But, buddy, you are weak now. Because of us, you haven't starved. I, and my wife, won't agree with you to carry it. You will slow us down. And most importantly, where will you put it on the train?"

"I will carry the coffin on my back."

Long'er does not want to waste time on this idiot. He walks away.

"Then you walk all by yourself there. I doubt you will waste my two-hundred Yin Yuan."

2.

Zhuang is walking on a barren trail at noon, with the coffin on his back fastened through hemp rope. He walked for six days and ran out of the little amount of solid food on the first two. He was so hungry and grabbed weeds and leaves to allay the hunger.

Now the sign of oedema appears on Zhuang's face, with the nostril and corners of eyes turning black. He tries hard to keep walking, or more precisely, staggering. The coffin on the back becomes heavier and heavier.

Zhuang kneel on the ground and faint.

Around eight hours later, Zhuang feebly opens his eyes, still lying on the ground. He sees an emaciated but delicate and pretty woman is sitting near him, holding a shabby bowl of blue and white porcelain aslant on her right hand and pouring water gradually into his mouth. Her left arm is carrying a one-or-two-year-old girl. So pitiful is the baby that she has to suffer from the disaster at such a young age. Although with a lean and hungry look, she is quiet and staring the man with the big eyes. A scrawny greyhound squatting at her left side.

"Oh you are awake!" The woman smiles.

"What's wrong with me...I need to go to the train station..." Zhuang tries to support the body by the arms and stand up. He fails.

"Hold on...You seem to have poisoning. You need to rest. What did you eat?" The lady frowns and asks.

"Some weeds and leaves... My master only offered me a little food..." Zhuang answered.

"Your master? Are you abandoned by your master? You're still lucky and can eat real food. You know we would rather eat scraps of dried firewood than the weed." The woman feels sad. "Oh you can call me Zhen, this is my daughter, Fengxia. She is so cute, isn't she?"

The baby seems to understand what her mother told. She reached her arm out to touch Zhuang's forehead. The palm is much less fleshy as it should be. But Zhuang can feel its warmth.

"And you should be grateful to our Zhaocai!" She indicates the greyhound. "It is he who found you lying here."

Zhuang manages to smile shallowly to Zhen. But the only thing he wants to do is move ahead to the train station.

"Why are you carrying a coffin?" Zhen seems not to be scared at all. Dead bodies are so common to see in this period.

"Oh, she is my wife..." Zhuang lowers his head and grabs the forehead by hand forcefully.

The woman does not keep asking. She looks ruefully at Zhuang. Another man's sound comes behind her.

"Ha, Carrying a dead body? You must wanna sell it to the 'market'."

Zhuang raises his head. He notices a man who looks shrewd leans his back against a dead tree, crossing two arms. He seems to be healthier than the woman, or generally, than any other refugees.

"Husband, stop saying that!" Zhen turns the head and says to the man. "You heard that his wife is in it!" Zhuang looks at the guy angrily and disgustedly. Zhen turns her head back and apologizes: "Sorry. He is my husband FUGUI. Don't argue with him. He usually tends to be a kind person...You know these days people turn to be harsh."

Fugui stares at Zhuang for a while. He thinks the man is silly, but also appreciates his strength. God, how many people left are there in this hell who keep the strength to carry a coffin now? He finally says:

"Common on. Buddy, you need to move forward. Do not let any burden encumber you." He pauses, then continues to talk: "Your wife definitely is not willing to be your burden."

Zhuang is lost in thought. He looks rather hopeless. How can he not understand the situation! He just does not want to accept his wife's death.

Fugui looks at Zhuang interestedly. He enjoys the desperate expression on Zhuang's face. "We're moving towards the train

station too. **Bury the coffin and we'll help you get there.**
Okay?

Zhen says sympathetically: "He is right. We're so sorry for your wife's death. But you need to be rational these days."

2a. (Escape 3. Move directly to 4b.)

Zhuang stares at Zhen for a while, then at Fugui feebly for a moment. He says: "No."

He tries to support the body for standing up by elbows. But now he even does not have the strength to lift the waist. He lies on his stomach again.

Zhen quickly unties the hemp rope, separating Zhuang and the coffin, then lifts Zhuang up. She says to her husband Fugui: "He is so weak right now. Can we stay here this night and take care of this poor man?"

Fugui is really disappointed to the idiot in front of him. He rolls his eyes, then says to his wife: "Don't you forget yourself caught rickets?"

Fugui turns around to leave. "You guys stay here for resting. I go first."

"We're pretty near the train station. I will wait there for you."

2b. (Move to 3.)

Zhuang stares at Zhen for a while, then at Fugui feebly for a moment. He lowers his head. That is the sign of acknowledging his powerless and helpless. He starts to untie the hemp rope, separating himself and the coffin.

Fugui turns to be a little excited. He says: "A wise man who can recognize the situation."

Zhen is happy at Zhuang's returning to reason, too. "Great! We escape to the west together! We'll find a new home!" Even the baby in her arm wiggles limbs excitedly. She tries to laugh, but no sound come out. Zhuang finally recognizes that the baby is mute.

Zhen says to Fugui: "Can we rest here for one night to take care of him? He is too weak to walk right now."

Fugui frowns slightly. He thinks for a while, then says: "Okay."

3.

(No scene here if players choose 2a.)

At midnight, Zhuang and Fugui's family set up a fire and sleep around it. Zhuang feels painful because of the stomachache. But he is too tired. He faded slowly into sleep.

Suddenly, Zhuang feels someone is shaking his body. He can barely open the eyes.

"Hey buddy, come with me, we need talk." It is Fugui.

Zhuang can stand by himself right now, even though feeling dizzy and hard to keep balance. He staggers and follows Fugui to a nearby groves.

Fugui looks at Zhuang interestedly. Both guys' face turn to be more pale and waxy under the moonlight.

"Hey buddy. Leave with me. We can take care of each other." Fugui whispers.

Zhuang looks confused.

Fugui looks at the woman and baby lying asleep several meters away. He keeps talking: "I told you we should get rid of burdens."

3a. (Move to 4a.)

Zhuang does not believe what he heard. He frowns and asks angrily: "What? You beast wanna..." He raises his fist.

Fugui responds fast to Zhuang's reaction. He instantly wears a shallow smiling mask: "Ha-ha. Great man. I know you're keeping your morality. You know there're too many beasts who lose their bottom lines these days."

Fugui pats Zhuang's shoulder. "Let's sleep. We need to hurry on with our journey tomorrow."

At the morning, Fugui already disappeared.

Zhen seems not to be surprised. "That's okay. He is always so hurried." She smiles and looks at Zhaocai, the dog. "We'll keep up with him."

Zhuang talks to Zhen anxiously: "He seems to wanna abandon you. He had a talk with me when you were sleeping last..."

"No." Zhen interrupts him. Her eyes turn red. She pauses for a moment, says calmly: "He won't. He needs a woman."

3b. (Move to 4c.)

Zhuang is confounded for a while, then understand what this man is talking about. He turns to be a little emotional and says:

"Are you crazy? How can you abandon your wife and baby? They will die!"

Fugui instantly covers Zhuang's mouth. He glances at Zhen and the dog, then says: "Calm down buddy."

Fugui wears a depressed and disgusted expression. "You're right! I should not abandon my wife. But you know what? The baby is not mine..."

Zhuang appears to be shocked, then looks skeptical. "What do you mean? She's not your baby?"

"No. But I do not wanna explain. Buddy, I believe you loved your wife so much and even don't wanna leave her bo...leave her after she passed away."

Fugui stares at Zhuang, who is not sure if he is lying right now.

Fugui appears to be angry and says: "Alright! You're never gonna understand me. You had a wife that never cheated on you!"

Zhuang trembled a little. He knows how depressed did a Long'er 's tenant look like when he found out his woman was working at a brothel in Luoyang.

Fugui starts to move to the bonfire. He says: "I'm gonna leave right now. I heard all the refugees are desperate for a space on the top of trains. I have friends who will leave me a vacancy."

Zhuang catch him by his garment and says: "Wait! comrade, I wanna go with you."

4.

It seems that all the refugees are gathering at the train station. Hundreds and thousands of scrawny and stink bodies jostle each other, forming waves crashing on the train. Zhuang does not know if Long'er and his family get any seat inside the train, but obviously, his own ticket is totally useless. The top of the train is full of refugees who cannot move their limbs and adjust their positions. Only flexible men can reach there. The carriages are too high.

Even though uncomfortable and painful, everyone needs to stand and keep the position carefully. They may be jostled down from the top at any moment.

Will I feel regretful if I keep carrying the coffin here? Zhuang does not know.

4a

Thanks to the greyhound, Zhuang and Zhen with the baby, Fengxia find Fugui. He manages to get a position on the top of train. There is no other vacancy there.

Fugui is gloating at Zhuang. The expression is talking like "That's it! The consequence of failing to get rid of burdens!" then he looks at Zhen with complex expression. Fugui says to them: "Sorry. There is no more space for you. You have to linger around here for another week."

Zhen cries. She pries: "I know you treat we mother and daughter as burdens for you. But you should at least take your baby!"

Zhuang finally confirms that Fugui was lying. Fugui notices Zhuang's expression but does not react much. He says to Zhen: "She is not my child."

"I know you want a boy! But you cannot deny she is your daughter!" Zhen cries even harder. "She is so pitiful! But she still has a chance to recover! She can talk finally!"

Fugui looks around. He knows the refugees near him. They both nod their heads. He says: "Alright! Alright! Let the Herculean man toss our baby up here. I will catch her."

Zhen just like sees the hope. She prays to Zhuang: "Please! Help Fengxia!"

Zhuang takes the baby from her. He stares at the cute baby. The mute angle is smiling towards him. Suddenly, something reminds him.

"I told you we should get rid of burdens."

He says to Zhen: "Sorry. I cannot do this. And I strongly suggest you to keep her with you."

Zhen cannot believe this man. She shouts out: "This is the only way she can survive! If she follows me, we'll starve together! Please, I saved your life!"

Zhuang glances at Fugui meaningfully, then responds: "If I do that this girl won't live through today." He takes the baby and turns around, tending to leave.

Zhen shouts out: "Wait! Where are you gonna take Fengxia!"

4b.

Almost the same with **4a. However:**

Rather than reject tossing the baby towards Fugui, Zhuang helps the woman, Zhen, to do that.

No one reach out the arms to catch the baby.

Then

She falls and bangs against the solid ground.

4c.

Almost the same with **4a. However:**

Both Fugui and Zhuang successfully get a position on the top of the train.

Zhen asks another man to help her toss the baby.

Fugui let Zhuang to catch the baby. But he also winks at men (he is familiar with these guys and they know what he is thinking. Fugui complained a lot about his wife and daughter. More importantly, no one wanna a baby to risk their chance to survive.).

Someone bumps against Zhuang, making him fail to catch the baby.

She falls and bangs against the solid ground.

(To be continued.)

1

2 a

Zhuang says he won't give up carrying the coffin

2 b

Zhuang acknowledges he is not able to keep carrying the coffin

3 a

Zhuang gets angry at Fugui's intention to abandon Zhen and Fengxia

3 b

Zhuang accepts Fugui's intention to abandon Zhen and Fengxia

4 b

Zhuang tosses the baby and indirectly kills her

4 a

Zhuang saves the baby

4 c

Zhuang is framed for killing the baby unintentionally