

“Kindergarten”

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The night before his first day of kindergarten, Wei Jia refused to talk about it. He was five years old, and he had spent the summer playing in Sancha, wearing nothing but a dirty tank top and a pair of underpants. Sancha is a small village in the mountains north of Beijing, and, along with a Chinese-American friend named Mimi Kuo, I rent a weekend house there from Wei Jia’s relatives. The village is home to around a hundred and fifty peasants, who make their living primarily from orchards. That Sunday evening, while we were eating dinner, I asked Wei Jia if he was excited about going to school the next day. He ignored the question.

Earlier in the day, Mimi and I had made the two-hour drive from Beijing. It was the first week of September, and the walnuts had come into season; peasants carried long sticks that they used to knock the nuts onto the ground. Along the road we saw dozens of men, some on bicycles, their sticks poised as if for a joust. We also passed a topless elderly woman. Her silver hair was well groomed, and she walked at a determined pace. I pulled over to the side of the road.

“Leave me alone!” the woman shouted when Mimi stepped out of the car. “There’s nothing wrong!” Tears shined on her cheeks; she clutched her shirt in one hand. When the woman stormed past, we could see fresh bruises across her back.

We drove a bit farther and tried again. She began screaming the moment Mimi opened the door. “I’m not going back there!” the woman shouted. “I’m not going back!” She veered out into the road, causing an oncoming car to slow down. Perhaps in the next village there would be somebody who knew her and would help. It was only two miles; surely she would make it that far. This kind of thing happens in the countryside, and sometimes an outsider’s attempt to help only does more harm. “Mei banfa,” the Chinese say—nothing can be done.

At seven o’clock the following morning, we left for school. Wei Jia wore khaki trousers and a red T-shirt. I had given him a new Mickey Mouse backpack, and his mother had put a pencil box in one of the pockets. Inside the box was a single pencil. The pencil was newly sharpened; the

trousers still had a crease. It was the first time I had ever seen Wei Jia in clean clothes.

I'd known the boy's family since 2001, when Mimi and I began spending time in Sancha. I went to the village because it was quiet—there were no restaurants, no shops, no bus service. When I sat at my desk to write, I usually heard only the sounds of rural life: the bray of a mule, the wind in the walnut trees. Three or four times a week, a flatbed truck rumbled up the hill to sell basic groceries. Twice a day, in the morning and just before sunset, the government propaganda speakers on the telephone poles screeched to life. Village announcements, national news, Communist Party slogans—all of it echoed off the valley's high rock walls. But rarely in Sancha did I hear the sound of children playing. The local elementary school closed years ago, because young families tended to move away; all across China, peasants have been leaving rural areas for the economic opportunity of the cities. The few families that remained in Sancha were small, because of the government's planned-birth policies, and the children attended schools in the more heavily populated villages down in the valley, ten miles away, where they either boarded or lived with relatives.

That year, Wei Jia was the only kindergartner from Sancha. He was going to live with his grandparents in Xingying, a village with an elementary school. On the morning of his first day, Mimi drove the car and the boy sat on my lap, in the front seat. Wei Ziqi, his father, and Cao Chunmei, his mother, rode in the back. Between them sat Wei Ziqi's older brother—the Idiot.

Once, I asked Cao Chunmei what the Idiot's real name was, but she didn't know. Everybody simply called him the shazi, which means "idiot." He was in his forties. Most villages in China seem to have a shazi or two from that generation, because in the past the peasant diet often lacked iodine. A pregnant woman who does not consume enough iodine runs the risk of bearing a mentally handicapped child. Nowadays, the widespread distribution of iodized salt has dramatically reduced such birth defects in rural China.

Generally, the Idiot seemed as happy as anybody in Sancha. He ate well, and he spent his days on the Weis' front porch, high on the mountain. From the porch one could see for miles: the tile-roofed village, the

winding road, the ruined traces of the Great Wall atop the mountain peaks. These were the boundaries of the Idiot's world. He couldn't do much work in the fields, and he couldn't talk. Whenever he wanted to say something, he contorted his face with such passion that it seemed as if the power of speech had fled precisely at that moment and he was just beginning to grapple with its loss. But in fact he had never spoken. The villagers ignored his attempts to communicate.

This was the first time I had seen the Idiot leave Sancha, and I asked Wei Ziqi why he was coming with us. "We have a little problem to take care of at the government office," he said.

Wei Jia leaned forward with both hands on the dashboard as we drove out of the village. He rarely got to ride in an automobile, and the experience for him was anything but passive. At every turn, I felt him edging toward the windshield, trying to see what was around the bend. He lurched forward whenever we reached the crest of a hill. I have never seen a child's car seat in China, and I was keenly aware of the fact that I should put Wei Jia in the back; but it would have broken his heart. And so I held him tightly.

We came down from the mountains, past the freshly cut stalks of wheat and corn in the valley. The men with sticks were going at the walnuts; husks crunched beneath our tires. Children walked along the road. "See, they have backpacks, too," Cao Chunmei said. "They're going to school just like you." Wei Jia's arms were stiff against the dash.

As we approached Bohai Township, Wei Ziqi asked Mimi to stop at the government office. Then he explained why the Idiot had come along. "The government is supposed to pay a monthly fee to help us take care of him," he said. "That's the law. I've asked the Party Secretary in Sancha about it, but she hasn't helped. So the only thing to do is to come here ourselves. I'll ask them to pay the fee now, and if they don't, then I'll leave the Idiot until they're willing to pay it. It's their responsibility."

"You're going to leave him at the government office?" Mimi asked. "Yes," Wei Ziqi said. "It's the only way to get their attention." Mimi asked how much the monthly fee should be.

“Fifty yuan at the very least,” Wei Ziqi said. It was the equivalent of about six dollars.

We parked outside the government compound. In front, there was a sculpture consisting of a shiny steel ball and an enormous twisted rod. Many of the local townships had recently erected sculptures in a similar style, accompanied by slogans intended to inspire images of modernity and prosperity. The Bohai Township slogan was “The Star of the Century.” The sculpture was hideous. Wei Ziqi walked through the gate, followed by his brother. The Idiot’s face had been blank all morning.

Wei Jia kept his hands on the dash. Five minutes later, his father returned. He was alone. We kept driving.

Wei Jia was the smallest five-year-old I have ever known. His mother often worried about his health; he was a finicky eater, and he weighed only thirty pounds. Four-year-olds towered over him; a child of three was often nearly as big. Wei Jia’s mind was sharp, but he had a speech impediment, and even his parents had difficulty understanding him. Yet he had a wiry strength, and his sense of balance was remarkable.

For the last year, he had been allowed to roam free in the village, and he moved easily along the mountain paths above his home. It was impossible to wear him out. He almost never cried. His capacity for roughhousing was infinite: it was as if the toughness and dexterity of a nine-year-old had been squeezed into a three-year-old’s body. Over time, he came to call me Mogui Shushu (Uncle Monster), a play on the traditional term of respect used by Chinese children for adults. I was the first foreigner he had ever met.

Wei Jia’s face was a perfect oval. His hair was cropped short, and his eyes glowed with mischief. But his parents could set him straight at a moment’s notice. They avoided praising him—like traditional Chinese parents, they had a deep fear of flattery. Partly it was modesty, but there was also the superstition that pride would attract misfortune. Occasionally, if I wanted to annoy Mimi with my Western ways, I would relentlessly praise the boy to Cao Chunmei: “Wei Jia is so good-looking.”

“He’s ugly,” his mother would say immediately.

“He’s so smart.”

“He’s stupid. Not a bit smart.”

“What a nice child.”

“Cut it out,” Mimi said, in English.

“He’s a bad boy,” the mother said.

The only praise that I ever heard the parents give Wei Jia was a single adjective: laoshi. The dictionary defines it as “honest,” but the term is difficult to translate. It also means obedient, as well as having a certain sense of propriety that is characteristic of people in the countryside. “Wei Jia is laoshi,” his parents would say, and that was the closest they came to pride.

We parked by the back gate of the Xingying Elementary School. A teacher greeted us and led us inside. Wei Jia’s face was blank. He walked into the classroom, stopped dead, and announced, loudly, “This place is no good!”

His parents tried to grab him, but he squirmed free and ran out the door. He was crying now, rushing back through the gate to the car. “I’m going home!” he said. “I don’t want to be here!”

His mother followed him. The other children looked up and then lost interest. The classroom was dirty, and there was a hole in the ceiling. The blackboard was chipped and scarred. Twenty children sat at their desks; each of them played with a pile of Lego-like blocks. There were only three girls. Bohai isn’t strictly a one-child township—like many parts of China that are mountainous and less populated, this area allows peasants in some villages to have a second child if the first is a girl. But it’s not unusual in China for people to bribe doctors for ultrasound information, which is restricted by law. Locals told me that the majority of babies born in Xingying are boys.

Outside, Wei Jia stood in the dust beside the car, crying. He struggled against anybody who tried to lead him back into the school. Usually, Wei Ziqi is strict with his son, but he seemed to sympathize with this fear, and

now he tried to reason with him. “Everybody goes to school,” Wei Ziqi said patiently. “I did, and so did your mother. Aunt Mimi went to school, and so did Uncle Monster.”

The schoolyard’s loudspeakers crackled, and music came on for the flag-raising. The older children, wearing the red kerchiefs of the Young Pioneers, marched in place while the national anthem played. Wei Jia’s face was creased with panic. Until now, he had never seen more than a handful of children together at once.

It took nearly forty-five minutes to calm him down. His father carried him into the classroom; his mother sat him down behind a desk. After ten minutes, he made another move for the door, but this time they caught him. He cried again, another hard burst, and then he calmed down. Resignation furrowed his forehead.

We left as quietly as we could. I asked Wei Ziqi where the bathroom was, and he told me just to use the schoolyard fence on the way out. I could hear the children’s voices—talking, laughing, chanting lessons—while I pissed in the weeds. We had been at the school for almost an hour. The car seemed empty on the way home.

That day, the Idiot escaped twice from the government office. The first time, the cadres caught him just outside the gate. The second time, he made it into Bohai Township. It took a while for them to find him.

The officials telephoned Wei Ziqi and told him to pick up his brother; Wei Ziqi requested the subsidy. Neither side would budge, and finally, late in the afternoon, the cadres put the Idiot in a car and drove into the mountains. They dropped him off two miles outside Sancha. It was a steep climb, and the Idiot was not accustomed to such distances; he was fortunate to find his way back.

I heard all of this later, from Wei Ziqi, who was more or less satisfied with the exchange. The county government—a higher level than the township—had agreed to review the issue of the subsidy.

The next time I visited Sancha, the Idiot greeted me with an enormous grin and pointed at my parked automobile. He kept grunting and gesturing. I realized that he was telling the story of our trip into the

valley. “I know,” I said. “I remember.” I wanted to tell him that I hadn’t understood that situation until it was too late—mei banfa. But there was no way to communicate my regret, and the Idiot continued his gestures. He seemed thrilled to see me again.

During the National Day school holiday, Wei Jia returned home with a series of purple bruises across his legs and back. It was the first week of October, and the corn had come into season; the Weis had piled their harvested crop on the porch. Wei Jia spent an afternoon playing on it. Afterward, his parents noticed that the bruises had darkened. They decided that the boy should see a doctor.

Mimi and I had come to Sancha for the holiday, and I offered to drive Wei Jia and his father down to Huairou, the nearest city. From the mountains, Huairou is roughly halfway to Beijing, and in recent years it has grown from a small town into a satellite city of the capital. At the hospital, a nurse performed a blood test and told us that the boy’s xuexiaoban count was low. I was unfamiliar with the term, and I didn’t have my dictionary.

“His count is only seventeen thousand,” the nurse said. “It should be more than a hundred and fifty thousand.” She recommended that we immediately go to the Children’s Hospital in Beijing for further tests. Wei Jia had been born at a hospital in the capital, but this was his first time back. He was quiet during the drive to Beijing, as if sensing that something important was happening. Once we arrived at the hospital, I felt as if everybody was staring at us—the obvious foreigner, the obvious peasants. Wei Ziqi wore a surplus security-guard-uniform vest—it’s a common garment for men in the countryside—and the boy was dressed in a filthy green sweatshirt. His cloth shoes had holes in the toes.

We joined a line for another blood test. There were about thirty other children, and all of them looked like city kids—pampered products of China’s urban one-child policy, which, along with rising living standards, has undermined the traditional strictness in child-rearing. At the hospital, most children were accompanied by both parents, and often at least two grandparents as well. The adults bickered and shoved in the queue; the children whined and cried. Near my feet, a small child vomited on the floor. Inside the lab area, a little girl slipped out of the line to tinker with a tray of test tubes and slides. “Stop that!” a nurse shouted, slapping the

child's hand. A sign on the wall proclaimed, "With Your Coöperation and Our Experience, We Will Take Good Care of Your Precious."

When Wei Jia's turn finally came, his face twisted as if he were going to cry. "Be laoshi!" Wei Ziqi said firmly, and the boy calmed down. But he was shaking after the blood test was finished.

The doctor on duty—dressed in a dirty white coat, with a look of exhaustion on his face—recommended Vitamin C and said that the boy just needed to rest at home. It wasn't until almost a day and a half later, after I had taken them back to Sancha and then returned to my apartment in Beijing, that I was able to look up xuexiaoban in the dictionary: "platelet."

I went online and searched for childhood diseases with low platelet counts and bruising. Leukemia kept coming up. In a panic, I sent e-mails to three doctor friends in the United States, copying Wei Jia's blood-test printout.

The e-mails arrived early the next morning. All three doctors said that leukemia seemed unlikely; independently, they all guessed that it was a condition known as ITP—immune thrombocytopenic purpura. ITP is a disease with unknown causes which is rarely chronic in children; generally, if the patient rests and eats well, it resolves itself within two months. But Wei Jia's platelet count was so dangerously low that there was a risk of bleeding in the brain. "I'd give him steroids or immune globulin," one doctor wrote. My friend Eileen Kavanagh, who was then finishing medical school in New Jersey, responded, "The thing that bothers me the most is that they didn't put him in the hospital to figure all of this out."

I telephoned Sancha, and Cao Chunmei answered. "He's been fine," she said. "But for the last half hour he's had a nosebleed that won't stop." She put her husband on the phone.

"He's O.K. as long as he's lying down," Wei Ziqi said. "But if he sits up it starts bleeding again."

"He should be in the hospital," I said. "The doctor made a mistake."



I had already called Mimi, who was contacting friends in order to find a better hospital in Beijing. But the only transport available in Sancha was the Weis' motorbike, which was too rough for the boy's condition. I told Wei Ziqi that I'd borrow Mimi's car and drive out to the village.

Wei Ziqi and I had been born exactly two weeks apart, in June of 1969—the Year of the Rooster. One evening in Sancha, we discussed our educational experiences through junior high school, which represented the end of Wei Ziqi's formal education. After comparing the years that we had entered various grades, Wei Ziqi looked at me shrewdly. "Did you flunk?" he asked.

Back in 1974, my parents had referred to it as "being held back," and they had always stressed that I had been undersized rather than stupid—at the age of five, I weighed only thirty-five pounds. But there was no such euphemism in the Chinese spoken by the peasants of Sancha.

"Yes," I said. "I flunked nursery school."

"I figured you must have flunked a year," Wei Ziqi said with a grin. He was different from the other villagers. His mind was quicker, and he seemed to be the only one who realized that the path of progress might eventually return to Sancha, which stands at the terminus of a dead-end road. Back when Wei Ziqi was born, the road had been nothing more than a dirt track that passed beneath a magnificent entrance gate to the Great Wall. The villagers tore down the gate in the nineteen-seventies, because they wanted to use the stones to build a road out. Not long after they finished the road, people started to leave. Nowadays, a number of houses are uninhabited, and many residents are elderly people who never had the option of going elsewhere. There are still two women, in their eighties, with bound feet. Even the history of the village seems to have slipped away. There are no official ancient written records in Sancha, although one can find a few lonely paragraphs carved in stone high in the mountains. Along the peaks, which are too remote for villagers to forage in for stones, the Wall is mostly intact. If you follow it eastward, you eventually come to a cracked stone stele lying amid the rubble. The inscription notes that this section of the Wall was completed in the forty-third year of the reign of the Ming-dynasty emperor Wanli—in 1615. But there is no mention of the village, and nobody in Sancha knows for certain when it was first settled.

In the lower section of Sancha, where most residents are named Yan, the early-morning sunlight comes through a gap in the mountains and shines on the last remaining corner of the ruined entrance gate. Our part of the village is situated on a higher shelf—because of the mountains the sun doesn't reach us until late morning. Nearly everybody here is named Wei. Wei Ziqi believes that his ancestors settled here during the nineteenth century, possibly after fleeing a famine in the northern province of Shanxi, but he isn't certain. All he knows is that he is the fifth generation of his family to live in Sancha.

Wei Ziqi is short and barrel-chested, and he rarely talks about the past; his few sentimental streaks run in other directions. He appreciates Sancha's natural beauty; he says that's one reason that he hasn't moved to the city. If I ask about a hike in the mountains, his directions reflect how much of his world is botanical—turn left at the big pine, take a right at the walnut grove. Once, he told me that he wished the villagers hadn't torn down the entrance gate, because it might have attracted visitors. Wei Ziqi is one of the few Sancha residents who collect books; he has more than thirty volumes, many of which are college texts for courses in Chinese law. For somebody like Wei Ziqi—pragmatic as well as literate—law is a natural subject of interest. When Mimi and I first rented the house, Wei Ziqi used one of his books, "Modern Economic Contracts," to draw up a three-page handwritten agreement. He proudly explained the eleven clauses, one of which prohibited the use of the house to "store contraband explosives." The rent was the equivalent of forty dollars a month.

Wei Ziqi farms about an acre of land, and when I first came to know him the Wei family earned about five hundred dollars in the average year. By local standards, their situation was good—they owned a motorbike, a telephone, and a black-and-white TV. But they weren't necessarily satisfied, and Wei Ziqi kept an old blue notebook that he referred to as his "Information." The Information consisted of simple sketched maps, as well as statistics on local altitudes and seasonal temperatures. On one page, he had written ten potential names for a tourist business that he hoped to start in Sancha. They included Mountain Peace and Happiness Village and Sweet Water Farmyard Villa (Sancha is known for having good springwater). Other pages contained long drafts of potential advertisements: "If each household uses a small amount of money and big developers invest, we can change our village into a paradise where

tourists can appreciate the plants, climb the Great Wall, and enjoy peasant family meals.”

In 2002, Wei Ziqi had his first business cards printed up in Huairou. He settled on a humble name: A Small Post on the Great Wall. The back of the card invited tourists to “return to the simple nature of the past.” In recent years, even as rural migration accelerated, upper-class Beijing residents with cars have started taking pleasure trips to the countryside. By the summer of 2002, it seemed that almost every weekend somebody found his way to Sancha, usually by chance. When they saw Wei Ziqi’s hand-painted advertisement beside the road, they often stopped at his house for a meal cooked by Cao Chunmei. Wei Ziqi told me that, if he were able to advertise in the cities, he could triple his income.

He liked talking with Mimi and me, and often he asked us about life in America. He was amused by my inability to fix even the simplest electrical or mechanical problem, and he liked the fact that I was a writer. The other villagers were also interested; sometimes I turned around from my computer and saw a peasant standing in my living room, watching in rapt enjoyment. Nobody in Sancha knocks when they visit a neighbor.

I parked the car and walked directly inside. Wei Jia lay on the kang, the traditional northern-Chinese brick bed that can be heated by a wood fire. His face was pale, and flecks of blood had dried dark around his nostrils. He didn’t say anything when I touched his forehead.

“It’s a lot of trouble for you,” Cao Chunmei said. She is a heavyset woman with short hair, and usually she has a lovely smile. But now her face was drawn; on the phone she had told me that her son might have a fever. “Will you eat some lunch?” she said politely.

“I already ate,” I said. “I think we should go now.”

Cao Chunmei had put a change of clothes and a roll of toilet paper in the Mickey Mouse backpack. They had decided that she would stay behind until Wei Jia was settled in the hospital. Wei Ziqi carried him down the hill and put him in the back seat of the car. The boy lay with his head in his father’s lap.

The road from the village is steeply switchbacked, and I drove slowly, so the car wouldn't bounce. After ten minutes, Wei Jia said that he felt sick, and I pulled over. He made gagging noises but nothing came up. As soon as he sat up, twin trails of blood trickled down from his nostrils. Wei Ziqi dabbed at them with the toilet paper. We kept driving.

Fall is the best season in northern China, and it was a beautiful clear day. The peasants had come to the final crop of the year, the soybeans, and they were threshing the haylike stalks along the road. I knew that we had an hour of mountain driving before we reached the highway, and I tried to keep calm by concentrating on the details. We came to Nine-Crossings River—the orange-painted rails of the bridge, the white-streaked bark of the waterside poplars. At Black Mountain Stockade, we had to stop again; this time the boy vomited. There was a long descent from the last blue line of the mountains, and then we reached the plain, where the Ming-dynasty emperors are buried. We passed the faded yellow roof of the tomb of Xuande, the fifth Ming ruler. According to legend, he had killed three Mongols with his own bow. Next, we drove by the tomb of his grandfather, Yongle, the great ruler who had moved the capital north from Nanjing to Beijing, in 1421. Just beyond that tomb, Wei Ziqi asked me to stop again.

The boy spat something up and murmured that he had to go to the bathroom. I couldn't tell how much of it was due to car sickness—it's a common ailment among rural people, who are unaccustomed to automobile travel. Wei Ziqi took down the boy's pants, and he produced a sickly stream of diarrhea. He was very pale now, and there was no expression in his eyes. The back of the car was strewn with bloodstained tissues.

"I think we should keep moving," I said.

"Give him a minute," Wei Ziqi said. We stood in a ditch next to a harvested apple orchard; tour buses streamed past on their way to the Ming tombs. I wondered if any tourists noticed the scene: the car with its lights flashing, the father cradling his son. The bare trees in the stark autumn light. The driver in the ditch, waiting.

Wei Jia ran a fever for most of that week. Mimi had arranged for him to be in the children's ward of a Beijing hospital where the blood specialists

are supposed to be good. On the fifth day, Wei Jia's temperature reached a hundred and four degrees. His platelet count dipped beneath fifteen thousand—if it went much lower, there was a serious risk of bleeding in the brain.

Mimi and I visited daily, and she generally handled any direct interaction with the doctors. It was safer that way—her spoken Chinese was better than mine, and she didn't look like a foreigner. Nevertheless, there had been some difficulties in dealing with the staff. When we had first arrived at the hospital, after the drive from Sancha, one of the nurses brusquely informed us that Wei Ziqi couldn't stay with his son, because only “female comrades” are allowed to spend the night in the ward. Mimi begged for a one-night exception, because the Weis lived so far away, but the nurse refused. In the end, I had to make another four-hour drive, late that night, to pick up Cao Chunmei. Chinese hospitals have a reputation for mistreating peasants.

Whenever we visited, Mimi and I tried to monitor the boy's care, and we had advised the parents to avoid a transfusion, if possible. The blood supply in China isn't safe; donors are in short supply, and the system relies primarily on people who are paid for giving blood. Testing practices vary widely from region to region, blood bank to blood bank. In China, an estimated one million people have been infected with H.I.V.; the epidemic has been particularly severe in Henan Province, just south of Beijing, because of unsanitary donor conditions. Even in cities like Beijing, hospitals usually rely on antibody tests, which are cheaper and less reliable than the molecular diagnostics used by blood banks in developed countries.

In the evenings, after visiting the hospital, I often e-mailed my doctor friends in the United States with questions. On the morning of the seventh day, the Beijing doctors performed a bone-marrow test for leukemia. Immediately after the procedure, Wei Ziqi telephoned me and asked to borrow eight thousand yuan—nearly a thousand dollars. The doctors had decided that the boy needed a transfusion, which had to be paid for in advance. In China, most peasants have no medical insurance, but the Weis had taken the unusual step of purchasing a private policy when their son entered kindergarten. It would cover about half of his bills, but the money could be claimed only after the fact.

That day, Mimi was preparing to leave on a trip, so I went to the hospital alone. When I arrived, Wei Jia was sleeping fitfully. His mother told me that he had been bleeding from the mouth. Accompanied by Wei Ziqi, I introduced myself to one of the doctors on duty. I asked her if the transfusion was critical.

“Who is this?” she said sharply to Wei Ziqi. “Why is he asking questions?”

“He’s a writer,” Wei Ziqi said proudly.

“I’m a friend, as I just explained,” I said quickly. “I have some simple questions about what we should do.”

“This isn’t his affair!” the doctor said to Wei Ziqi. “You’re the parents, and you have responsibility for the child. He has nothing to do with it.”

“I just want to make sure we make the right decision,” I said.

“The decision has already been made!” I had assumed that the hospital staff would be patient with me just because I was showing concern for a Chinese child. But now they glared at me: three nurses and two doctors, all women.

“Who can I talk to about this?” I said, but the women ignored me. I repeated the question—silence. Finally, one of the nurses whispered something, and the others laughed. I felt my face turn red.

“It’s very simple,” I said. “I’m paying for this. I have to know why he needs a transfusion before I pay the money.”

One of the doctors, a middle-aged woman named Zhao, turned to me. “He needs immune globulin,” she said tersely. “If he doesn’t get it, there’s a risk that he’ll have brain damage from internal bleeding. Already he is bleeding inside his mouth. We know what to do, and you don’t understand anything about it.”

“I’m trying to understand as much as I can,” I said. “If you speak slowly, it helps. I’m only asking these questions because I care about the boy.”

“If you care, then let us give him the transfusion.”

I asked if it might be better to wait for the test results to come back, but Dr. Zhao said that the lab was too slow. Finally, I asked if there was a risk that the immune globulin might be infected with a disease.

“Of course there’s a risk!” she said. “It could be infected with H.I.V. or hepatitis or something else!”

“Don’t they test the blood?” I asked.

“You can’t test blood completely,” she said.

“I think you can, actually.”

“Believe me, you can’t!”

“Where does the blood come from?”

“How am I supposed to know?” She was practically shouting now. I backed out of the room with Wei Ziqi. I told him that the blood supply was my main concern, and he nodded calmly.

I used my cell phone to call an American I knew who worked in medicine in Beijing. She was familiar with one local organization that followed international testing standards for blood. After checking with the organization, she called back to tell me they could sell a clean unit for three hundred and seventy-eight American dollars. They could have the blood delivered, but I’d have to get the hospital to accept it.

I took a deep breath and walked back into the staff room. “I’m sorry to bother you again,” I said to Dr. Zhao. “But if we find guaranteed clean blood can we use that?”

“There’s no guaranteed clean blood in Beijing,” she said.

I told her that the other organization performs thorough H.I.V. tests. “There’s no test like that,” she said.

It sounded like a lie, but I realized that it might simply mean mei banfa—nothing can be done. I said, “If I buy clean blood from them and have them deliver it, can we use it?”

“We won’t accept it!” she shouted. “It’s against hospital policy. Who do you think you are?”

I stepped outside again. At the time, I didn’t realize that Dr. Zhao was actually in the right—such a sale of blood was strictly illegal. My American contact also hadn’t known. In China, pragmatism often blurs such regulations, and a foreigner can find himself operating in shady territory without even knowing it. I called the American again to see if she had any ideas.

“I know some Chinese doctors who used to work at your hospital,” she said. “I’ll ask them to check on the blood supply, and then I’ll call you back.”

I waited in the hospital room with Wei Jia and his parents. During everything that had happened in the past week, they had remained completely calm: no tears, no raised voices. Life in Sancha had taught them that there were limits to what you could control and understand. During my argument with Dr. Zhao, Wei Ziqi had stood in the background, as if it were not his affair. He had a deep respect for my doctor friends in America.

The only decoration in the hospital room was a clock featuring Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. There were two other patients: a teen-ager with a heart problem, and an eight-year-old with an ailing kidney. The kidney treatment involved large amounts of hormones, and since June the eight-year-old’s weight had increased by fifty per cent. Everything about his body, especially his face, appeared stretched and swollen. My phone rang.

“It’s pretty good news,” the woman said. She told me that the hospital that was treating Wei Jia used the same blood bank as the medical organization that followed international testing standards. “They haven’t ever come up with a positive for H.I.V. That blood bank has been safe so far.”

On impulse, I tried to call a doctor friend in San Francisco, but his answering machine clicked on. I stared at my cell phone. “I think it’s O.K.,” I said finally to Wei Ziqi.



We went downstairs to the hospital's payment division. Clerks sat behind windows, and money was everywhere: strewn across tables, spinning in counting machines, bound into red bricks. From my bag, I took out a thick wad of cash. Without a word, the clerk tossed it into a counting machine.

After the immune globulin was given, Wei Jia's fever broke, and within two days his platelet count was back to normal. It held steady for the rest of the week. The bone-marrow examination showed no leukemia; the doctors decided that the condition was in fact ITP. Five days after the treatment, a group of Wei Jia's relatives came to visit.

There were four men: a grandfather, a great-uncle, an uncle, and a distant cousin named Li Ziwen, a peasant who had joined the military and then moved to the city a few years ago. The rest of the men had come in from the countryside. The great-uncle told me that he hadn't been to Beijing in almost thirty years.

The men gathered around Wei Jia's hospital bed. Cao Jifu, the grandfather, put his hand on the boy's back and spoke softly to him. But the sudden attention had made Wei Jia shy, and he sat in silence at the head of the bed. The sheets had red-brown stains on them from blood tests.

After ten minutes, somebody mentioned lunch. Li Ziwen reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. He dropped the money onto the bed.

"Use this for the child," he said.

Wei Ziqi tried to give the money back, but Li refused. For a minute, they argued gently, and then Wei nodded his head in thanks. The uncle was next, and then the grandfather. The great-uncle went last. He was poorer than the others, and his stack included some tens and twenties. The money lay in four bright piles on the sheets. The boy looked very small, and now he leaned back, away from the bills. There was an awkward silence, and finally somebody mentioned lunch again. Cao Chunmei pushed the money out of sight, under the boy's pillow. The men filed out of the room.

We went to a restaurant across the street. Wei Ziqi studied the menu intently. When the waitress brought a bottle of grain alcohol, he examined the seal. "Can you guarantee that this bottle isn't counterfeit?"

The waitress seemed surprised by the question. "I'm pretty sure," she said. "But I guess I can't say for certain."

Wei Ziqi sent back that bottle, and the next one as well. Finally, the third one satisfied him. When the food arrived, he commented that the iron-plate beef wasn't so good. Carefully, he monitored the dishes, and for a moment I had trouble believing that this was the same man who had stood in the background during the arguments about his son's treatment. But, as a farmer, Wei Ziqi knew food; he was the expert at the restaurant.

The men drank steadily. The grandfather's face was the first to turn red with the grain alcohol. He stood up and gave me a formal toast: "We appreciate all of your help with Wei Jia."

Everybody downed a shot. Wei Ziqi told the story of our drive into Beijing, and the men began discussing the boy's health. Wei Ziqi turned to me.

"You know," he said quietly, "I was frightened during that drive." I told him that I had been scared, too.

Winter is the quietest season in Sancha. There are no crops; apart from some pruning, there is little work in the orchards. The villagers often remain in bed until midmorning, and they eat two meals a day instead of three. Everything slows down.

Wei Jia stayed home from school most of that winter. For two months, he hardly left the house, and his parents were careful with his meals. The doctors gave him a month's worth of steroids. There was a brief period during which Wei Jia whined and cried easily—his parents said that he had learned to act this way from his neighbor in the hospital, the city boy with kidney problems. Whenever Wei Jia cried, his parents mocked him for looking ridiculous, and soon he stopped. Over the winter he gained nine pounds. His father taught him how to write some simple Chinese characters, and together they listened to English-language tapes.

Wei Ziqi kept busy that winter. He enlarged his front porch and part of his home, to prepare for summer tourists, and he made up a new business card. The name changed from A Small Post on the Great Wall to A Post on the Great Wall. Wei Ziqi acquired a cell phone; it didn't work in the village, because the mountains were too high, but he could use it in Huairou, where he increasingly spent time on business—meeting people, buying construction materials. For thirty yuan, he purchased a pair of black leather shoes that he reserved strictly for trips to the city. At home, he kept the shoebox in good condition. A brand name had been printed on the box: "Italy." Later that year, the government agreed to pay the subsidy for the Idiot.

Over the winter, I made a trip back to America, where a friend asked me if I planned to have Wei Jia tested for H.I.V. I knew that I would never suggest such a test, because I didn't trust the hospitals, and the parents would find the request strange. With every step that I took—from the United States to Beijing, from Beijing to the village—familiar rules slipped away. Like everyone else, in a crisis I simply reacted. But after the emergency had passed I sometimes felt an emptiness that reminded me that I was far from home, and that it was not my village, not my child.

Mimi and I returned to Sancha for Qing Ming, the Day of Clear Brightness. It was the first week of April and the apricot trees had just begun to bloom; a thin pink color was brushed across the lower hills. Qing Ming is the Chinese holiday for the dead and is celebrated by tending the tombs of ancestors. In the countryside, it also marks the start of the busy season. In Sancha, only the adult men perform the tomb-sweeping. We awoke at dawn and hiked into the hills behind the village.

Each tomb is nothing more than a mound of dirt, and the villagers cover the piles with fresh earth. Mimi took photographs—because she was an outsider, it was fine for her to come along. The tombs were arranged in neat rows, according to generation, and Wei Ziqi started with a single mound at the back. "This is the Laozu," he said as he shovelled dirt onto the pile. The word means "Old Ancestor." When I asked about the dead man's name, Wei Ziqi shrugged. "I've never heard it," he said. "But he was the first one to be buried here."

The next line of tombs was the generation of his great-grandparents, and then he heaped dirt onto his grandparents' grave. The men chatted idly

while they worked. It was communal: a man took particular care with the tombs of his own ancestors, but everybody added a little dirt to every tomb. After the shovelling, they burned money for the dead to use in the afterlife. The bills looked like official Chinese currency, but they were labelled, in English, "The Bank of Heaven Company, Ltd."

The cemetery had run out of space for Wei Ziqi's parents' generation. We hiked down the mountain to his parents' grave site, which was next to a small plot of farmland. Wei Ziqi paused to examine a tangle of fur that was strewn across the path. "Rabbit," he said. "A hawk got it, probably."

As we walked, I asked him what his father had been like.

"He was a peasant," Wei Ziqi said simply.

I pressed him, asking what he remembered most about his father.

"He liked to play cards," Wei Ziqi said. We continued down the hill. A moment later, he said, "I remember that my father had a bad temper."

That evening, I was finishing dinner with the Weis when a neighbor stopped by and said that his grandson was running a fever. He wanted to go down to the valley to Shayu, twenty minutes away, where there is a small clinic.

I agreed to drive, and we piled into the car that I had rented for the week. Wei Jia sat on his father's lap in the front seat. The sick child, a four-year-old named Huang Hongyu, sat in the back with his grandparents.

At the clinic, a doctor examined the child. He said that the problem wasn't serious, and he prepared to give the boy an injection.

"I have an idea," I said to Wei Jia, pulling him outside. "Do you want to drive the car?"

I put him on my lap, behind the wheel. We pulled away just as the child in the clinic started screaming.

"I don't cry when I get a shot," Wei Jia said.

We made a loop around the village. By the time we returned, the rest of them were ready to leave. Huang Hongyu had calmed down, and the grandparents seemed relieved at the doctor's words. Halfway back to Sancha, I allowed Wei Jia to sit on my lap again. He held the wheel tightly

as we took the switchbacks up the mountain. The boy in the back was carsick and began to vomit.

“Do you want me to stop?” I asked.

“It’s not necessary,” the grandfather said. He had come prepared with plastic bags.

I rolled down the window and kept driving. We came to the lower village, and Wei Jia leaned forward in order to see more clearly. Electric lights glowed a soft orange against the brick of the homes, and then, high above, there was a dark line where the mountains gave way to stars and the great emptiness. The boy in the back had stopped throwing up. I kept telling myself that the children were fine and we were almost home.