

Diary of a Boy

Translated by Kyle Anderson

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Inspired by The Diary of a Girl

How I came to write The Diary of a Boy

After I published my children's novel The Diary of a Girl in 2000, I did a survey of my elementary and middle school readers, asking them two questions. To the boys, I asked which female character in the book they liked the best. And, to the girls, I asked which male character in the book they liked the best. The boys had a variety of answers. Some liked Ran Dongyang, some liked Mei Xiaoya, and others liked Mo Xin'er, Sha Li, or Little Witch. These were all very different types of girls: Ran Dongyang was kind, Mei Xiaoya was strong, Mo Xin'er was smart, Sha Li was pretty, and Little Witch was mischievous. All the boys had different favorite female characters. But the girls' answers were shockingly all the same. They all liked Wu Mian the most.

In The Diary of a Girl, Wu Mian isn't the kind of student who obeys all the rules. I think the reason the girls all liked him is because he has the qualities of a true man: He is a thoughtful individual who is responsible--boldly acting

when others don' t.

During some interviews on The Diary of a Girl, I was often asked about Wu Mian. Many people thought of him as the novel' s most appealing character. As a result, I was asked if I planned to write The Diary of a Boy. And that's how the plan for this book got out an entire year before its publication.

I spent a year writing The Diary of a Boy. Whenever I saw my friends, they would always ask me if I had finished. I received letters and phone calls from young readers too, asking me when they would get to read The Diary of a Boy.

Now that it' s finally finished, I worry that it won' t be what everyone wants. I hope readers think it' s still worth reading.

Two Men

Wednesday, June 23rd - Sunny

I was originally planning on sleeping the entire day to make up for all of the sleep I lost between first grade to sixth grade. But the phone rang before 7am.

Mom brought the phone to my room. "Wu Mian, it's for you."

I thought it was either Jing Doudou or Gu Longfei calling me. I pulled the blanket over my head. "Tell him that I'm sleeping!" I said.

Mom pulled the blanket off my head. "It's your father!"

I had to take the call when it was Dad. I didn't even know where he was. Dad's a photographer. He spends all his time with cameras and a bunch of different-sized lenses,

travelling around the world.

"Hey, Dad!" I said, acting like he was one of my friends.

"Where are you?"

"I'm in Lhasa. I'll be flying back around noon today.

Dad had an attractive, deep voice. I could clearly hear his breath over the phone. He didn't sound like he was in Tibet at all. In fact, he sounded like he was right in front of me. I suddenly missed him terribly.

"Wu Mian, let's meet up today. What do you think?"

"No problem, I'll pick you up at the airport."

I hung up the phone and noticed that Mom had walked out at some point. Every time I talk with Dad, Mom gives us space.

I yawned, put on my flip-flops, then pitter-pattered into the kitchen. Mom was frying an egg.

"Mom, Dad is coming back from Lhasa around noon. I'm going to pick him up at the airport. Do you want to come?"

"I don't think I'll go," Mom said, passing me the egg. "It should just be you two men. You will definitely have a lot to talk about."

I don't remember when Mom started calling Dad and I "you two men". She and Dad had divorced a long time ago. She never said anything bad about him in front of me, though. And Dad never said anything bad about Mom in front of me, either. In my mind, they just seemed like old friends.

"Wu Mian, you've never picked anyone up at the airport before. Do you want me to call your uncle for a ride?"

"No, thanks," I said. "I'll take the airport shuttle."

Dad's flight was arriving at 11:40am. At 10 am, I went to the Civil Aviation ticket stand and caught the shuttle to the airport.

There was a massive traffic jam. We stopped every few meters along the way. There were so many people on the street--a lot of kids my age too. They must have wanted to get some fresh air after taking their tests yesterday.

The long line of cars was like an iron reptile, slowly crawling through the bustling city. I saw that it was 11 am and that Dad's plane had almost landed, but we were still only halfway there. I got anxious. A few other people on their way to the airport started to worry too.

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"Don't worry!" the driver said. The bald young man didn't look the least bit worried. "Once we make it onto the freeway, we'll be there in no time."

The shuttle finally made it onto the highway headed towards the airport. The road was clear. We made it to the airport soon after, just like the bald driver had said.

As soon as I ran into the reception area, I heard a beautiful voice announce: "Flight 4375 from Lhasa has landed..."

Being early wasn't nearly as good as being lucky.

I squeezed my way through the crowd, trying to keep my eyes open for my Dad. I was worried that if I blinked, I might miss him walk past.

The smell of mutton hit me, and I saw Dad pop out of a group of tough-looking Tibetan men. His hair was so long it reached his shoulders, and he hadn't shaved in a long time. His square face was red and dark. He must have gotten sunburned on the high plateau. He was carrying a sheepskin travel pack--color nondescript--and he had a photographer's bag thrown across his shoulder like a bag of explosives. He was walking around in a pair of combat boots too. He looked like a man who'd been around the world.

"Dad!"

"Son!"

Dad rushed over. I jumped up and wrapped my arms around his neck, my feet lifting off the ground.

There was so much I wanted to say to him right then, but I couldn't get anything out. I felt my eyes getting wet, but men shouldn't cry about small things. So, I said: "Dad, I'm hungry."

Dad grinned, showing his pearl-white teeth: "Alright, let's go eat some western barbecue, then!"

A taxi took us to a buffet restaurant called Western Barbecue Town. Dad put his bags down and went to get a big plate of beef.

Dad picked up a huge slice of red and white beef as big as his hand and placed it into the frying pan.

"You can't come here and *not* try their beef," Dad said as he poured some beer into his cup. "What do you think? Do you want some too?" he asked.

I hesitated, then nodded my head.

Dad poured me half a glass of beer. White froth started rising out of the glass, so I hurried to suck it up.

Dad grinned again and held his glass up. "Congratulations, son!"

"Don't congratulate me," I said. "I only took my finals yesterday. I don't know how I did yet!"

"Let's not talk about your finals today. I'm congratulating you on graduating from elementary school!"

That seemed about right.

I held up my glass and touched it to Dad's. Dad tilted his head back and drank his beer down in a single gulp, showing me the bottom of his glass. I did the same, showing

Dad the bottom of my glass. He reached over and patted me on the shoulder: "Good job!"

Dad filled his glass up with beer again, then called the waiter over, asking him to bring me a can of Coca-Cola. He lit a cigarette and looked at me with a smile as I ate the oily beef.

"That's right. Men need to eat a lot of meat!"

"Dad, are you going to go back to Tibet again?" I mumbled through a mouth still full of beef.

"Yes, Tibet is a wonderful place. There's so many awesome things to take pictures of there," he said, straightening up. His two eyes looked straight into mine, like he was about bring up something important. "Son, I came back just for you. Didn't you say you wanted to go to Tibet?"

"Only you know me so well." I said. "When do we leave?" I asked excitedly.

"I'll give you two options for going to Tibet," Dad said, looking serious. "The first option is simple: we can take a plane and fly straight to Tibet in less than three hours. Or, the second option: we go by military convoy. It will take about one week to get to Tibet that way--it' ll be a hard trip. There might be some dangerous things that happen on the way too."

When I heard about the potential dangers, I chose the second option without even thinking. "Let's go by military convoy."

"Wu Mian!"

This time, Dad didn't call me "son", he called me by my name, like we were two guys making an important decision together.

"Wu Mian, you have to be sure about this. It' s going to be a difficult trip--your life might be in danger."

"I'm sure," I said. Once I'd decided something, it was near impossible to change my mind. "We're going with the military convoy!"

"How's this, then, Wu Mian..." Dad said, standing up and finishing his beer. "You talk about it first with your mother. It's best to get her opinion on this."

It was 2 p.m. by the time we left Western Barbecue Town. Dad walked me just outside of Mom's apartment. When it was time for us to part, he pulled out a Tibetan women's lined apron, and said, "This is for your mother. She likes to collect ethnic clothing."

I took the apron and shook it open. "I'm sure Mom will love it. Why don't you give it to her yourself?"

An awkward smile flashed across Dad's face. "I still have some stuff to do. You can take care of it for me!"

Back home, I called Mom. "Mom, can you come home early today? I have something important to talk about with

you. There's a surprise for you too!"

Mom came rushing back before 5 p.m. As soon as she entered the house, she opened up the refrigerator to get a cold drink. I poured her some hot green bean soup which I had cooled off. I made it especially for her.

"Mom, I want to go to Tibet with Dad."

"Great!" Mom said, taking a big drink of the green bean soup. "Tibet is beautiful place. Which flight are you taking?"

"We're not flying. We're going with a military convoy."

"The Sichuan-Tibet highway?" Mom looked me in the eyes and asked, "This was his idea, wasn't it? Your father is always chasing adventures."

"It was my idea," I said.

"Did your father tell you that this sort of trip is dangerous?"

"Yes," I said. "Dad gave me two options, and the other one was flying there. I chose to go by military convoy along the Sichuan-Tibet highway."

Mom silently sipped the green bean soup. When she had finished, she gently said, "Since you made the decision yourself, I'll respect it."

"Long live Mom!"

"Long live understanding!"

I raised my arms up and cheered.

Mom laughed, and stretched out her hand. "So, you said you had a special surprise for me, right?"

"It's not from me, it's from Dad." I said. I took out the Tibetan apron. "What do you think?"

"Wow!" Mom said, her eyes glistening. This is

handmade wool felt. Look at how well these colors match!
Only an artistic genius could make something so beautiful!"

Mom hammered another nail into the wall. Our walls were covered with ethnic clothes from all over the place. There was a vest worn by Uyghur women, a pleated Yi skirt, and a long sheath dress worn by Dai women.

Mom hung the Tibetan apron on the wall. She said, "Your father has a great eye for art. Look at this apron. It's so stylish!"

"If Dad is so great, why did you divorce him?" I asked.

Mom never avoided my questions. "We can only be friends, we can't be husband and wife. We only ever fought when we were together. Now that we're separated, we get along much better. Isn't that a good thing?"

I couldn't say anything else. As long as they thought it was a good thing, that's all that mattered.

Hardtack

Thursday, June 24th - Cloudy

I tried calling Dad all night last night, but nobody picked up. I called his cell phone, but it was turned off. He was probably in his darkroom messing around with his precious pictures. Whenever he went into his darkroom, he turned off his cell phone and didn't pick up any calls.

I called again around noon, and Dad finally picked up the phone. He said that he had spent all last night in his darkroom, and had just come out and was getting ready to eat.

"Dad! Mom agreed to let me go with the convoy to Tibet!"

"Oh, that's good."

I couldn't wait. "When are we leaving, Dad?" I asked.

"The 26th," he said, sounding tired. "There's a few

military trucks leaving then. Today, your mission is find us some rations."

I thought that "rations" meant "bread".

"How does shredded pork bread sound, Dad?"

"Bread won't work," Dad said. "Bread doesn't fill you up enough, and it doesn't stay fresh long enough. What we need is some hardtack."

I didn't know what "hardtack" was, and I had never seen it before, so I definitely didn't know where to go buy it.

I rode my bike to the biggest supermarket in the city. I rifled through the cracker aisle for what seemed like days, but couldn't find any "hardtack". I asked one of the workers, but she only stared back blankly.

"Hardtack? Who eats that anymore?" she said, reaching for a few boxes of crackers with good-looking packaging. "Take a look at these. These are selling really well."

The crackers felt light in my hand. They were dry, crunchy puffed grain foodstuffs. I could hear dad saying that they wouldn't fill us up either.

I left that supermarket and rode my bike to a few other place, but I still couldn't find any hardtack. It was 2:30 p.m., and I still hadn't had lunch. I was okay, but Mom's two precious "babies" --Beethoven and Monroe--needed to eat. So, I rushed back home to feed them.

As soon as I put the key in the keyhole, I heard Monroe whine. I walked in and Monroe jumped into my arms. Beethoven stood at the entrance to the bathroom, glaring at me and barking angrily.

They were hungry. Monroe was a cat and Beethoven was a dog. Mom also had a pet turtle she kept in a bowl in the kitchen. They were all her "babies". She worked as an art editor at a children's publishing company, and animals were often on the covers of children's books, so Mom loved animals.

I took some boiled pig's liver out of the fridge, cut it into square pieces, and mixed it in with some rice to boil. That was the cat food. Next I poured the dog food, and then I made some instant noodles for myself.

As I ate the noodles, I thought to myself, “Where can I go to buy hardtack?”

I wanted to call Dad, but I knew he would be in his darkroom. So I decided to call Lu Feifei. Since it was about food, I bet the question wouldn't stump him.

"Feifei, where can I buy some hardtack?" I asked.

"Hardtack? What is that?"

Ha! Even someone who loved food as much as Lu Feifei didn't know what hardtack was! After I explained it to him, he pointed me in the right direction—a travel supplies store.

There was a travel supplies store next to the zoo in the

north suburbs, and it would take me at least an hour and a half to ride my bike there. But, I had no choice!

I rode my bike to the zoo in the hot sun. The zoo used to be my favorite place when I was younger. I learned a lot there. Back then, it had always felt so far when an adult brought me. I had even gotten lost once there--I was so scared I cried. Now I could ride my bike here all by myself. I guess I had really grown up.

The travel supplies store did have hardtack. It was rectangular, and individually wrapped in silver foil--heavy, like a bunch of silver ingots.

I bought a bag's worth. It weighed at least 2.5 kilos.

I felt much more relaxed now that I had bought food for our trip. The sun started setting, and a cold breeze started blowing. I rode my bike as fast as I could back home.