

Ba Jin

**Autumn in Spring
And Other Stories**

Panda Books



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Ba Jin, one of China's outstanding contemporary novelists, was born into a big feudal family in 1904 in Chengdu, Sichuan. He was familiar from childhood with the wrangling and conflicts between its members and the misery inflicted on the young by the feudal moral code. This gave him an urge to revolt and made him ready to accept the progressive ideas of the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal May 4th Movement launched in 1919.

He went to study in France in 1926 and while there completed his first novel *Destruction*. After his return to Shanghai in 1928, in addition to a number of short stories, he wrote the short novel *A Dream of the Sea*; the trilogy *Fog, Rain and Lightning* which depicts the disillusionment of intellectuals and their desire for revolution; and the trilogy *The Family, Spring and Autumn* dealing with the evils and decline of the big feudal family. *The Family* was later adapted into a stage play by Cao Yu and made into a film in the fifties.

He has also translated into Chinese a number of foreign classics such as Turgenev's *Father and Son*. He is now a member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and vice-chairman of the All-China Federation of Literary and Art Circles.

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Autumn in Spring

MY younger sister sent me a telegram from home announcing the death of my elder brother.

I had no idea how he had died. So far as I knew he had been physically sound and planning to get engaged soon.

“Is it a dream? How could anyone die so easily? Especially just before his engagement?” I wondered.

I thought no more of the matter, for nothing around me had changed. There was nothing to remind me of his death.

The following day I received another telegram consisting of thirty-four ciphers, giving more details: My brother had committed suicide by cutting his own throat.

His hands slightly trembling, Xu, a friend of mine, helped me to decipher it.

“What’s to be done?” he asked.

I did not know what to say. Gripping my own arm, I muttered to myself: “So it’s not a dream after all.”

Xu looked at me with compassion. To him, I must have seemed the most unlucky man in the world.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Before I could ask he had slipped out of the room.

Sitting on a sofa, I gazed at the portrait of Janet Gaynor hanging on the wall. She smiled down at me. The silly girl had not smiled for a long time, so why

smile at me today all of a sudden? Laughing at my bad luck? She was a blond with a healthy complexion, wearing a pale blue blouse. But what had all this to do with me? She was just a pin-up girl, and now my brother was dead.

My eyes turned from Janet Gaynor to the white-washed wall, white and spotless. But gradually there emerged from it a dark gaunt face.

There was nothing special about this face. It could have been yours, mine or anyone's. But no, it turned out to be my brother's.

It was truly his face, an ordinary young man's face which reflected his ordinary life.

"I'm dead." He suddenly opened his mouth. "I cut my throat with my own hands."

"You couldn't have," I countered. "It can't be true since you're here talking to me."

"That knife, that agony, those final death throes! Nobody knows my feelings. No one will ever miss me! That's how my life ended," he said sadly, big tears falling from his deep-set eyes.

"If a dead man can still talk and shed tears, death is nothing dreadful. Besides, everyone has to die," I said dubiously to myself, my voice too low for anyone else to hear.

"I don't want to die!" He pursed his lips, his face livid, his mouth a straight line, and his eyes two slits. I stared wide-eyed as his face kept sinking in until it looked as ludicrous as a bun.

The wall was white again, with no sign of my brother's face on it.

"Damn it!" I cursed myself. "You're dreaming with your eyes open!"

The telegram still lay on the table, that telegram of thirty-four ciphers.

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"How would Rong console me if I told her the news? Girls are soft-hearted, she'd be sure to cry and feel distressed for me. Better not tell her." I thought my decision was right.

Just then she came in, already informed by Xu of what had happened.

"If you make me cross again, I'll follow your brother's example," she warned, pursing her little mouth. So she too could purse her lips!

Reminded of my brother's pursed mouth I was seized with terror.

"Don't talk like that!" I reached out to cover her mouth but my hand was warded off.

"Let's go for a walk," she suggested, picking up the telegram to fan herself.

"Shall we go to the garden under Rock Hill?" I proposed rather wearily.

"No! I don't like it. I can't stand that Malay gate-man!" She turned her head away in exasperation dropping the telegram on the ground.

"Have a heart," I murmured, picking it up and putting it into my pocket. "Better go to the garden where the jasmine is so fragrant." I straightened up.

"O.K." she agreed with a smile. "Whatever you say."

So I closed the gate and followed her. Thus we set off.

A neighbour's dog trotted over barking at me but soon ran away wagging its tail.

We walked side by side, but she kept me at arm's length. I couldn't make her out. What was she up to?

The sky, trees, houses and street were bathed in sunshine. A winding road carried her slim figure uphill. Under her short skirt, her legs in black silk stockings danced nimbly on the soft tarmac.

When we came to the cemetery she stopped abruptly. Leaning against the fence, she gazed in silence at the rows of crosses and the tombstones beneath them.

How strange that a young girl should be interested in graves!

"Let's go!" I said impatiently. "What is there to look at?"

She did not move, but suddenly exclaimed with her ringing voice: "How peaceful to lie here!"

"You!... You envy..." Shocked by my own ejaculation, I broke off before I might blurt out something ill-omened.

"Don't disturb me," she said reproachfully though not harshly. She took my hand in her soft one and held it tightly.

I looked at her with surprise and said no more.

What was in her mind? How could I ever guess?

Near by, there on two separate tombs were two wreaths, one already withered, the other still fresh.

"This is yours," she said, pointing at the fresh one. "That's mine." She indicated the withered one.

"I don't understand," I said frankly, sensing that something was preying on her mind.

"You don't understand?" She turned to me with a wan smile. I had never seen her smile like that before,

and felt it uncalled-for; for it was the smile of an invalid, yet she wasn't ill. It made me feel like crying.

"You must be kidding!" She chuckled. "An intelligent man like you surely understands. . . . My future's gloomy and so I'm like these flowers." Again she pointed to that withered wreath. "You are like those others because your future is bright. The two wreaths are so close but they're not together — just like the two of us."

My future was bright, so I had been told perhaps a hundred times. But no one saying that before had made me feel like weeping.

"That's not an apt comparison! You can't compare men to flowers," I retorted with a forced smile, not trying to comfort her for fear of being reduced to tears myself.

"But I'm very fond of flowers." She had such a ready tongue that I couldn't refute her.

It was true that she loved flowers. Every time I went to her room I would see a big vase of fresh flowers of all colours on the table. On the wall of the room there hung a portrait of her mother, a middle-aged woman.

"A young girl shouldn't linger in a cemetery, let alone peep in surreptitiously from outside." To cover up my depression, I gave a hollow laugh.

"All right, let's go." She abruptly let go of my hand and turned to leave.

At the gate of the garden we were assailed by the fragrance of jasmine.

"Well? I didn't deceive you, did I?" I was pleased.

"I knew all along!" She smiled.

We climbed the steps into the garden. The Malay

gategman riveted his beady eyes on her while wiping his hands with his red-checked apron. He was dark brown, with a bewhiskered mouth.

"Disgusting creature! His eyes are boring into my face!" she whispered as we passed him. "It's the same every time."

"That's because you're so beautiful," I said with a smile.

"Don't talk rot! Are you mocking me too? In that case you'd better leave me alone." She pretended to be angry and hurried away.

I stayed where I was, gazing after her slim figure and slightly ruffled bobbed hair, thinking over her recent behaviour. I began to have misgivings.

I found her finally sitting on a stone bench under a jasmine tree. Her head in her hands, she seemed to be deep in thought. Her hair was sprinkled with little white jasmine blossoms.

She deliberately ignored me.

I sat down beside her and reached out to hold her right hand, but she wrenched it away. When I clasped it a second time, instead of resisting she nestled up to me.

I inhaled the scent of jasmine in her hair, held her soft hand. I did not speak, hoping to sound her out without words.

The plaintive strains of a violin drifted over from a brown building partially covered by the trees on the left. The Malay with his nasal voice began to sing a native love song.

I could not tell where her thoughts — or mine — had wandered.

"Lin," she suddenly asked, looking into my eyes, "is it true that your brother committed suicide?"

"Of course. You saw that telegram, didn't you?"

"Why did he kill himself?" she probed.

"I don't know," I replied frankly. Why did she keep dwelling on unhappy things about which a young girl should know nothing? I asked myself sadly.

"I'm wondering if it's really possible to kill oneself with one's own hands," she said with an effort, her hand quivering in mine.

"That's not something you need know." I tried to change the subject.

"But I must know," she insisted.

"Then listen to me. It is possible, of course. My brother killed himself. It's a fact," I said reluctantly, hoping my blunt answer might forestall further questions.

"To live or to die, which is happier?" she said as though to herself.

"Rong, don't you love me any more?" I asked with dismay.

"Why?" She was surprised. "What gives you that idea? When have I said I don't love you?"

"Your face shows it."

"My face? Aren't you used to my face?" She thrust her cheek against my lips and I kissed her. Her face was so cold that it did tell me something. . . .

"On a fine day like this and in such lovely surroundings, don't you think it's ridiculous for two young lovers to keep talking about life and death and suicide?"

After a pause she replied, "Don't start imagining things. I'm here beside you, how can you think I don't

love you?" She was certainly adept at hiding her true feelings.

Yes, she was beside me but our hearts were far apart. How far I did not know.

"Love is a wonderful thing," she said in a low voice as if to herself. "Too wonderful to come my way." Her voice was as plaintive as that violin.

I looked at the shadows on her face which — like a bridal veil — made her seem even lovelier. But this bride would never be mine.

I clasped her to me as my dearest treasure. My tears fell like pearls on her hair.

"You're crying," said she, looking up with a smile which I thought more moving than tears. She laid one finger on my lips then kissed them, quick as a flash of lightning.

But when I tried to kiss her she turned away.

"Rong, you're not your normal self today. You've changed." I was very depressed. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know myself."

"Is there anything I can do to help? Lovers should have no secrets from each other."

"I just don't know," was her naive, frank reply.

I wondered if a rift had come between us.

The sun quietly set. We were enveloped in the fragrant dusk. The Malay, bare-footed, strolled to and fro before us.

"Shall we go back?" She got to her feet and took my arm.

We went back down that winding road.

"See me home, will you?" she said as if issuing an order.

"Fine."