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LIFE AND DEATH ARE WEARING ME OUT

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A NOVEL



MO YAN



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A NOVEL



TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE
BY HOWARD GOLDBLATT

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**LIFE AND DEATH
ARE WEARING ME OUT**

Also by Mo Yan

Big Breasts & Wide Hips

The Garlic Ballads

The Republic of Wine

Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh

The Buddha said:

Transmigration wearies owing to mundane desires

Few desires and inaction bring peace to the mind

Principal Characters

- Ximen Nao A Ximen Village landlord, executed and reincarnated as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, a monkey, and the boy, Big-Headed Lan Qiansui. One of the narrators.
- Lan Jiefang Son of Lan Lian and Yingchun. Serves as Head of the County Supply and Marketing Cooperative, Deputy County Head, etc. One of the narrators.
- Ximen Bai Wife of Ximen Nao.
- Yingchun Ximen Nao's first concubine. After 1949 marries Lan Lian.
- Wu Qiuxiang Ximen Nao's second concubine. After 1949 marries Huang Tong.
- Lan Lian (Blue Face) Ximen Nao's farmhand. After 1949 becomes an independent farmer, the last holdout in all of China.
- Huang Tong Leader of the Ximen Village Militia and commander of the production brigade.
- Ximen Jinlong Son of Ximen Nao and Yingchun. After 1949, takes his stepfather's surname, Lan. During the Cultural Revolution serves as Chairman of the Ximen Village Revolutionary Committee, later becomes Head of the Pig Farm, Party Secretary of the branch Youth League, and, after the Reform Period, Secretary of the Ximen Village Branch of the Communist Party.
- Ximen Baofeng Daughter of Ximen Nao and Yingchun. Ximen Village's "Barefoot Doctor." First marries Ma Liangcai, later cohabits with Chang Tianhong.

- Huang Huzhu Daughter of Huang Tong and Wu Qiuxiang. First marries Ximen Jinlong, later cohabits with Lan Jiefang.
- Huang Hezuo Daughter of Huang Tong and Wu Qiuxiang. Lan Jiefang's wife.
- Pang Hu A hero of the Chinese Volunteer Army in Korea. One-time Manager of the Number Five Cotton Processing Plant.
- Wang Leyun Pang Hu's wife.
- Pang Kangmei Daughter of Pang Hu and Wang Leyun. One-time County Party Secretary. Chang Tianhong's wife and Ximen Jinlong's lover.
- Pang Chunmiao Daughter of Pang Hu and Wang Leyun. Lan Jiefang's lover and then second wife.
- Chang Tianhong A graduate of the provincial art academy's music department. Works as a member of the village Four Clean-ups campaign. During the Cultural Revolution is Vice Chairman of the County Revolutionary Committee. Later serves as Assistant Director of the County Cat's Meow Drama Troupe.
- Ma Liangcai Teacher and principal of the Ximen Village elementary school.

A Note on Pronunciation

Most letters in the Chinese pinyin system are pronounced roughly as in English. The main exceptions are as follows:

c (not followed by h)	<i>ts</i> as in <i>its</i>	(Ma Liang <u>c</u> ai)
he	<i>u</i> as in <i>huh</i>	(Huang <u>H</u> e <u>z</u> uo)
ian	<i>yen</i>	(Lan <u>L</u> ia <u>n</u>)
le	<i>u</i> as in <i>luh</i>	(Wang <u>L</u> e <u>y</u> un)
qi	<i>ch</i> as in <i>cheese</i>	(Wu <u>Q</u> i <u>u</u> xia <u>ng</u>)
x	<i>sh</i> as in <i>she</i>	(Wu <u>Q</u> i <u>u</u> xia <u>ng</u>)
zh	<i>j</i> as in <i>jelly</i>	(Huang <u>H</u> u <u>z</u> h <u>u</u>)

Book One

Donkey Miseries

Book One

Danby Miscanes

1

Torture and Proclaimed Innocence in Yama's Hell Reincarnation Trickery for a White-Hoofed Donkey

My story begins on January 1, 1950. In the two years prior to that, I suffered cruel torture such as no man can imagine in the bowels of hell. Every time I was brought before the court, I proclaimed my innocence in solemn and moving, sad and miserable tones that penetrated every crevice of Lord Yama's Audience Hall and rebounded in layered echoes. Not a word of repentance escaped my lips though I was tortured cruelly, for which I gained the reputation of an iron man. I know I earned the unspoken respect of many of Yama's underworld attendants, but I also know that Lord Yama was sick and tired of me. So to force me to admit defeat, they subjected me to the most sinister form of torture hell had to offer: they flung me into a vat of boiling oil, in which I tumbled and turned and sizzled like a fried chicken for about an hour. Words cannot do justice to the agony I experienced until an attendant speared me with a trident and, holding me high, carried me up to the palace steps. He was joined by another attendant, one on either side, who screeched like vampire bats as scalding oil dripped from my body onto the Audience Hall steps, where it sputtered and produced puffs of yellow smoke. With care, they deposited me on a stone slab at the foot of the throne, and then bowed deeply.

"Great Lord," he announced, "he has been fried."

Having been fried to a crisp, I knew that even a light tap would turn me to charred slivers. Then, from high in the hall above me, somewhere in the brilliant candlelight in the hall above, I heard a mocking question from Lord Yama himself:

"Ximen Nao, whose name means West Gate Riot, is more rioting in your plans?"

I'll not lie to you; at that moment I wavered as my crisp body lay sprawled in a puddle of oil that was still popping and crackling. I had no illusions: I had reached my pain threshold and could not imagine what torture these venal officials would next employ if I did not yield to them now. Yet if I did, would I not have suffered their earlier brutalities in vain? I struggled to raise my head, which could easily have snapped off, and looked into the candlelight, where I saw Lord Yama, underworld judges seated beside him, oleaginous smiles on their faces. Anger churned inside me. To hell with them! I thought appropriately; let them grind me to powder under a millstone or turn me to paste in a mortar if they must, but I'll not back down.

"I am innocent!" I screamed.

Rancid drops of oil sprayed from my mouth with that scream: I am innocent! Me, Ximen Nao; in my thirty years in the land of mortals I loved manual labor and was a good and thrifty family man. I repaired bridges and repaved roads and was charitable to all. The idols in Northeast Gaomi Township temples were restored thanks to my generosity; the poor township people escaped starvation by eating my food. Every kernel of rice in my granary was wetted by the sweat of my brow, every coin in my family's coffers coated with painstaking effort. I grew rich through hard work, I elevated my family by clear thinking and wise decisions. I truly believe I was never guilty of an unconscionable act. And yet — here my voice turned shrill — a compassionate individual like me, a person of integrity, a good and decent man, was trussed up like a criminal, marched off to a bridgehead, and shot! . . . Standing no more than half a foot from me, they fired an old musket filled with half a gourd full of powder and half a bowl full of grapeshot, turning one side of my head into a bloody mess as the explosion shattered the stillness and stained the floor of the bridge and the melon-sized white stones beneath it. . . . You'll not get me to confess, I am innocent, and I ask to be sent back so I can ask those people to their face what I was guilty of.

I watched Lord Yama's unctuous face undergo many contortions throughout my rapid-fire monologue and saw how the judges around him turned their heads to avert their eyes. They knew I was innocent, that I had been falsely accused, but for reasons I could not fathom, they feigned ignorance. So I shouted, repeating myself, the same thing over and over, until one of the judges leaned over and whispered something in Lord Yama's ear. He banged his gavel to silence the hall.

"All right, Ximen Nao, we accept your claim of innocence. Many people in that world who deserve to die somehow live on while those who deserve to live die off. Those are facts about which this throne can do nothing. So I will be merciful and send you back."

Unanticipated joy fell on me like a millstone, seemingly shattering my body into shards. Lord Yama threw down his triangular vermilion symbol of office and, with what sounded like impatience, commanded:

"Ox Head and Horse Face, send him back!"

With a flick of his sleeve, Lord Yama left the hall, followed by his judges, whose swishing wide sleeves made the candles flicker. A pair of demonic attendants, dressed in black clothing cinched at the waist with wide orange sashes, walked up from opposite directions. One bent down, picked up the symbol of authority, and stuck it in his sash. The other grabbed my arm to pull me to my feet. A brittle sound, like bones breaking, drew a shriek from me. The demon holding the symbol of authority shoved the demon holding the arm and, in the tone of an old hand instructing a novice, said:

"What in damnation is your head filled with, water? Has an eagle plucked out your eyes? Can you really not see that his body is as crispy as one of those fried fritters on Tianjin's Eighteenth Street?"

The young attendant rolled his eyes as he was being admonished, not sure what to do.

"Why are you standing around?" Symbol of Authority said. "Go get some donkey blood!"

The attendant smacked his head, sudden enlightenment written on his face. He turned and ran out of the hall, quickly returning with a blood-spattered bucket. Evidently it was heavy, since he stumbled along, bent at the waist, and was barely able to keep his balance.

He set the bucket down beside me with a thud that made my body vibrate. The stench was nauseating, a hot, rank odor that seemed to carry the warmth of a real donkey. The image of a butchered donkey flashed briefly in my head, and then dissolved. Symbol of Authority reached into the bucket and took out a pig-bristle brush, which he swished around in the sticky, dark red blood, and then brushed across my scalp. I yelped from an eerie sensation that was part pain, part numbness, and part prickliness. My ears were assailed with subtle pops as the blood moistened my charred, crispy skin, calling to mind a welcome rain on drought-dry land. My mind

was a tangle of disjointed thoughts and mixed emotions. The attendant wielded his brush like a house painter, and I was quickly covered with donkey blood, head to toe. He then picked up the bucket and dumped what remained over me, and I felt a surge of life swell up inside me. Strength and courage returned to my body. I no longer needed their support when I stood up.

Despite the fact that the attendants were called Ox Head and Horse Face, they bore no resemblance to the underworld figures we are used to seeing in paintings: human bodies, one with the head of an ox, the other the face of a horse. These were totally human in appearance, except, that is, for their skin, whose color was iridescent blue, as if treated with a magical dye. A noble color, one rarely seen in the world of mortals, neither on fabric nor on trees; but I'd seen flowers of that color, small marshy blossoms in Northeast Gaomi Township that bloomed in the morning and withered and died that afternoon.

With one attendant on each side of me, we walked down a seemingly endless dark tunnel. Coral lantern holders protruded from the walls every few yards; from them hung shallow platter-shaped lanterns that burned soybean oil, the aroma sometimes dense, sometimes not, which kept me clearheaded some of the time, and befogged the rest of the time. In the light of the lanterns, I saw gigantic bats hanging from the tunnel dome, eyes shining through the darkness; foul-smelling guano kept falling on my head.

Finally, we reached the end and climbed onto a high platform, where a white-haired old woman reached out with a fair, smooth-skinned arm that did not befit her age, scooped out a black, foul-smelling liquid from a filthy steel pot with a black wooden spoon, and emptied it into a red-glazed bowl. One of the attendants handed me the bowl and flashed a smile that held no trace of kindness.

"Drink it," he said. "Drink what is in this bowl, and your suffering, your worries, and your hostility will all be forgotten."

I knocked it over with a sweep of my hand.

"No, I said. "I want to hold on to my suffering, worries, and hostility. Otherwise, returning to that world is meaningless."

I climbed down off of the wooden platform, which shook with each step, and heard the attendants shout my name as they ran down from the platform.

The next thing I knew, we were walking in Northeast Gaomi Township, where I knew every mountain and stream, every tree and

blade of grass. New to me were the white wooden posts stuck in the ground, on which were written names — some familiar, some not. They were even buried in the rich soil of my estate. I did not learn until later that when I was in the halls of hell proclaiming my innocence, a period of land reform had been ushered in to the world of mortals, and that the big estates had been piecemealed out to landless peasants; naturally, mine was no exception. Parceling out land has its historical precedents, I thought, so why did they have to shoot me before dividing up mine?

Seemingly worried that I would run away, the attendants held me by the arms in their icy hands, or, more precisely, claws. The sun shone brightly, the air was fresh and clean; birds flew in the sky, rabbits hopped along the ground. Snow on the shady banks of the ditches and the river reflected light that hurt my eyes. I glanced at the blue faces of my escort, suddenly aware that they looked like costumed and heavily made-up stage actors, except that earthly dyes could never, not in a million years, paint faces with hues that noble or that pure.

We passed a dozen or more villages as we walked down the riverbank road and met several people coming from the opposite direction. Among them were my friends and neighbors, but each time I tried to greet them, one of my attendants clapped his hand around my throat and turned me mute. I showed my displeasure by kicking them in the legs, but elicited no response; it was as if their limbs had no feeling. So I rammed my head into their faces, which seemed made of rubber. The hand around my neck was loosened only when we were alone again. A horse-drawn wagon with rubber wheels shot past us, raising a cloud of dust. Recognizing that horse by the smell of its sweat, I looked up and saw the driver, a fellow named Ma Wendou, sitting up front, a sheepskin coat draped over his shoulders, whip in hand, a long-handled pipe and tobacco pouch tied together and tucked into his collar to hang down his back. The pouch swayed like a public house shop sign. The wagon was mine, the horse was mine, but the man on the wagon was not one of my hired hands. I tried to run after him to find out what was going on here, but my attendants clung to me like vines. Ma Wendou had to have seen me and known who I was, and he surely heard the sounds of struggle I was making, not to mention smelled the strange unearthly odor that came from my body. But he drove past without slowing down, like a man on the run. After

that we encountered a group of men on stilts who were reenacting the travels of the Tang monk Tripitaka on his way to fetch Buddhist scriptures. His disciples, Monkey and Pigsy, were both villagers I knew, and I learned from the slogans on the banners they were carrying and from what they were saying that it was the first day of 1950.

Just before we arrived at the stone bridge on the village outskirts, I grew uneasy. I was about to see the stones beneath the bridge that had been discolored by my blood and flecks of my brain. Dirty clumps of hair and strips of cloth sticking to the stones gave off a disagreeable blood stench. Three wild dogs lurked at the bridge opening, two lying down, one standing; two were black, the other brown, and all three coats shone. Their tongues were bright red, their teeth snowy white, their gleaming eyes like awls.

In his story "The Cure," Mo Yan wrote about this bridge and dogs that grew crazed on the corpses of executed people. He wrote about a filial son who cut the gallbladder, the seat of courage, out of an executed man, took it home, and made a tonic for his blind mother. We all know stories about using bear gallbladder as a curative, but no one has ever heard of the curative powers of the human gallbladder. So it was made-up nonsense from the pen of a novelist who likes to do such things, and there wasn't an ounce of truth in it.

Images of the execution floated into my head on the way from the bridge to my house. They had tied my hands behind my back and hung a condemned sign around my neck. It was the twenty-third day of the twelfth month, seven days before New Year's. Cold winds cut through us that day; red clouds blotted out the sun. The sleet was like kernels of white rice that slipped beneath my collar. My wife, from the Bai family, walked behind me, wailing loudly, but I heard nothing from my two concubines, Yingchun and Qiuxiang. Yingchun was expecting a baby any day, so I could forgive her for staying home. But the absence of Qiuxiang, who was younger and was not pregnant, bitterly disappointed me. Once I was standing on the bridge, I turned to see Huang Tong and his team of militiamen. You men, we all live in the same village and there's never been any enmity between us, not then and not now. If I have somehow offended you, tell me how. There is no need to do this, is there? Huang Tong gazed at me briefly, and then looked away. His golden yellow irises sparkled like gold stars. Huang Tong, I said, Yellow-eyed Huang, your parents named you well. That's enough out of you, he said. This is government