

I knew the forest well, but to be there on my own was an adventure. The excitement of my wanderings distracted me from the bleakness of my life and the forest's tranquility soothed my lonely soul.

Baba didn't leave, but he grew ever more distant. He spent all day shut in his room or hiding behind Carola. I wanted to talk to him but he didn't give me a chance. Whatever I said, the reply always came from Carola - until I couldn't stand it any more.

In fifth grade, during the winter holidays, I received a postcard from Baba showing a village with mountains in the background and the sea in front. The sea was blue and the sky was blue and the high mountains were covered in snow..

"We were expecting Baba. Instead, we received a postcard from him, with a message saying: "Gone travelling. When I get to the end of the road, I'll turn around. I was with my grandparents when it arrived. Yeye was furious. He hurled the postcard to the ground.

"You mean Carola can move by herself?" It was clear from Qing Qing's face that she couldn't believe what she'd just heard. "It's true. Not only move, but also - " O suddenly froze..

Two days later, we were invited to Qing Qing's house for a special meal. Auntie's wonderful cooking filled the table. Everything looked, smelled and tasted superb. Uncle Ming De brought out a bottle of good vintage and tasted us enthusiastically.

The following morning, I felt ill all over again. I forced myself to get out of bed. As I looked out of the window, I saw Ah Fen walking towards Hu Niu. The cat greeted her like the enemy at the gates, arching her back and growling deep in her throat.

On the day of the Water God Festival, I was astonished when Nainai asked Ah Fen to take me to see Baba's performance. I hadn't left the house for weeks, except to go to school.

When I came back from the forest, I felt ill. My body was burning and I was aching all over. I felt so confused. I longed for a good sleep, but the faint voices that carried through from Baba's room were loud enough to prevent me from falling asleep.

As soon as I arrived at school, Qing Qing rushed over to me and asked excitedly "So your ba's back then?" Her question caught me off guard, then I realised that Nainai must have phoned to tell Uncle Ming De.

Not long after the Water God Festival, the school broke up for the summer holidays. In the past, I couldn't have been happier when the holidays started, but this time I was grumpy and miserable.

I opened my eyes and found I was lying in bed. I felt weak and my arm was badly scratched. "Those cats are evil. Attacking like that. It's shocking," Ah Fen muttered by my bedside

After my visit to the library, I was more unsettled than ever. Whenever I closed my eyes, the image of the mummified girl would drift into my mind. There was still hope in her pure, child-like face, and the slight curve of her mouth gave the suggestion of a smile.

I didn't die. When I came round, I found myself lying in the hospital. My legs were wrapped in gauze. They hurt so badly. I heard Ah Fen asking anxiously, "Why did you set the house on fire?"

When Uncle Ming De told me that Baba was going to pick me up from hospital himself, I didn't dare to believe it. "Why hasn't he been to see me?" I asked.

I spent another four months in hospital. Baba had also been hurt, but his injuries weren't serious. He came to visit me every day.



