

FICTION

# The Reason Why

Yiyun Li



Adelaide High School Library, 1947. Courtesy History Trust of South Australia

WHY ARE THE PARENTS OF THESE CHILDREN NEVER AROUND? I asked my writing class during the discussion of a story in which a set of teenagers seemed to live in a dome established entirely for their adolescent existence. The characters, homogenous in their demeanor and desire, reminded me of those mice I used to conduct research on in a science lab: they arrived, six in a cage, and were

sacrificed at exactly eight weeks old. “Sacrifice” is a misnomer; there was little to be called sacred in their lives.

A student said, Professor, you must understand that, at our age, parents don’t exist for our characters.

I laughed. He was right, in a way. A while ago, when my family checked into a flat at the center of Edinburgh, my elder son said, If only I were here with my friends, not you guys.

Excuse me, I said.

Would you rather holiday with your friends or with grandma? he said.

Touché, I said.

It was the last summer we traveled together. Unlike on our previous trips, he took many selfies with me. Aren’t you happy that I’m not as mean to you as a year ago, he said several times. Earlier that summer his best friend had said that she’d found him changed. They were in Tibet then, lying next to a river and looking at the stars. She said I was more settled, he told me. The way he described the moment made me believe that they would both remember it forever.

At the end of the summer, he turned sixteen and then died.

DO YOU KNOW, IN NEW ZEALAND, two friends killed the mother of one of them? Someone made a movie out of it.

It was thirty years ago when Xian told me about the girls in New Zealand. We were fifteen then, in a world that seemed complete without adults; occasionally we allowed other classmates into our world, but they were only guests, and we were not often hospitable.

Yes? I said. I didn't know where the conversation was leading us. I rarely did in those days.

Xian said that there was something ominous about those two girls. You know, we could easily be them.

I was shocked, but I took it as one of those shocking statements Xian liked to make. *(Have you ever wondered what to do if someone raped you? We would have to pretend it's only a bad experience with a wrong boyfriend.)*

We were not murderers. Xian didn't take anything seriously enough to want to eliminate anyone. I was a model student, with pleasing qualities that other parents wished their children possessed.

Years later, I listened to a radio program. Two teenage girls played truant one day,

took a walk out of their Midwest town, and eventually lay down on a train track. After a long conversation they fell asleep, only to wake up to the rest of their lives: a train ran over them, and four legs were lost between the two girls.

I shivered when I listened to the girls on the program. They said they had not intended to do anything, though not many people would believe them. They had only been talking, and then dozed off. One girl said, No one will ever understand us as we understand each other.

That, I realized, was Xian's fear – that we had marked ourselves in a way beyond the insipid words of hate or love, affection or loyalty. Such a thing can happen during adolescence, and like sleep, it takes hostage of one's consciousness before one is aware, and if one wakes up again – as one is bound to – something is missing. Irretrievably and irreplaceably: that's what forever is.

WHY ARE YOU NOT WRITING? For many years Xian had asked me, starting when we were fifteen.

Her questions were baffling, as I had never wanted to be a writer. What should I write about? I would ask. Anything, she would reply, and once, she said, Cannibals.

Why cannibals? I asked.

Because I read a story about cannibals in a magazine. Some tribe roasting and feasting on another tribe. It's fiction but not well written. I thought you could do better than that.

I did not ask her where she read the cannibal story. It would be like asking her where she had heard about the murderesses in New Zealand. This was long before internet — this was when neither of us even had access to the high school library. How did she learn so much about the world? I do not remember if it baffled me. I was malleable then, but not curious.

THE HIGH SCHOOL LIBRARY WOULD SOON OPEN ITS DOOR TO US — to me, to be precise. For the first year of high school, I had worked studiously; with perfect scores, I was one of the few chosen students to be granted the privilege of using the library. Others would only be allowed into the reading room, where most books were academically oriented. I had toiled through several of the mathematics and physics books, the best among them written by the Soviets and the Romanians.

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I was in a hurry to become an adult. To be old as soon as possible, so I could stop being young.

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Xian read the card catalogue, and I walked between the shelves with stacks of borrowing requests. In this way we had found the writers we would read together: Romain Rolland, Albert Camus, Françoise Sagan, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. There were long afternoons on Saturdays when we took turns to read aloud chapters from *The Tale of Genji* to each other, and then *Tender Is the Night*, *The Garden of Eden*. The last had converted us into dedicated readers of Hemingway, and we read *The Nick Adams Stories*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and other Hemingway novels. Our favorite story was called “The Last Good Country.” When I say our favorite, I mean Xian’s favorite. I did not often have opinions then.

Then we discovered D. H. Lawrence. Sometimes we read side by side, sometimes to each other: *Sons and Lovers*, *Women in Love*, *The Rainbow*. At an age when everything feels permeable, one friend’s obsession easily becomes another’s. And obsession can lead even a malleable person to strong opinions. For a while we argued about two Lawrence stories, pitching them against each other as two gladiators, as though in our world only one of them should be allowed to exist.

The two stories: my choice was “The Princess,” Xian’s, “The Fox.” In each story a character is killed: a man who seems to have every right to live but is shot dead after he is thought to have abducted and raped the Princess; a woman whose death is wished for by another character – a man who is in love with her best friend – and is made to happen by the story. Xian did not like the dramatic change of the Princess after a mere sexual encounter with the man. The Princess asked him to make love to her and then decided that she did not like it, Xian said; she did not have to like it, but

there was no need for her to pretend that her entire being was shattered. I opposed the perfunctory death of the woman, which does not turn her from an essential character into an extraneous one: death is but only a convenient solution.

Lawrence was the first writer who made life make sense to us. Or, a more precise way to say it is this: Lawrence admitted us into a world more extraordinary than our sensible one. We were living, I now know, in a puritan society then. But Lawrence gave us tortuous riddles and distorting rituals, men and women that we wanted to be our own makings. In possessing us, he granted us possessions: unexperienced desires and wonderments, unwarranted griefs and disillusion.

WHY ARE YOU NOT WRITING? Xian still asked me in high school and, later, when we were in college.

What should I write about?

Strange people, weird happenings, she said. A fox with a pair of wings. A sun frozen in midair. Anything you can make up.

I don't want to write, I said. Why don't you yourself write?

I'm not disciplined, she said. That's why.



I WOULD NOT CALL MYSELF DISCIPLINED. I was only malleable, and for the longest time I considered that a reliable strength of mine. Malleability would never make an interesting person, but it did give me an achievable goal: I wanted a life as solid as a Chekhov story. I didn't mind being called conventional. Or stolid. Or nondescript. A disciple of Chekhov thinks little of those adjectives.

It made me proud, even, to think of myself being as beguiling as a Chekhovian character.

And then, imagine this: one day that character wakes up and finds herself in a Shakespeare play.

O, the horror of being in the wrong story. Ask Constance. Ask Lear. Ask me.

THE GIRLS IN NEW ZEALAND would do well in a Lawrence story or a Shakespeare play. The girls who lost their legs, too. Xian and I— or who we once were — could have become one of those pairs. What saved, or diverted, us? She had thought if one of us could become a writer, the extraordinary would be corralled into stories; I had thought that if I rushed into an ordinary life, I would be free.

After I gave birth to my elder son, Xian called. In no time you'll make yourself into a perfect suburban housewife and mother, she said.

I don't see why that is a problem, I said.

You could've chosen differently.

Like what? I said.

Like writing, she said. Where were the ambition and the wildness we once shared?

I didn't know if I was ever ambitious. I was not wild. Or even young. I was in a hurry to become an adult. To be old as soon as possible, so I could stop being young.

Domesticated, Xian had said of me in that phone call. After that we faded from each other's life.

A FEW MONTHS BEFORE MY ELDER SON'S DEATH, Xian had called me out of the blue. So, you've become a writer, she said.

Yes, I said.

No offense, but I haven't read any of your books, she said.

I said that I didn't imagine she would like what I wrote.

In fact, I don't read fiction anymore, she said.

The statement, more tragic than all Shakespearean tragedies combined, shook me. What do you read? I asked.

Not much, she said. Reading requires discipline, and you know I'm not disciplined.

MY ELDER SON AND HIS BEST FRIEND next to the Tibetan river: they were young then. I was your age once – this was one of the last things I said to him. Yet that didn't save him. I spent my youth hurrying into adulthood. Unlike me, he would have taken his time to become a Chekhovian character, if at all. Before that he would have all the Shakespearean passions to live through, and many, in Shakespeare's plays, do not flinch when they take their own lives.

Nothing is more fatal than being young. Not all survive, but those who do, they wake up and find something missing, irretrievably and irreplaceably. They then earn that word – forever – which even the most brilliant young minds misunderstand.

WHY ARE YOU NOT WRITING, Xian asked. But perhaps what she said, all those years ago, was this: you will, one day, because I have said so, and that's why.

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**YIYUN LI** is the author of seven books, including *Must I Go*. Her books have won awards including PEN/Jean Stein, PEN/Hemingway, and many others. She teaches at Princeton University.

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