

BUYING A FISHING ROD
FOR MY GRANDFATHER

S T O R I E S

GAO XINGJIAN

Translated from the Chinese by Mabel Lee



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Cramp. His stomach is starting to cramp. Of course, he thought he could swim farther out. But about a kilometer from shore his stomach is starting to cramp. At first he thinks it's a stomachache—that will pass if he keeps moving. But when his stomach keeps tightening, he stops swimming any farther and feels it with his hand. The right side is hard, and he knows it's a cramp in his stomach because of the cold water. He hadn't exercised enough to prepare himself before entering the water. After dinner, he had set off alone from the little white hostel and had come to the beach. It was early autumn, windy, and at dusk, few people were going into the water. Everyone was either chatting or playing poker. In the middle of the day men and women were lying everywhere on the beach, but now there were only five or six people playing volleyball, a young woman in a red swimsuit, the others young men. The swimsuit and the trunks were all dripping wet—they'd just come out of the water. On this autumn day, the water was probably too cold for them. Along the whole coastline no one else was in the water. He had gone straight into the water without looking back, thinking that the woman might be watching him. He can't see them now. He looks

back, toward the sun. It's setting, about to set behind the rehabilitation hospital's beachfront pavilion on the hill. The lingering brilliant yellow rays of the sun hurt his eyes, but he can see the beachfront pavilion on top of the hill, the outline of the hazy treetops above the coast road, and the boat-shaped rehabilitation hospital from the first floor up; anything below can't be seen, because of the surging sea and the direct rays of the sun. Are they still playing volleyball? He is treading water.

White-crested waves on the ink green sea. The surging waves surround him, but no fishing boats are at work. Turning his body, he is borne up by the waves. Up ahead on the gray-black sea is a dark spot, far in the distance. He drops down between the waves and can no longer see the surface of the sea. The sloping sea is black and shiny, smoother than satin. The cramp in his stomach gets worse. Lying on his back and floating on the water, he massages the hard spot on his abdomen until it hurts less. Diagonally in front, above his head, is a feathery cloud; up there, the wind must be even stronger.

As the waves rise and fall, he is borne up and then dropped between them. But just floating like this is useless. He has to swim quickly toward shore. Turning, he tries hard to keep his legs pressed together and, by so doing, counteract the wind and the waves to enhance his speed. But his stomach that had gained some slight relief again starts hurting. This time the pain comes faster. He

feels his right leg immediately become stiff, and the water go right over his head. He can see only ink green water, so limp and, moreover, extremely peaceful, except for the rapid string of bubbles he breathes out. His head emerges from the water and he blinks, trying to shake the water from his eyelashes. He still can't see the coastline. The sun has set, and the sky above the undulating hills glows with the color of roses. Are they still playing volleyball? That woman, it's all because of that red swimsuit of hers. He's sinking again, surrendering to the pain. He rapidly strikes out with his arms but, taking in air, swallows a mouthful of water, salty seawater, and coughing feels like a needle being jabbed into his stomach. He has to turn again, to lie flat on his back with his arms and legs apart. This way he can relax and let the pain subside a little. The sky above has turned gray. Are they still playing volleyball? They are important. Did the woman in the red swimsuit notice him entering the water, and will they look out to sea? That dark spot back there in the gray-black sea . . . is it a small boat? Or is it a pontoon that has broken loose from its mooring, and would anyone be concerned with what has happened to it? At this point, he can rely only upon himself. Even if he calls out, there is only the sound of the surging waves, monotonous, never ending. Listening to the waves has never been so lonely. He sways, but instantly steadies himself. Next, an icy current charges relentlessly by and carries him, helpless, along with it. Turning on his side, with his

left arm stroking out, his right hand pressing against his abdomen, and his feet kicking, he massages. It still hurts, but it's bearable. He knows he can now depend only on the strength of his own kicking to fight his way out of the cold current. Whether or not he can bear it, he'll just have to, because this is the only way he'll be able to save himself. Don't take it too seriously. Serious or not, he has a cramp in the abdomen and he's one kilometer from shore, out in deep sea. He's not sure anymore if it's one kilometer, but senses that he's been floating in line with the coast. The strength of his kicking barely offsets the thrust of the current. He must struggle to get out of it, or else before too long he'll be like that dark spot floating on the waves, and vanish into the gray-black sea. He must endure the pain, he must relax, he must kick as hard as he can, he can't slacken off, and above all he mustn't panic. With great precision he has to coordinate his kicking, breathing, and massaging. He can't be distracted by any other thoughts, and he can't allow any thoughts of fear. The sun has set very quickly, and there is a hazy gray above the sea, but he can't see any lights on the shore yet. He can't even see the coast clearly, or the curves of the hills. His feet have kicked something! He panics, and feels a spasm in his stomach—sharp and painful. He gently moves his legs; there are stinging circles on his ankles. He has run into the tentacles of a jellyfish and he sees the gray-white creature, like an open umbrella, with thin floating membranous lips.

He is perfectly capable of grabbing it and pulling out its mouth and its tentacles. Over the past few days he has learned from the children living here by the sea how to catch and preserve jellyfish. Below the windowsill of his hostel window, there are seven salted jellyfish with their tentacles and mouths pulled out. Once the water is squeezed out, all that remain are sheets of shriveled skin, and he too will be just a piece of skin, a corpse, no longer able to float to the shore. Let the thing live. But he wants to live even more, and he will never catch jellyfish again—that is, if he can return to shore—and he won't even go into the sea again. He kicks hard, his right hand pressed against his stomach. He stops thinking about anything else, only about kicking in rhythm, evenly, as he pushes through the water. He can see the stars . . . they are wonderfully bright . . . in other words, his head is now pointing in the direction of the coast. The cramp in his abdomen has gone but he keeps rubbing it carefully, even though this slows him down. . . .

When he emerges from the sea and comes onto the shore, the beach is completely deserted. The tide is coming in again and he thinks he was helped by the tide. The wind blowing on his bare body is colder than it had been in the seawater, and he shivers. He collapses onto the beach, but the sand is no longer warm. Getting to his feet, he immediately starts running. He's in a hurry to tell people he's just escaped death. In the front hall of the hostel the same

group is playing poker. They are all looking intently at the faces or at the cards of their opponents, and no one bothers to look up at him. He goes back to his own room, but his roommate, who is probably still chatting in the room next door, isn't there. He takes a towel from the windowsill, aware that the jellyfish, with a coat of salt on them and squashed under a rock outside his window, are still full of water. Afterward, he puts on fresh clothes and shoes and, feeling warm, returns alone to the beach.

The sound of the sea is all-embracing. The wind is stronger and lines of gray-white waves are charging onto shore. The black seawater suddenly spreads out, and because he doesn't jump in time, his shoes get soaked. He walks a little farther off, following the shore, along the dark beach. There is no longer any starlight. He hears voices, male and female, and the figures of three people. He stops. They are pushing two bicycles, and one of them has a girl with long hair sitting on the pillion. The wheel sinks into the sand and the person pushing seems to be struggling. But they keep talking and laughing; the voice of the girl sitting on the pillion is particularly happy. They stop in front of him, holding their bicycles. A young guy takes a big bag from the back rack of the other bicycle and hands it to the woman. They start taking off their clothes. Two skinny boys, stark naked and waving their arms, prance about, yelling: "It's really cold, it's really cold!" There is also the happy, cackling laughter of the girl.

"Do you want to drink it now?" asks the girl leaning on the bicycle.

They go over, take a wine bottle from the girl, take turns drinking from the bottle, pass it back to the girl, then run toward the sea.

"Hey! Hey!"

"Hey—"

The tide noisily charges forward and keeps rising.

"Hurry back!" The girl screams out, but it is only the crashing of the waves that respond.

In the faint light reflected on the sea surging up to the shore, he sees that the girl leaning on the bicycle is supporting herself on crutches.

