

A Farm in the Desert

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As the daughter of peasants, I know what a struggle it is for an entire family to survive on the meager earnings brought in from the fields. I can see this struggle in the heavy wrinkles on my young parents' foreheads and their stooped gait as they come home for the night. They have given everything they have so that my brothers, sisters and I could get a complete education and live a more comfortable life. I have watched their health deteriorate and their eyes fill with hopelessness as they have toiled, day after day, to bring us a better life. Now, as a college graduate, I have the knowledge and power to improve the desperate situation of my parents and impoverished people like them. This is my life's work, and my firm commitment.

My hometown is located in a remote area surrounded, not by beautiful grasslands and limpid rivers, but a vast expanse of sand dunes as far as the eye can see. We are a pastoral community, and for over one hundred years the people of my village have made their living by farming the arid land. Traditionally, local people grew wheat, potatoes, beans and rapeseed, and enjoyed bountiful harvests. But for the past decade, most of the families in my village have not even been able to produce enough food to feed their own families. The desert is slowly expanding into our farmland, making our former way of life impossible. Due to government restructuring, the amount of land that each person owns is not sufficient to produce any substantial harvest. To make matters worse, most of the small fields that villagers own are littered with sand and stones, making them useless for farming. Fields that otherwise would be productive are often desiccated because of the unreliability of our village's irrigation system.

The barrenness of our village's fields has driven the people to find other means of income. The people in my family, like many in my village, make money doing unskilled migrant construction work such as mixing mud for houses and building roads. They also dig for caterpillar fungus, a bitter herb which is used to make medicine that is sold overseas. Except for these two options, there are no other known ways to earn money to survive. The problem with both of these sources of income is that they are unstable and unreliable. People who do construction work are very often cheated out of their pay. Often the construction manager promises to pay the workers one month after they finish construction, but when they go to collect their payments, the construction manager is gone, and they end up getting paid absolutely nothing. Recently, to protect the ecological balance, a new law was passed that forbids people in my area from digging caterpillar fungus. Because villagers have difficulty earning an income, it is becoming very common that, in addition to not having enough money to support their children's education, many families do not have enough money to buy food and clothing.

It wasn't always like this in my village. For hundreds of years, we lived in a different area, Longyangxia town. At that time our fields were productive and many villagers could live comfortably off of the income that they made growing different fruits and vegetables such as tomatoes, watermelons, pears, apples, eggplants, and peppers. A clean spring flowed out of the mountain directly in front of my home. Although I was too small to remember it vividly now, I feel an immense fondness for my former hometown. In the fall, fruit was so bountiful that it

seemed unlimited, and some days after working the field my family would sit under the shade of the fruit tree, next to the spring, and eat apricots, pears and apples until our stomachs ached. In the autumn, all of the village children would set out with small baskets into the woods and compete to collect the most mushrooms. After coming home our with baskets full, we would fry them and then feast.

In 1987 the local government decided to build a hydroelectric station in Longyangxia town, and everyone had to move. A few days before they completed the dam, we packed all of our belongings onto a small hand truck and drove to our new designated home several kilometers up the mountain. I was six years old. I struggled to hold onto my seat as the vehicle rumbled unsteadily along the dry rocky path. When it stopped, I saw nothing but tall dry grass all around. My parents' faces looked like stone as they unpacked the truck. There was no river, and no drinking water nearby. There would be no more fruit, and no more mushroom picking competitions, because all that surrounded our new home was grass and sand. I knew that our life would never be the same.



I remember clearly the day I went back to see what was left of my village. Everything that I had known and loved in my childhood was gone, buried under a lake. A Chinese villager in a boat now stood with his pole in hand catching fish above my former home. I felt empty and small beside the shores of this huge, unwelcome lake.

In our new village, we could no longer rely on farming for an income, so my parents were

constantly absent, doing migrant work to earn as much money as they could to support us. Waiting for them to return from digging medical herbs was an exercise in hope and despair for us young children. We hoped that luck would take their side, as it did on rare occasions, and they would return bearing gifts of candies and toys, but we dreaded their more common empty handed return for it would mean that they would be leaving us again all too soon. On the day that I knew they would return, I would stand at the edge of the village and stare at the bend in the road on which they would arrive. I stood very still and stared for hours, until my eyes became red and sore. Sometimes, my body would fill with anticipation as I saw what looked like their small hand truck round the corner, but then the truck would disappear into a cloud of dust and I would realize that my mind had been playing tricks on me. When they did finally arrive, I could tell right away how their luck had been by the looks on their faces. On the bad days, their eyes were sallow and their faces drained of energy. Even on the good days, when they smiled from ear to ear and carried bags of chewing gum and candy for us children, they looked pale and emaciated. But we children were so excited by the prospect of sugar that we soon forgot the toll that the work was taking on our parents.

Tasteless black wheat bread was our family's habitual diet. We didn't have the money to buy a modern electric wheat mill, and instead used a stone mill, which produced wheat of terrible quality. Few products could be made out of this wheat, and one was the tasteless dark bread that my grandmother baked every day. Breakfast, lunch, or dinner, despite our stomachs' protests, we knew that we could expect the same black wheat bread to greet us at the table. My grandmother tried cooking the bread with rapeseed oil to give it some flavor, but instead of improving, it took on the characteristics of the oil, gooey and sour. After years of this diet, I developed an aversion to the bread that was so strong that I had to choke it down with water. The ubiquitous bread came to symbolize my childhood, pasting itself over earlier memories of fruit and mushroom gathering. Today, being near the bread fills me with fear and revulsion, and takes me back to a childhood of grumbling stomachs and absent parents.

Before the move, my villagers did not live lavishly, but we got by, and we were satisfied to work the land and take care of our families. But when all sources of income were eradicated by the dam, my village became stuck in a cycle of never ending poverty. Education was the only way out. Unfortunately, most of the villagers didn't see this—they still don't. Lack of knowledge and experience made the majority of local people in my hometown think that sending children to school was a wasteful way to spoil children into uselessness. So, most parents kept their children at home after primary school so that they could help bring in money, do housework, and care for animals. I began primary school in a class of ten, but only two of us went on to middle school. The others were pulled out to become unskilled laborers, herders, and housewives. Even those with high scores in primary school were taken out because of their parent's perception that earning money now was more important than spending it on a useless education. It was as if the entire village had their eyes covered in thick mud.

My parents were different. They kept all of us in school for as long as we could pass the end of year exams which determined entrance into middle school, high school, and eventually college. Both of my parents are illiterate, and never attended a day of school. But, they could see through the mud that blurred the vision of our fellow villagers, and they decided upon the birth of their first child that they wanted a better life for their children. They knew that we could get this through education. For a long time, I didn't see this, and I thought that they were no different than everyone else—caring only about money. They seldom encouraged us to study hard and didn't praise us when we got prizes for our high scores in class. Sometimes I spent hours brooding over their frugality. I also yearned for the life of my richer middle school classmates. I stared at their leather shoes with envy, detested my passed down clothing that never fit right, and suffered every step home as I watched my classmates enjoy the bus ride that their pocket money had afforded them.

One way that my villagers could earn a meager income was selling wheat flour in the county town. My parents did this every week, and one day when I walked through the market on the way home, I ran into my father bartering with a customer. My father handed the man a 76 kilo sack without weighing it. The customer didn't trust my father, and with disdain asked him to weigh it in front of him. Although the man was being very rude, my father kept a smile on his face and assured him that it was more than 76 kilos, he had weighed it that very morning in the

mill. The man persisted in his demand that the flour be weighed, treating my father like he was nothing more than the dirt under the man's shiny city shoes. Seeing my father treated this way, my eyes began to well up with tears. I wished that I hadn't seen this horrible transaction, and that I could disappear from this terrible place. Still amiable, my father agreed to weigh the flour again, it was 79 kilos. The man grabbed the sack from my father's hands and thrust his money at him. He didn't pay any extra for the extra weight. I was so ashamed. I could not understand why my parents did business with such people, why they were willing to let people treat them like dogs just to sell one more sack of flour. I soon found my answer.

One day soon after, I asked my father why he had suffered such ill treatment from the customer just to sell a bag of wheat. "To earn money" he replied curtly. But I was unsatisfied, my pride wounded. "But why do you let people treat you like that?" I persisted. My father turned to me confidently and his voice softened "so that you can go to school" At that very moment, I realized that I had made a shameful mistake in assuming that my parents cared only about money. It was all for us, everything they did, everything they had suffered through, it was so their children could have a better future. The price of our future was higher than even their pride. It was a miracle to send four children to school in our village, and my parents made it happen by giving up everything for us. This day I realized that although poverty weakens some, it had made my parents even stronger. From then on, I learned to trust them. Even though I didn't always understand them, I knew that they had nothing but my best interests in mind.

This trust soon proved important, for when I was twelve years old, without much explanation, my parents pulled me out of school to act as a surrogate mother for my aunt. They were confident in their decision, and although it didn't make sense to me, I agreed without much of a fight. At that time, my mother's sister had given birth to a baby girl. Neither she nor her husband could take care of the child, because they both needed to attend to their jobs in the county town as teachers. My younger sister was too young to take on such a task, and my older sister was needed at home, so I was chosen. In Tibetan culture, it is expected that relatives will help each other in this way, so I didn't think much of my new fate. In fact, I looked forward to moving in with my aunt and uncle in the county town, because I knew that there I would finally be able to wear nice clothes, watch TV, and eat fruit and candy—I would have the life that I had dreamt of and envied since my family had moved.

The journey to my aunt's home took almost four hours on the bus. The bus was very crowded and my mother and I had to stand in the aisle for the entire trip along with a crowd of other passengers. While the others looked sick and exhausted, I was quite happy and excited the entire time—it was the first time in my life that I had ridden on anything larger than our family's small hand tractor. Some of the passengers wore tattered clothes like me, and they chatted happily with each other about their lives and families. Other passengers wore new clothes, suits, and shiny leather shoes. These people remained quiet the entire trip, and recoiled in disgust every time one of the villagers came near them when the bus swerved for a turn in the road. Some of them wore a look of disdain so fixed it appeared as though they were wearing masks.

When we arrived at my aunt's home, there were so many new and amazing sights that I could barely contain my amazement. I stood frozen in the doorway, my mouth ajar, as I stared at the glazed tile floor. Further inside the room, the television, washing machine and refrigerator

enchanted me. Never before had I seen such amazing machines. My aunt offered tea to my mom and handed me a chunk of chewing gum wrapped in glassy paper. I took the gum and held it tightly in my fist, afraid that someone would take it away because it did not truly belong to me. My aunt noticed my trepidation, and asked me to unwrap and enjoy the gum. As I slid the wrapper off of the perfectly shaped pink rectangle, my mouth watered. When I finally managed to get it into my mouth I chewed voraciously and made the biggest bubbles possible. I chewed the gum for hours, until it lost its flavor and could no longer produce bubbles, even longer after it had formed into a glob of gray cement on my teeth; I refused to spit it out. It wasn't until my aunt handed me her baby that the gum lost its interest.

The girl was about four months old, and she felt light in my arms. She looked at me strangely, without blinking, and I could see my face reflected in her eyes. For the next few days it was just her and I alone in the expansive and mysterious house. Taking care of her was harder than I had imagined. I had to keep an eye on her every minute except during the rare times when she fell asleep. Days turned into months, and the months stretched out into two years. In the beginning, I had a difficult time being a mother. One time, the baby wet herself during her nap. Her trousers were soaked as if they had just been taken out of the wash. The baby began screaming for food, and when I approached her to try to solve the problem, a terrible smell drifted towards me. I had never dealt with a diaper before, and wasn't quite sure what to do. Eventually, after much confusion, I managed to make her clean and dry. I soon became more adept at the task, but never quite got used to the terrible smell of sullied clothing when the baby had wet herself. But I was there for her first words, and saw her first steps, and over time, I grew to love taking care of her.

My aunt and uncle were home at dinner and on the weekends, when they would help me study Chinese, Tibetan and math on my own. They were caring teachers. They tracked my progress and gave me fair amounts of homework. Although I did not move along as quickly as my peers who were in school, I made progress.

Soon the young girl was big enough to attend kindergarten with her mother during the day, and it was time for me to move on. I began going to grade three in the county primary school. My aunt paid for everything, including my clothing and tuition. Now, two years later, I finally understood my parents' decision to make me a foster mother to my cousin. I never could have had this kind of an education on the meager income they earned as farmers. Although I hadn't understood it at the time, taking me out of school to live with my aunt and uncle would ultimately be the best way for me to get an education. My parents had pulled me out of school not to reduce their own burdens, but with my future in mind.

Unfortunately, sometimes just when everything in life is working out for the best, disaster strikes. In my family, my grandmother had always herded the livestock so that my four siblings and I could attend school. But this arrangement would change swiftly, and to everyone's detriment. One cold winter morning during physics class someone came to the classroom door looking for me. I was asked to leave the class, and when I went outside I saw my sister crying inconsolably. Without her saying a word, I knew that my grandmother had died. I asked her what was wrong and in a whisper she confirmed my fears. My grandmother was only 56 years old, and she had passed away quite suddenly while herding sheep outside of our village. She had been completely

alone, and no one had been able to help her when she collapsed. I always wonder if it hadn't been for our poverty, which forced my grandmother to herd the family's livestock alone, would she still be here with us today?

The next day my sister and I headed home with heavy hearts for my grandmother's funeral. The house was humming with the sound of scriptures being chanted by loved ones, and the air was thick with incense. The house was abuzz with activity, but the sorrow hanging in the air made everything move in slow motion. I sat in the corner and cried until my eyes were so puffy that I could not see, and my cheeks burned with the salt from my tears. My mother found me and said "good child, don't be so sad. It is a law that nobody can escape". I knew that her grief was far heavier than mine, because she had lost her own mother, and she would never be a daughter again, but still she tried to comfort me. As I watched her walk away into the kitchen, my eyes hung on her shadow, and I became desperately sad. I simply could not accept that my dear grandmother was gone forever. I stood up and began searching for her in every room of the house. Eventually, I found her, resting quietly under the light of a large butter lamp in the prayer room. She looked peacefully asleep, but knowing that she would never again awake to this life filled me with pain. I knelt down on the floor next to her and sobbed bitterly. My mourning was interrupted by my aunt's soft voice "mother's soul can not go if you cry". I didn't want to hold grandmother back, so I wiped my sore cheeks with the sleeve of my jacket, and tried to concentrate on our happy times together.

The next day, my elder sister and I left early in the morning in order to attend our first class on time. My father told us before we left that we would not have to follow the customary mourning rituals like everyone else in our family. According to Tibetan customs, the relatives of a recently deceased loved one must not wash or comb their hair, change their clothing, or sing for forty nine days after the person's passing. After this amount of time, it is said that the deceased will have been reborn somewhere else, and life can go back to normal. My sister and I wanted to follow the custom to honor and protect our grandmother's soul, but we because we were students, we could not. We waited only seven days before washing up and combing our hair. At school, we had to be clean or we would be kicked out. So we could not properly mourn our grandmother's death.

Now that my grandmother was gone, there was no one to take care of my family's livestock. Both of my parents had to work the fields—our entire family depended on this income. One of my siblings would have to leave school to care for the livestock. It was an impossible decision, and my parents couldn't bring themselves to choose which of their four children would be pulled out of school. Finally, my younger sister stood out and made the decision that she would be the one to drop out and herd the goats and sheep. This decision would drastically alter her future.

I often wonder, if my family had not been so poor, how different my younger sister's life may have been. Now, she is married and the mother of a three year old girl. She herds livestock during the day, and sometimes helps my parents work the fields. Were it not for our poverty, she would be a university graduate like me. I can sometimes see the regret in her eyes, and feel her mourning the future that she will never have. But she never complains, because she knows that her fate is no one's fault but poverty's. Perhaps nothing can be done now to alter her destiny, but

when I look into her eyes and see the pain and regret, I know that I must do everything I can to stop other young girls from falling into her situation.

The best weapon I have to fight against poverty is my own education. With this tool, I can help the people in my community who are struggling to meet their basic needs. I knew this in middle school, and I studied harder than I ever had before, and searched out every possible chance to expand my education. One day, the school leaders told us that there would soon be an opportunity for a few students to study English on scholarship at the provincial college. I resolved to put all of my effort into this competition. Several teachers from Qinghai Normal University came and gave us oral and written tests in Chinese and Tibetan. As the tests proceeded, the list of candidates' names grew shorter and shorter, but after the second test, my name still remained. At the third and final test, one of the exam proctors asked whether I wanted to be a teacher, and if so, why. He told me the answer was not very important, what mattered was that I spoke loudly, clearly and confidently. I knew that this would be my one chance; it was time for me to express myself. I put everything that I had into my answer.



At the end of the semester, my teacher told me that I had been chosen among sixty students. I was brimming with joy. My parents were proud and said that I had excellent Karma. I didn't quite know what lay ahead of me, but I knew that it was the beginning of a new life. While my family celebrated, I saw my sister sitting in the corner staring at the TV. She appeared to be ignoring our conversation, but I knew better. She couldn't hide her sadness at her own fate. Her

head hung low as two happy lovers frolicked about on the screen in front of her, celebrating some unknown joy. For just a second my eyes met hers, and in that moment, I made a promise to myself and to her that I would do everything in my power to find a way to help her.

On the first day of class, I did not know one single English word. A strange looking man with a gray beard came into our classroom and began speaking; I didn't understand anything he said. He was American and he was speaking English. He had two Tibetan students with him, and they all spoke with ease in this strange new language. The foreigner spoke, and the students translated his words into Tibetan. I envied their skill. At the end of his speech, the foreigner handed us all a small piece of paper with strange writing on it. I had no idea what the symbols meant or what I was to do with them. I looked down at my paper, it said "lily". I soon learned that this was my new English name.

We had many foreign teachers, and they only used English in class. At first it was very difficult, and all of the students struggled to understand. I still remember watching our first film after class, and only understanding two words in two hours, “yes” and “no”. Sometimes it seemed impossible to make sense of what we were learning, to remember it all. Whenever I felt like giving up, I thought of my parents and my dear sister, and buried my head back in my books. Some nights I would stay up as late as two AM memorizing words and going over lessons. But the more I studied, the easier it became, and soon I was conversing in English with my teachers and classmates with the skill of the two students who I had so envied my first day in class.

As soon as my English knowledge was sufficient, I learned from my teachers how to do small scale development projects, and I wrote a proposal to bring a new form of income to my village. After a few months of anxious waiting, my greenhouse proposal was funded by the Australian Embassy. When I went back to my village to begin construction, I felt as though I had finally accomplished my dream. Now my villagers would be able to increase their income by 1,000 rmb per year selling livestock that they raised in the houses. They would also be able to eat the vegetables that they could grow in the houses. The greenhouses were an oasis in our desert farm town. This was the first project of its kind to be started by a villager. I am one of only four girls in my village with a college education, and the usefulness of the skills that I had gained in school did not go unnoticed.

Last winter, I went home to celebrate Tibetan New Year with my family and collect information for a new proposal for a health clinic in my village. I was very sick for several days, and during the New Year’s festivities, I stayed in the back room of our house wrapped in blankets, writing up my notes for the proposal. One afternoon, while everyone else was celebrating and eating, my mother came and sat beside me. “I know that this new project will be successful” she assured me as she took my hand in hers. “How can you be so sure that we will get funding?” I asked my nose running. “I had a dream last night”, she explained, “The village doctor came and offered me a plain piece of worn out cloth. When he spread it out before me, it transformed into a long white kathang scarf. It was for you.” I said nothing, just sniffled and held her hand. The next night, I too dreamed of Kathang, of bountiful fruit, and clean clear mountain water. I saw my village thriving, and laughed as I held hands with my sister and raced to fill my basket with the most mushrooms.