

## Be with Him for a While

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My friend Fei Min wasn't a pretty woman, but it was impossible to turn her down when she smiled at you.

She'd been alone up until we graduated from college. It wasn't because no one wanted to date her; it was just that she hid her feelings and remained indifferent.

After college, she started working for a newspaper. The more people she came into contact with, the more her loneliness stood out. Then she fell in love with a sculptor. It lasted from winter to the following fall. I didn't get to see her for three months after that winter.

When spring came, she called me. "Come take in a movie with me, OK?" I knew she loved going to movies, as she often said it felt great to see a whole lively world that has nothing to do with you flash before your eyes.

She was visibly thinner. I asked her where she'd been, but got no response. Her head was still raised high, but there was no more smile in her eyes, her former energetic self gone. That day she insisted on seeing *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*. I clearly recall the lovemaking scene between the male and female leads, not only because it was beautifully done but also because Fei Min had said something that was so unlike her: "At least she could give him something."

A month later she was gone: suicide.

I couldn't believe that such a colorful person would disappear so suddenly. Her parents, losing a daughter in their old age, were nearly beside themselves with grief. Yesterday I mustered up the will

to take care of her stuff. Her books, newspaper reports, and diaries all reminded me of what she'd been like when we were at school. Fei Min's carefree handwriting left a deep impression, but she was the simplest, the most considerate person I'd ever met. I took her diary home. I don't know what she would've liked me to do with it. Her personality would have dictated that she erase all traces before she left, but she didn't, and I wanted to know why.

Fei Min had never said a bad word about him, not even in the most private form of a diary.

She'd met him while reporting on a modern sculpture show. He was neat and clean, but didn't stand out. The main thing was, he noticed her first; he saw how real she was. Fei Min didn't take the relationship very seriously at first, because he was going abroad soon. She thought the amount of time was just enough for him to take some memories with him without getting hurt.

But one day, he said, "I'm not leaving." It was a cold day. He held her in his arms and sighed. "Don't think I'm just playing with you." What he said and what he thought could mean only one thing—he wanted her. Fei Min had always said that one could be comfortable only in a familiar environment. This was a serious matter; he'd made this decision on account of her, so she thought she should repay him with something more. She turned away all the men whom she'd been seeing. She wrote, "Maybe I am in love with him, maybe I'm not, but I should be sincere. It takes a whole lifetime to make a friend."

Before she made up her mind, Fei Min took a five-day solitary trip to Orchid Island. During the day, she walked to every corner of the island to observe the completely unfamiliar people and scenery. At night, she'd lie in bed, listening to the monotonous and repetitive sounds of waves. She wrote, "Resentment and hatred breed bitterness; love and separation cause suffering. I can't attain enlightenment in such a simple and clean lifestyle. So forget it."

I thought about how she'd often solemnly said, "Love is useless for someone in the modern world; it's too simple and too miserable."

It was truly miserable, because Fei Min wasn't the type to do well in love; she never knew how to "want" something.

He, on the other hand, didn't even notice her disappearance. It didn't matter then, since the two of them actually had such different feelings. So she asked him out and told him, "I'll be with you for a while."

Be with you for a while?!

From then on, he occupied a considerable part of her life. Fei Min was surely the best writer among our college friends; she painted

a vivid picture of him. She knew he'd leave eventually, so she doted on him, particularly because he was a man-child who wanted but didn't dare, an abstruse and yet transparent person. What Fei Min liked most was his conflicting personality, which, coupled with the tragic mission he gave her, let her fully enjoy playing the role of a giver. She didn't complain at all.

He needed lots of love. One day he told Fei Min about an earlier love affair that had soured, which had turned him into a man overnight and helped him understand the passion of love and desire between the sexes. Fei Min had met him, then, at the moment when his suffering was most unbearable. He said, "Maybe I'm no longer in the mood for love, or maybe the mood hasn't arrived yet. But now my heart feels so empty I want to grab something to fill it up." Without any regard for the consequences, Fei Min decided to try her luck. He didn't pay her one tenth of the attention he'd given to his former girlfriend, but Fei Min was easily moved.

In the beginning, he did a lot of things with Fei Min, spending all night walking down many alleys of Taipei. Dark nights make it easy for people to pour out their hearts. She wrote, "He's just like an exclamation mark; everything feels real when he looks at you." Once they returned from a rowing trip in Hsintien around eleven at night. Neither of them said much before they started walking toward Taipei. On the way home he told her something she'd never forget: "I need lots and lots of love." She saw him staring straight ahead and his face looked calm and burning hot at the same time. She felt pangs of love for him and she started to give him whatever he wanted.

They quickly got involved for another reason—he was the first man to kiss Fei Min.

Her feelings were stirred. Before then, she'd doubted her love for him. That day they went to the Starlit Tower at the Century Plaza Hotel. Dusk started to envelop them. She never liked dusk and her face showed her loneliness. He kissed her, as the stars started to twinkle.

Someone once said, "A person loses independence in love." She began to worry about him.

His father was very well known in art circles and his family situation was complicated. He loved his father to the point of worshipping him. He had all but forgotten himself. The forgotten part, including every moment of their relationship and his lost happiness, was kept by Fei Min. But she often wondered where she belonged in his heart. Maybe nowhere.

He didn't take good care of himself and he particularly liked to stay up all night. She wasn't the bossy type, but she tried several

times to tell him to attend to himself. She failed, so she'd get up late at night to call him. His deep voice coming from the other end of the line made her heart ache. He said, "I'm sitting here not knowing what to do." She'd go over and take his hands in hers, afraid that he would die of loneliness. His life was complicated, so she hid her sophisticated, pragmatic side and showed him her more naive and joyful side. That, after all, was something he could handle.

As someone who was attentive to details, Fei Min liked to live a refreshing, active life. I recalled how back at college she would call me out on late winter nights and toss me a box of ice cream. We'd sit on the sidewalk and finish the ice cream, trembling in the cold wind. She'd say, "Cold and warmth are all in you head." Sometimes she'd come over with a bottle of rice liquor and a bag of peanuts. She'd bang on the door and say, "Hurry! Hurry up! The road to drunken stupor is safe, and we ought to travel it more often. Otherwise, it's not worth the journey." For her, life was filled with turning points. She wasn't talkative but liked a good laugh. Serious matters would turn to nothing with her laugh. But she didn't seem to be able to laugh off their relationship.

When it first started, she was happy and everything was fine.

Spring arrived, and they decided to take a trip. But they couldn't get time off, so they decided to leave on a Friday night, taking the 4:30 morning train to Su-ao. On their way to the station, they walked down every lane along Chungshan North Road, where Fei Min inundated the streets of Taipei with her laughter. Then they boarded the train, waiting for it to leave the station. In the spring evening chill, he held her tightly, which she knew was a silent way of showing his feelings. The scenery on the northeastern coast was magnificent, like a slide show. From late night to dawn, endless unedited images flashed past their eyes. Fei Min knew she must look dreadful after a sleepless night, but he kissed her forehead and said, "You're so pretty." She believed he really loved her.

Nanfang'ao was quiet. No longer laughing, Fei Min lay quietly beside him to bathe in the Pacific coast sun. Love was so colorless, so transparent and pure that it filled her heart to the brim. He gave her many of her firsts, which she collected, the bad along with the good. She was too naive and decent; she didn't know how to fight back, so she took everything, good and bad.

On their way back, the Golden Horse bus twisted and turned on the Taipei-Yilan Highway. He asked, "I'm still young, but have you thought about when you'll get married?" She was obviously under attack, but she still didn't want to fight back. Yes, he was still young, younger than she, actually. He easily beat her with her weakness. The

bus was turning; her heart almost flew out of her chest. When the bus neared mundane, bustling Taipei, she smiled and said, "We don't necessarily get involved because we want to get married, do we?" She looked as understanding as the protagonist, Li Yaxian, in traditional drama, who, upon hearing that her lover, Zheng Yuanhe, had passed the imperial exam, said, "My wish has been fulfilled. Ying-cheng, give the official garment and the imperial edict to Master Cheng and let us return to Chang'an to end my worldly entanglements."

Only Fei Min was understanding; he gave her too many of her firsts and she couldn't get over the impact when he said he needed lots of love. Clearly, she couldn't bear not to give.

When they returned to Taipei, she told him to take the bus home while she walked back from the train station. That was the first time she couldn't force a smile or use her laughter to explain away everything.

He called to ask her out the next day, but she didn't go. She couldn't bear to hear his voice. Fei Min spoiled him to the point that she wouldn't tell him when he made a mistake because she didn't want him to feel bad. He actually showed up at her place. Seeing her smiling face, he said a lot of things, promising words that gave her a sense of security. She wrote in her diary, "But all that was useless. He isn't the best, but he's not someone I can hold on to." Not many people could learn her kind of insight and few could see through every aspect of a matter as she could without letting it bother her. Even someone twenty years older would find it hard to be so thoughtful.

From then on, she still smiled, but only to him did her smile never change. Often, when they sat facing each other, she'd be lost in thought. He'd ask, "Hey, what are you thinking?" Looking at him, she felt even more deeply that they were from two different worlds. She didn't want to think about anything.

She often asked him, "Why did you break up with Li Quantong?" He didn't like talking about it, and even when he did, she could tell he was lying. He always said, "She was too pretty," or "She was so different from most people that I couldn't be her equal." Fei Min remembered everything, even if they were lies; she wanted to see what kind of luck she had when the time came. After they got together, she put aside anything in her life that was unrelated to him. He spent his days pursuing fame and wealth, busy over human relationships and mundane affairs, so she abandoned all worldly matters to be with him. She never talked about her family, her work or her friends. The intensity of their relationship was built upon Fei Min's attenuation, so with the magnification of his world, the more attenuated she became. It was completely out of proportion.

Time flew by. They went on another trip, this time to Hsitou, also at night. He was extremely attentive. They spent the day in Taichung, indulging themselves, like reinless horses.

Dusk at Hsitou was crisp and quiet, veiled in mist. After talking it over for a long time, they finally settled on a log cabin for honeymooners by the forest. Then they took a walk at dusk with the dying sunlight spreading among the tress and seeping into every inch of their bodies. He took lots of black and white pictures of her, showing her at her best: with her head raised, she looked so haughty that no one seemed to matter to her. Fei Min wasn't really pretty, but no one could turn her down. One of our teachers who could tell fortunes once said that Fei Min's looks were too ethereal to be good for her. But when she smiled, you felt you'd seen the essence of happiness, and that it was easily attainable.

When evening arrived, they returned to the log cabin. She showered first, but she had no idea how she'd face him when he came out of the shower. She read a bit and then went out to take in some fresh air. She really didn't know how to be alone with him.

She pretended to be asleep when he emerged from the shower. Turning off the light, he sat on a sofa across from the bed, smoking, as if he'd spend his whole lifetime watching over her. It was strangely quiet in the mountains, which made the sounds of their breathing much louder. She sat up and said, "I can't sleep." He didn't turn on the light, so they just looked at each other in the dark. The night was like a feather duster, brushing every bit of dust from their hearts, leaving only their true feelings in plain view.

She asked him to lie down with her. At first he felt unreasonably cold to her, but everything changed when their bodies touched. They held each other. The price she had to pay to retain the moment forever was to give herself to him.

After that, everything seemed easier, as she couldn't think of anything else to give him. But she wished she could just die that night; love was such a luxury that she could never pay enough for it and it got old quickly. Now she could feel the burden of love.

She didn't know what to do after they returned to Taipei. The only idea flashing repeatedly through her mind was, "Don't think about him." When she couldn't sleep at night, she'd sit at her desk looking at the candle he gave her, not thinking about anything till dawn. She couldn't see him, and the idea that she wouldn't give up until one day she had him all to herself scared her even more. What had happened to her clear-headedness? She could stop herself from going to see him, but for how long? She once ran into a mutual friend, who asked, "Where've you been, Fei Min? He's looking all over for you." She felt

as if she'd been caught in the act and slapped in the face. But she kept smiling. He'd asked her to let her hair grow, but her hair grew very slowly and she couldn't help but have it trimmed. This time it finally got longer. She returned home at midnight one day, trying hard not to think about the line in a poem—Flying over the barren branches but unwilling to settle down. Picking up the phone, she slowly dialed his number—seven-zero-two-eight-nine-seven-four. When the rotary dial for number four returned to its place she was expressionless; the voice from the other end was saying "Hello." She responded with a "Hi." They both fell silent until she finally said, "My hair is longer now." He still sounded so lonely, as if he wanted to hold her tight. He wasn't normally an excitable person, but this time he couldn't go on after saying her name. How wonderful it would be to remain clear-headed, like riding in a car without feeling sleepy even with the monotonous movement of the vehicle. She knew him too well; she wasn't the most arresting scenery on his life's journey. Fei Min wasn't a calculating person and was even less sure of herself when it came to love. Putting down the phone, she went to his office. In the sixth-floor office, motor vehicles could be heard slashing through the deep night. He looked at her and she looked at him. Feelings and moral justice had left no noticeable mark; she picked up the pieces and reentered their realm, without regard for anything. Some people play with feelings with ease while others are defeated each time. She belonged to the latter.

One day she saw Li Quantong. She was certainly pretty, and sharp too. Li walked past them with poise, casting him a glance devoid of love and hate. Li didn't even take her seriously. He was holding her hand, but, without even being aware of it, let go. Controlling herself, Fei Min waited until they reached the overpass, where she pointed at the street and told him to take the bus home. Then she turned around and walked away, without waiting for his decision. She was surrounded by people, but none of them meant anything to her; she was inundated by noises, but she had no idea what they meant. She hadn't cared enough, but now she'd had enough. The bus was nowhere in sight. Teardrops hung on her cheeks, but she didn't dare wipe them off, not because she didn't want to open an old wound—it had already been opened. The bus finally came, but she didn't get on; she couldn't move an inch. Slowly the crowd dispersed. She turned around to see him standing behind her. A play that had been acted out thousands of years ago was still being acted out. She'd never been a good actress; she couldn't even walk on stage, let alone say her lines and look the part. The real cause was the play itself; it was too clichéd and her partner was an emotionless person. Taking her hand, he wanted to say

something, but then stopped. He took her to his office, where he held her tightly in his arms, kissed her and told her, "I don't love Li."

Fei Min would rather he loved Li Quantong. How did he feel anyway?

She felt like his mistress, who saw through everything and decided to be with him without any regard for herself.

Later Fei Min went with a group of journalists to Quemoy. It was during the time when the US had just normalized relations with China and everyone in Taiwan was shaken and agitated. As soon as she left Taipei she wrote to him every day. She suffered severe sea sickness. The waves lapped at the deck, splashing and smashing tens of thousands of drops of water. Lying face down in a hammock, she threw up while she wrote, "Now I know why the mermaid was disillusioned." When she got to Quemoy and saw Liaoluo Bay, she felt the solemnity and vitality of life at a place like that. She forgot everything back in Taiwan; she liked the place.

It was during that month that she saw through everything. "This life is now and will always be the only life to me; it can't get any better, but it can't get any worse either," she wrote. They spent every day visiting places and gathering materials, on a schedule so tight that it was as if they were trying to outrace a bullet. She was exhausted, but felt independent. Being separated from love, she felt more energized, no longer clinging or ambiguous. A place like Quemoy demanded that a person live with the most instinctive and primitive attitude. She saw a lot of things—anticommunist determination and a life of deprivation. What she saw most were granite, the ocean, the trees, and herself.

They stayed upstairs in the County Committee Guest House. Every day after dinner, before the shelling started, they had some free time to take a walk outside in small groups. They'd leave at dusk and return in the dark. She rarely went out with them; instead she'd sit on the second-floor balcony, her mind a blank, watching them disappearing and reappearing before her eyes. She noticed that a male journalist in the group was very friendly and often stayed with her. There had been many who were nice to her, but now she'd rather her life were a blank. She'd stored up everything in her heart and it filled to the brim; the slightest touch would spill its contents all over the place.

She never forgot to tell him in her letters that she missed him.

She bought a pound of knitting wool and started to knit a sweater, feeling like a lonely traveler in a strange town. As she knitted the gray, fuzzy wool, she would often lose herself in her thoughts after a while. None of her letters got a response. Rubbing the unfinished sweater against her cheek, she felt teardrops rolling down. Unable to

stand that sight, the male journalist dragged her out to watch the waves lapping at the levee, to visit the broadcasting station on Ma-shan, to look at the scenery across the straits, to chat with the soldiers in the bunkers, or to taste the Quemoy specialties of crab and Kao-liang Liqueur. But he never said anything about his feelings. He was ten times nicer to her, doted on her with ten times the tenderness, and knew her ten times better than the person whose silence tormented her. She hated herself. The December wind sent chills through her heart.

The closer she was to finishing the sweater, the harder it was for her to finish it. Was that because it felt too much like when love should end but the courage to end it is lacking? She'd put so much into it and so much had happened between them that she couldn't feel the pleasure of completion, whether it ended well or badly. She sent him the sweater when it was finally finished.

She returned to Taipei with nothing added to her suitcase. Fei Min never collected anything, but she did bring back the independence that was a specialty of Quemoy. She didn't want to have anything to do with ambiguity anymore. Their love had no beginning, so there was no need for a formal ending.

He cared even less about her now.

Late one night, her bus passed by his office when she was on a reporting assignment. The building was nearly dark, except for his office, where a dim light shone from his desk lamp, with its yellow hemp lampshade. Fei Min felt as if a rock were pressing down on her, and she could hardly breathe. His father was an accomplished artist with style, manner, talent, focus, and achievement, but, as far as daily life was concerned, he was naive in many aspects. His mother, on the other hand, was very down to earth. Many people exploited his father relentlessly and his father, unaware, seemed to be trying his best to be cheated and scammed. As everything at home was left to his mother's devices, she developed a vigilant attitude and guarded against everyone else. His father's experience prompted his mother to devote all her energy to watching over him, which made him nervous. He respected his father, but he was suffocating under the pressures of taking care of his own and his father's business. It was so late at night now, but he must be occupied by who knows what. He must be seated in front of his desk, stacks of projects piled high before him, but with no idea how to proceed. Yet he didn't want anyone to meddle in whatever he did.

Fei Min needed rest; she knew it, and he must know it too.

From then on, Fei Min guarded herself even more closely. Time passed slowly; she got into the habit of walking aimlessly. Since she couldn't bear sitting alone in her house, she often walked to her

office after dinner or went to windy beaches on weekends and holidays. The crowds on the street numbed her even more.

Her outgoing temperament completely disappeared two months after her return from Quemoy. One day she was sent to report on an art exhibit. It was only when she got to the gallery that she realized it was the opening reception for a joint sculpture show by him and his father. The eye-catching posters could be seen from the building all the way into the door of the gallery. She had to go in, because she wanted to see his success. There was nothing special about the artwork. His youth stood out when contrasted with his father's works, but she could see that his works came out of a hard struggle; he'd told her about every piece—let our environment and the life we love bond tightly together. There were many people there. He was standing where she could see him as soon as she walked through the door. After two months' separation, he must have fallen and gotten up again, for he was standing straight. She knew him all too well; sculpture wasn't his forte, so he was always struggling, suffering. Who knew how much he'd had to struggle to produce these sculptures? But he didn't care much about them. She couldn't be impetuous again; she really had to forget what he'd said about needing a lot of love. Between them there wasn't the modern-style of romance that was filled with café, Picasso, and existentialism. She treated him with the most ancient feeling, which was black and humane. They both understood it; the problem was whether the style of love was progressive or regressive.

He walked over and she smiled. His eyes were still filled with loneliness, the sight of which enraged her. What exactly does he want?

He drove to Ta-chih, a quiet place, with the Grand Hotel standing off in the distance like a dream. He said, "Fei Min, where have you been? I'm so exhausted." She leaned against him, knowing that he wasn't her support and she not his. But there wasn't anything to do, since there were only the two of them and they could only lean against each other, and only body temperature could save them from being frozen to death by love.

He asked her, "What kind of feeling did you get from those sculptures?" Fei Min said, "Very warm." He drew his inspiration from life—a basket of fruit, some simple construction materials, or ordinary people around them, which he arranged so they'd emit their own light. But is art a full-scale copy of reality? Is it a representation of human feeling or spirit? With her years of reporting on arts and culture, she was well aware that creating art from a view of human feeling does not necessarily mean it has the feeling. It was only when the artwork itself has the ability to touch people that it can move people. He was indeed

young, but it was precisely his youth that made people aware of the process of his struggle, and for which some would applaud his foreseeable maturity.

She didn't want to talk to him about this, because he belonged to her daily life, not the intellectual realm. He didn't like people encroaching upon his life; moreover, he had every right to experience the process himself. It was very late. They spent most of the time quietly staring at each other. Two months' separation hadn't estranged their relationship or brought them closer. He had to go home; his mother was waiting up for him. Before it had been Fei Min, who would say, "It's getting late. Let's go." But now his evening was too precious to be wasted. He kissed her gently, and then hugged her tightly, which could be interpreted as an apology for a futile reencounter.

After that, she started to dump her love passively, exposing herself on the frontline. He could attack or retreat; she no longer cared about that, since she was doomed to die on the battlefield.

It was his birthday, exactly one year after they'd gotten together. The year before, Fei Min had put a lot of thought into recording things he often said, his usual movements, and her love for him. She made a little booklet which she called Notes on Feelings. She also made a tape of her singing their favorite songs. Some of the songs were obscure and she'd tried very hard to find them. On her birthday, he'd given her a candle, over which she'd cried hundreds of times. This year Fei Min collected a hundred forget-me-not peas of unusual shapes to give to him. But his grandmother had a recurrence of an old illness, and he, being the oldest grandson, had to be by her side. They had agreed to meet at seven o'clock, but he didn't show until eleven. Her hand, clasping those peas, were so cramped that the fingers would barely straighten. There were many people and vehicles on the street; the later it got, the more remorse she felt.

She was completely numb when he suddenly appeared before her eyes. He parked his car in Wai-shuang-hsi before letting out a long sigh. Then he started talking, not about his grandmother, but about Li Quantong. Li's father had been ill and she'd called him over. He'd helped her find a doctor. When doctors of Western medicine couldn't do anything, he'd searched out doctors of Chinese medicine. Daytime alone wouldn't do, so he'd stayed with them at night, while at home his own grandmother was also sick. Fei Min didn't want to think too much. Some people were simply oblivious of the things they loved. She was reminded of Li Quantong's expression the day they'd run into each other on the street. She held those peas so tightly that she nearly

crushed them. He noticed her vacant look and shook her. She smiled. He said, "Fei Min, why aren't you saying anything?"

She didn't open her mouth, as she had nothing left to say. She wanted badly to find a reason to tell herself, "He doesn't want you any more."

But she had a more powerful reason: She wanted him.

He asked her, "Do you have any money? Can you lend me twenty thousand? Li's father needs money and I can't ask my mom for it." Fei Min didn't say anything, and he didn't pursue the matter.

She called him the next day to ask if he still needed the money. She delivered the money herself. He was alone at the office, which was actually a kind of gallery to display works, both early and current, by his father. The building was gray, with black display cases. Every time she went there, she had trouble breathing, similar to the feeling she got from the way he'd treated her over the past year. He was sitting at his desk with his long legs stretched out. "Where did you get the money?" he asked. From that male colleague who had been nice to her. But of course Fei Min wouldn't tell him that. She just said quietly, "It's mine." That night he didn't want to leave, even though it was getting very late. She could tell he was tired, and she wondered whether it was because he'd spent all night taking care of his grandmother or Li's sick father. She told him to go home and get some rest. Before they left, he said, "Thank you, Fei Min." She could tell he meant it.

Fei Min knew the hospital where Li Quantong's father was staying; she felt an irrational urge to go look her up. After work one day she stayed in her office till dawn and then slowly walked to the hospital in the early morning light. From a distance, she saw his car parked outside.

Was he a nostalgic person, or was Li Quantong the nostalgic one? What about her? Was she his new love? If so, then how to interpret the line, "You only see the new person smile, and not the old one crying?"

The sun came out. Her heart might have already rusted.

The biggest counterattack she launched against him was perhaps the money she'd borrowed from his rival. How ironic that she'd borrowed money from his rival for her rival to use.

Is it really true that when feelings are deep there are no complaints? Fei Min didn't bring up the issue at all.

Over New Year's, her parents mentioned that it had been a long time since they'd last seen him. To make them happy, she called him and asked him to come say "Happy New Year." Her parents were pleased by his visit. Afterwards, she went home with him. That day

his family was busy with the introduction of a boyfriend for his older sister. His grandmother, still sick, cried out from pain in her room. The more she hurt, the more she cried out. The more she cried out, the more she hurt. The house was in chaos. Neglected, she stood to the side and watched the cycle of birth, aging, illness, and death being enacted before her eyes. She walked out of their house alone. The long alley was filled with firecrackers and the rhythms of New Year. Fei Min had always envied hot-tempered people who could slam the phone down on others and get mad at people at will. Would love really make one lose oneself?

Later she saw the obituary of Li's father in the paper; they couldn't hold onto his soul after all. She called, but he was never home. She went to the memorial and saw his car parked outside the mourning hall. Li Quantong was crying, her pretty face painted in the hues of grief. It is a great sorrow to lose one's father. Li needed someone to share her pain, just as Fei Min needed someone to share her happiness. Neither could be denied. But he'd said, "I don't love Li."

Was that true? She didn't know.

For many years, Fei Min had always been a proper person with teachers, elders, and friends. But when she was with him, her heart was drained to a vacuum and turned transparent. In her diary, Fei Min never once wrote that he'd said he loved her. But would it be possible that he never did, even when he wanted her and she gave herself to him? Was it because Fei Min wanted to give him a way out? None of their "spiritual activities" could have given him more happiness, but he was pent up and needed an outlet. She gave to him, and yet she wasn't at peace with herself. Physical contact and spiritual communication brought her more distress, but in spite of that, she gave to him anyway.

The affair didn't end there. Fei Min was distraught, for she was afraid she might have wronged him. She didn't dare ask either, for fear of learning the truth. They maintained a schedule of seeing each other once a week. By now Fei Min had completely stopped laughing; when that started, she didn't know. They almost always met in his car. Usually the stars would be twinkling outside the window. She couldn't remember how many nights were spent like this. She was often reminded of the stars outside Starlit Tower; they were so pretty and yet so far away. They never spoke about Li Quantong again. She knew no other way to save herself but to give him up completely. So she was resigned to stay away from everything else. One day she said, "Let's go away, OK?" His father happened to be abroad during the time, so he

wasn't as busy. His mother was less aggressive, now that there was one less moving target. He agreed.

They didn't go far, only as far as Chiaohsi. During the days, they dressed casually for window shopping and visiting temples. At night they ate at the night market. Fei Min felt that the small town was like a pearl at the bottom of the ocean, where it glowed faintly. When the night deepened, they walked slowly back to their hotel, an ancient looking Japanese-style building. Moonlight gathered in the yard. They moved rattan chairs into the yard, where they talked sparingly and quietly and drank the strongest Golden Dragon Liquor with salted peanuts. The flavors of "beginning" and "ending" tasted the same. The taste of love is both good and bad, but Fei Min couldn't tell the difference.

They returned to Taipei, where the news of his father's return awaited him and an assignment down south greeted her.

Before she left, she called him. He said, "OK, I'll come see you off." Fei Min asked, "You're sure you'll be there?" He replied, "Of course." After the last train left at midnight, she knew he wasn't coming. She had been to the train station at midnight three times, twice with him. The station was still full of activity at midnight. Standing under the sign for "Station," she didn't move an inch. The night wind was cold. She was devoid of feelings when the first train for Su'ao left. How time flew; it seemed only yesterday that they had gone to Su'ao together. Her paper turned out to be the only one that didn't cover the news in Kaohsiung.

She lay down as soon she got home. Staring wide-eyed day after day, she suffered from a high fever and coughed up blood. She didn't want to alert her parents, so she covered her mouth with a blanket, letting tears flow down her cheeks and drench her pillow. Her mother had stitched a phrase on her pillowcase: Life in dreams. Fei Min's life wasn't in dreams, but in reality.

Her illness dragged on for over a month. She felt inert, like a throat that has coughed one time too many, but no one could tell from her appearance. Mustering up her energy, she dug up some pictures of the two of them smiling and put them into an album. On the inside front cover, she copied a poem from Hsu Chi-mo, "Songs"—When I die, my dear, please don't sing me sad songs. On my grave . . . If you willingly forget me . . .

The photos in the album were all first-rate, with such an exquisite feeling that no one would forget seeing them. Fei Min was happy and sweet in every one of them.

It was raining when she took the album over. He was eager to leave because his father was waiting for him. She handed it over; he

immediately quieted down the moment he opened it. His eyes were filled with emotion, but she didn't know whether it was because of the love in the album or because of her. She smiled. As she turned to leave, she told him, "Don't worry. If I were ever to get married, I'd marry only you." The rain was falling more heavily; without an umbrella, she went home in the rain. Those were the most solemn words she'd said to him since they met.

She once wrote, "I really want to meet Li Quantong." When they were in Chiaohsi, she casually asked him about her. He said, "Everything between us is over. Now I don't care about anything except for my father. It's strange; I actually loved her."

She'd thought that she really understood the problems between them. What she truly yearned for was a normal love; it didn't matter whether she met Li or not.

The Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall was often the site of art and cultural activities, which Fei Min sometimes attended. She would have liked him to go along to ease his tension, but they never had the chance. She went one day when a famous vocalist was giving a concert to plea for the future of Chinese folk music. It was a sold-out show and the entrance was crowded with people who couldn't get tickets. Fei Min experienced the "outrage of the crowd," as she stood at the entrance. The crowd was growing. From a distance, she saw him walking up holding hands with Li Quantong. They didn't look like people who were forty minutes late or were trying to catch a concert. They looked as if they had all the time in the world, something Fei Min could long for all her life but would never have. She left. The wind was howling around the Memorial Hall, so strong she couldn't help trembling all over after she reached the main street. How had retribution occurred so fast? She still recalled how they were walking hand in hand that time when they'd run into Li. If Li had loved him, then Fei Min now knew how Li had felt that day.

That night, she held a pillow tightly across her chest to press down on her heart, which seemed about to leap out of her chest. At half past midnight she called his house. His mother answered. "He's not home yet. Call back tomorrow." On recent dates, he'd always wanted to go home early, as he worried about his mother waiting up for him. Maybe his mother was lying.

The last time they met was at the Starlit Tower. As soon as he saw her he said, "I was so caught up in work last night that I didn't leave until after midnight." She couldn't bear to listen to his lies, so she smiled and said, "Liar." He was dumbfounded; she said, "How was the concert?"

Fei Min didn't know how they had started. Perhaps it never really ended between them. But nothing mattered now. What happened was between the two of them; it had nothing to do with Li Quantong. Looking at his young, clean face, Fei Min thought about all the badly acted scripts in the world and knew there was no need to add another one. She didn't dare ask him, "Do you love me?" Perhaps everything about Fei Min was still not enough to induce mad love from him. But they had done a lot together, and talked about many things, which should have surpassed the activities of average lovers. Maybe he was too forgetful; maybe he was never sure of his love; maybe they'd been together too long. Fei Min never said a word about love, since love needed no reminding and should have relied on his conscience. For Fei Min, the Starlit Tower held a dream she would never forget. They stayed till midnight. The stars were bewitching; Fei Min had an eyeful and was getting drunk from the sherry they were drinking.

She was used to combating loneliness by herself and was reluctant to retreat, but now there was no reason for her to stand her ground. She felt as if she were watching a tragic love story in which she was the star. She'd been moved when she was acting, but the drama stopped moving her once she was no longer in it, even though it could have been the show of her life.

This is where the diary ended; Fei Min stopping writing, except at the very end, where she seemed to have thought of something, and wrote, "I need lots and lots of love."

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Selected from Su Wei-chen. *Fengpi de daoyü: dejang xiaoshuo xuan* [Closed Island: Selection of Awarded Short Stories]. Taipei: Mai-tian chubanshe, November 1996, pp. 127-143.

Su Wei-chen, whose parents were originally from Fanyu County in Guangdong Province, was born in Tainan, Taiwan in 1954. After receiving a degree in film and drama from the School of Political Warfare, she worked for the Military News Agency of the Ministry of Defense and the Artistic Work Force, and later as editor of the Central Radio Station and then the literary supplement of the *United Daily News*, while simultaneously serving as editor-in-chief for the *Reader's Weekly*. She has won the United Daily New's Novella Prize, Short Short Story contest and the China Times' Million Dollar Fiction Prize.

The critic Kao T'ien-sheng once described the major characteristic of Su's fiction as subtly describing prominent features of society and reality. Her themes tend to be, first of all, portraying the generation gap between father and son in modern society. Employing techniques of "modernist fiction," she deals with traditional issues such as family relationships, friendship, and the meaning of the older folks' existence. Secondly, she depicts modern women's ambiguous feelings about their lack of choices, about being caught in between, and about fatalism. Conversation between her characters is prose-like, with less dialogue than monologue, and questions without answers. The relationship between men and women she portrays is a flighty game, giving her fiction a uniquely sad and desolate quality. Her recent work focuses more on writings of desire. Some of her works include *Pei ta yiduan* [Be with Him for a While] (short stories), *Likai Tongfang* [Leaving Tongfang] (novel), *Chenmo zhi dao* [Silent Island] (novel), and *Fengbide daoyü* [Closed Island] (short stories).