

Fei-Fei

Sun Moon Lake, July 1956:

It was two o'clock in the morning and Fei-Fei was wide awake, staring distractedly at the oddly shaped shadows on the ceiling. For the past two hours, after Young Master Chu had fallen asleep, she had been re-living the events of the previous six days.

The words of warning uttered by Mama Mui kept echoing inside her head. "Love's not for the likes of you. Sweet talk by men can only lead to heartaches. I know. I've lost my head once. Just treat your customers as shadows cast across your life, shadows without names or faces, each no different from the next. The best hope is for a rich merchant or a powerful official to take to you. Then you may enjoy a period of ease as a concubine or mistress, until he tires of you. When that happens you'll become like me, drinking too much, smoking too much, trying to teach other unfortunates their trade."

The trouble was that Young Master Chu was not a shadow. He had a name and attractive features. During the past six days she had grown accustomed to his round, smiling face, to his voice that seemed at once shy and coaxing. Now lost to sleep he looked as innocent as the brothers she had helped to raise in their village near Su-Ao. At daybreak, however, he would be heading for Kaohsiung to take ship back to Hong Kong.

"Come with me," Young Master Chu had urged. "The ship belongs to my father. I can sneak you on board. We can get married and travel the world."

"How can I leave?" she had replied, laughing at such fantasies. "I have no papers, no passport, no exit permit. I'm sure to be arrested and punished."

"Don't worry. My father's a magician with money. You've heard the old saw that with enough money even the devil can be made to do one's bidding? Well, my father has lots and lots of money and he has a way of making impossible things possible."

"Will the Hong Kong authorities allow me to stay?"

"Certainly. Once we're married that will make you -- in the official jargon -- a Hong Kong believer."

"Please don't joke. Marriage is a serious matter."

"Who's joking?"

"You're teasing me. We're too young to get married. We're only seventeen."

"If we're old enough to do the things we've been doing, we're old enough to get married!"

"You're wicked!" She blushed and thumped him on the chest, as she remembered the pleasures his lips and tongue had given. "I hate you!"

"But I love you."

"Stop it! Stop it! We're not suited. You're from a wealthy family; I'm a fisherman's daughter. I can't even read or write properly. Your family will never permit it."

“You may be surprised. My parents can be quite broad-minded. I can get you all the education you need. Education is a commodity, to be acquired like any other. You buy it with money. Just say you’ll marry me and everything’ll come out right.”

“What about my mother and my brothers and sisters? I just can’t up and leave. They are expecting Uncle Fung to get me a job so that I can support them.”

“What kind of a job can Uncle Fung get you? The pay wouldn’t be enough for you to live in Taipei, let alone support your family. Don’t be taken in. My father can take care of your family.”

He made everything sound so easy. In the still of the night, however, not only Mama Mui’s words but also Uncle Fung’s instructions troubled her.

“I want you on something important,” Uncle Fung had said. “Play your cards right and you’ll hook a big fish. I’ve a rich friend, suddenly called away on business. He wants his sonny looked after for a few days. Right up your alley. The boy’s the same age as you. A ‘green-headed lad’ for sure, so you’ll have to play the bashful virgin. You know what to do. Say you’re a distant relative of mine, looking for a job in Taipei. There’ll be money in it, to be sure.”

It was supposed to be a business transaction, like all the others. How was she to know that Young Master Chu would be so attentive, so gentle, so loving? How was she to know she would fall in love so fast?

She recalled strolling with Young Master Chu through the centre of Taipei when they happened upon a shop specializing in jade ornaments. They had stopped to glance at its window display and were about to move on when the elderly owner came out.

“Do come in,” he invited, with a broad, welcoming smile. “A plentiful selection inside. Take your time. You are not obligated to buy. Come in to have a cup of tea on this hot summer’s day. If the young lady finds an item to strike her fancy, well, then that must be fate.”

She had been reluctant to enter, for she had neither the means nor the intention of buying anything. She also did not want to give the impression of angling for a gift. But Young Master Chu had responded to the invitation and had pulled her in.

Once inside, an assistant served tea and the owner showed tray after tray of jade ornaments. There was a bewildering array of bracelets, rings, earrings, necklaces and pendants. They came in many colours, ranging through white, grey, yellow, brown and mauve to various shades of green. There were also pieces with marvellous combinations of colours, like abstract pictures etched in stone.

“See anything you like?” Young Master Chu asked, in his quaint, Cantonese-accented Mandarin.

“They all look nice but I don’t know anything about jade,” Fei-Fei replied.

“Please permit me to advise,” the owner intervened. “I have a special place in my heart for young people in love. Oh, yes, I can tell you’re in love! I was young once. First love, it’s wonderful! It is good to have a memento to mark such glorious days. They come but once. How about this?”

He dangled before them a circular jade pendant in lustrous emerald green. He then placed it in her hand.

“Feel its quality, its warmth, its magic,” he said. “A superb piece of the finest Burmese jade. Not Taiwanese nephrite, you know. See the brilliance of the green, the blended striations in white.”

“You sure this is Burmese?” Young Master Chu asked. “I’ve been warned of fakes.”

“The reputation of my shop is my guarantee. Jade evokes all the qualities revered by Chinese people. How can a dealer in jade act against what that stone represents? Jade is smooth and glossy like benevolence, compact and strong like intelligence, full of radiance like good faith. It’s like courage, for it cannot be bent, only broken. It’s esteemed by all, like the paths to truth and duty. When worn as a necklace or a pendant, it falls naturally towards the ground like humility. One can easily feel those qualities in a piece of jade. No stone colours the imagination as much. Would a humble man who deals in it violate everything it stands for?”

“We do not mean to doubt your word. It is just that we know little about jade. We do not even know why pendants are shaped the way they are.”

“This humble person would be happy to explain whatever the gentleman wishes to know about jade,” the owner said. “Pendants shaped like a peach denotes longevity, that of a bat represents wealth. This particular pendant is in the form of a circle. Circles have no beginning and no end. They are like the unendingness sought in love. This pendant is fashioned after the bi, the symbol of heaven, a symbol familiar since the Shang Kingdom of 3,500 years ago. Note the hole in the centre. It represents the opening through which the soul can ascend into heaven. What more fitting token can be offered to a loved one?”

As he spoke, it seemed to her that the pendant in her hand actually took on the attributes described. She quickly put it down on the counter, afraid she might become attached.

Young Master Chu asked the price and the shop owner quoted a figure which seemed astronomical.

“If the young lady is pleased with it, I can offer a discount of ten per cent, as a token of my good wishes,” the owner added.

As Young Master Chu reached for his wallet, she became flustered. She did not know what to say. She was not sure that so expensive a pendant was actually meant for her. It was only when he hung it around her neck that she understood.

“It’s a perfect adornment for a charming young lady,” the shop owner beamed.

“No, I can’t accept so valuable a gift,” Fei-Fei protested, fearful about how Uncle Fung and Mama Mui might react.

“Hush,” Young Master Chu said, and led her from the shop, to the bows of the owner and his assistants.

Now Fei-Fei looked over to the man sleeping next to her and fingered the emerald green pendant lying between her naked breasts. It was the most beautiful thing she had even possessed. She would have to hide it, lest Uncle Fung or Mama Mui took it from her. But, if she

hid it, would it turn into an everlasting reminder of her deceptions and lies? She silently cursed the unfairness of life.

Her childhood had been one of poverty, helping her mother with household chores and her father with mending fishing nets. When she was fifteen, her father was lost at sea during a typhoon and the family sank progressively into debt.

Then the village money-lender brought Uncle Fung into her life. She heard this stranger with buckteeth and uneven eyes telling her mother: "I can get your daughter a job as a waitress in a Taipei hotel. The pay should support your family and help pay off debts. But I'm not going to train her to have her skipping off after a few months. I'm only prepared to do it if you and your daughter sign an agreement to work for five years."

Her mother broke down in tears. "That's a very long time. What about two years?"

"Take it or leave it," Uncle Fung said. "I have to invest a lot to make her presentable. She's pretty enough and lively enough but she can't show up for work in a classy hotel like that. Just look at her skin, dry as old leather. Her hands are full of calluses and her feet are big as sampans. She doesn't even walk properly, stomping around like a manual worker."

"It's all right, Mother," Fei-Fei said. "Don't cry. Five years will pass quickly. The younger ones will be ready for work then. I don't mind."

Uncle Fung did not get her a job in a hotel, however. Instead he took her into a frightening labyrinth of alleys and warrens hidden behind the modern thoroughfares of Taipei, and passed her over to a woman he addressed as Mama Mui. She was in her late forties and was pleasantly plump and jolly.

The woman clucked her tongue. "She'll need a lot of work."

The next three months with Mama Mui seemed, in retrospect, like living in the lap of luxury. She shared quarters with two other village girls. Food was plentiful. Tasty meat and fowl she used to enjoy at her village only during Lunar New Year were available almost daily. The rest of the time was spent in what she regarded as pure fun. She and the other girls doubled up with hysteria each time they tried walking on high heels. They also giggled helplessly when misapplying rouge or mascara and slapping gooey creams and lotions on their faces and bodies. A regime of exercises soon re-shaped their waists and firmed their breasts.

Mama Mui took a special interest in her, showing her how to walk with a slightly indolent swing to her hips. Her hair was trimmed and permed and gowns of silk and brocade were made to measure for her. Looking into the mirror she was amazed by her own transformation. She never dreamt she could become such a beauty.

When Mama Mui began teaching her to dance to Western music she expressed surprise. "Why must a waitress learn to dance?" she asked.

"Do you think we've spent all that time and money to have you wait at table?" Mama Mui replied. "You won't earn enough to live. We all have to make the most of what we've been given. For the moment, you've got youth and beauty. You'll be a hit as a dance hostess. I'm the manageress of a dozen girls like you at the Starlight Rendezvous. That's a classy nightclub, with a rich clientele. You'll enjoy working there."

“But I don’t want to work in a nightclub. My mother only agreed to my working as a waitress.”

“Don’t be a silly goose. Why struggle against fate? I would hate to see anything unpleasant happen to you. If you don’t work in a nightclub, you’ll have to pay back the money given to your mother and what we’ve spent on you. Can you do that? Be sensible. Being a dancing girl is much better than mending fishing nets under a boiling sun.”

When she still resisted the idea of becoming a dancing girl, Uncle Fung reappeared. “It’s wiser to do as you’re told,” he said, glaring at her. “You’re in territory controlled by the Green Bamboo Triad. You can’t run away. If you try, their boys will catch you and slash your face. Or pour sulphuric acid over you. For the sake of your family, behave! Start earning your keep.”

She began learning dance steps.

When she finally made her debut, she found the Starlight Rendezvous both exciting and frightening. It was a vast, dimly lit hall more luxurious than any place she had previously seen. The air was machine-cooled and pinpoints of light in a dark domed ceiling twinkled like stars. The darkness was filled with a steady stream of soft, sentimental music from a band. On a small dance floor, hostesses sheathed in Chinese dresses with side slits moved indistinctly with their customers, like shadows locked in languid, amorous embraces. Clustered around the dance floor were a succession of high-backed sofas, set at discreet angles and separated from one another by lattice screens and broad-leaved plants.

What held her back, however, were the crude gropings and importunings Mama Mui had warned her to expect. Back in her village, she would simply clout or kick boys who tried to be fresh and she knew the village elders would always be on her side. At the Starlight Rendezvous, she had been briefed that customers were always right.

“Men do not pay good money to cuddle a block of wood or to gaze into a sour face,” Mama Mui had said. “They can get that at home for free. They pay to feel good about themselves, to imagine they could impress girls half their age and escape with them to paradise. They want to forget their professional and family responsibilities, the state of the war, the conscription of their sons. Your job is to help them forget. If anyone propositions you, send him to me. Don’t negotiate yourself. I’ll get you better deals.”

The trouble was that she never sent anyone to Mama Mui. Instead customers descended upon the manager, complaining about the lack of success with their overtures.

“What’s the matter with you?” Mama Mui asked one day, taking her aside. “Don’t you want to make money?”

“I don’t want to do what they ask,” she replied. “I feel dirty, being pawed and fondled every night.”

“Ah, I see! You’ve never gone beyond fondling before! You’re protecting your precious pearl! That’s a good selling point. A premium is in order.”

Uncle Fung appeared in her room again shortly afterwards. “Mama Mui tells me you have hesitations,” he said, darkly. “We can’t allow anything to stand in the way of business. Are you going to stop this nonsense or do you want me to deal with you?”

“There’s nothing in my mother’s agreement about sleeping with strangers.”

“Well, I’m no stranger. Strip!”

When she refused Uncle Fung slapped her across the face and tore off her dress. She fought furiously but Uncle was too big and strong.

After he had finished, Uncle Fung said, not unkindly: “You may hate me now but one day you’ll thank me. If the Green Bamboo Triad had done the honours, you would have had four or five thugs here and you wouldn’t be able to walk for a week afterwards.”

She felt numb, too hurt for tears. In the subsequent days she seemed to acquire a look of infinite sorrow, as if something irretrievable had been lost. Paradoxically, the customers found that quality charming. She quickly became the most sought-after hostess at the Starlight Rendezvous and queues formed to hire her for those brief, regulated minutes of simulated romance.

It was during this period of semi-torpor that Young Master Chu was pressed upon her. The young man’s initial shyness suggested he might indeed be the “green-headed lad” Uncle Fung had supposed. She suffered his clumsy initiatives, as if he were courting the girl next door. But when he spoke about his ambitions he seemed a young man in a hurry, confident of what he could achieve.

His talk was grand. She thought at first it might be adolescent bravado. But there was a consistent refrain to it, about reshaping the world and one day laying it at her feet. It was refreshing to listen to his earnest talk about his ambitions instead of the puppy prattle of other customers.

When he presented her with the jade pendant she realized that in his quaint, boyish way he was trying to make a commitment to her. It came as a surprise that his love-making came with a passion she could not resist. He had unlocked some secret part of her, liberating her, enabling her to give of herself. She could no longer engage him in the soul-dead fashion she had adopted with other men, with simulated grunts and groans. With him making love was akin to physical annihilation or the agony of creation.

She had a big black mole on her left buttock which she had always been a little self-conscious about. Her sisters and some customers teased her about it. But Young Master Chu appeared to love it. “That’s my star of destiny,” he had said, stroking it and kissing it. “It’s going to link us together forever, in life and in death.”

The realization that she meant something special to him, coming as it did in the Sixth Moon of the lunar year, caused her to muse again about life. That month contained the anniversary of the lotus. Back home, villagers took the lotus to represent redemption. They marked its anniversary with prayers and offerings. Though grown in filth, the lotus was capable of rising pure and clean above the foulest mud. Could she not do likewise with this strange boy-man? Could she not leave behind all the past deceits and corruptions and become worthy of his love? Or was she already beyond redemption?

The dreadful uncertainty of her fate, the tenuous clinging to hope when there was no hope, caused tears to flow at last. Sorrow, sorrow. Was there to be no end? What crimes had she

committed in a previous existence to warrant her present suffering? Was redemption available only in story books? The more desperately she sought answers, the faster her tears flowed.

Her sobbing woke Chu Wing-seng. "My love, why are you crying?" he asked, embracing her. "Is it because I am leaving today? There's no need for tears. I'm not disappearing for good. I'll get my father to arrange travel documents and send for you. He can get you a visa for America. You can go with me to Princeton and learn English. We can study together. We can settle in America."

Fei-Fei shook her head, sobbing more convulsively than ever. After another bout of love-making they fell asleep.

At daybreak, Fei-Fei awoke to the lingering spoor of love on the bed. Young Master Chu was still asleep. She was clear-headed now. To attempt to cling to the happiness of the past few days was self-delusion. She had been blessed with a gift of love she had never expected. Now was the time for courage and sacrifice. Her life was a ruin. Nothing could alter that. If sorrow had to come, let it fall upon her for being party to the plot of Uncle Fung and Mama Mui. She would come clean. That was better than a lifetime of longing and pain. She might then disappear from his memory like an insignificant misadventure.

She got quietly out of bed and went into the bathroom. She dressed carefully, steeling herself for her ordeal. She re-entered the bedroom to find Young Master Chu already awake.

"Good morning," Chu Wing-seng said, sleepily. "You're dressed early. Are you thinking of going down for breakfast?"

"No, I'm going back to Taipei," Fei-Fei replied. "You have been good to me. I ought to tell you before I leave I'm not related to Uncle Fung."

"Good, Uncle Fung has never been one of my favourite characters. Now I don't have to treat him with the consideration due a relative when we marry."

"You don't understand. We're not getting married."

"Why not? Because you're from a poor family and haven't much education? What does that matter so long as we love each other? When you get to America you'll find that nobody cares about your origins so long as you have money. And I do promise you we are going to have lots of money."

"I'm not who you think I am. I've been hired by Uncle Fung to keep you company for a few days, that's all."

"That's the smartest thing he's ever done. We fell in love during your employment. What's so strange about that? We're going to be together forever."

"You're not listening to what I'm saying. I will bring sorrow to you and your family. Uncle Fung means to extort money from your father."

"Fiddlesticks! My father's got the measure of Uncle Fung. Come over and kiss me."

Fei-Fei did not move. She had to be more brutal, to inflict a sharper and more vicious hurt. Her heart ached at the prospect and she prayed for the strength to bring it off.

“Why do ‘green-headed lads’ always think they’re in love with the first woman they bed?” she said, with an assumed air of cynicism. “Why get all hot and emotional over a simple business deal? If you like what I do, come back and see me the next time you’re in Taipei. You can find me at the Starlight Rendezvous.”

Chu Wing-seng looked half-stunned. It was as if he had just been told he would be shot at dawn. He groped for his spectacles on the bedside table and looked at Fei-Fei in disbelief. “Are you telling me the last six days meant nothing to you? That everything has been an act?”

Fei-Fei saw the pain in his eyes and knew she would have to live with that vision for the rest of her days. She forced herself to smile.

“I’m sorry,” Fei-Fei said. “You’re a sweet boy. I never meant to hurt you. And thanks for the jade pendant. You’ve got to learn to be less generous with dancing girls, no matter how much money you may eventually make.” She then headed for the door.

Chu Wing-seng hesitated for a moment before scrambling naked out of the bed. He cast aside the tangle of bedsheets and blanket and yelled: “Wait! Fei-Fei!”

But the door slammed before he could reach it.