
ZHANG JIE

Essentially banned during all of 1966-76, romantic love burgeoned in the fiction of the late 1970s perhaps more and faster than any other theme. Even stories whose main themes were quite different often included love-story subthemes, almost as if this were required by the spirit of the times. Young readers were especially fond of stories that spoke for them in protesting the fact that marriage in China, despite years of revolution, was still based on social considerations such as family background, wealth, status (now primarily Party status), and parental desires to cement alliances. Youth championed "true love," including the notion in the present story of lifelong, or even eternal, bliss with a partner specially made for one in heaven, if one "can only find" him or her. The clash between these romanticized visions of individual liberation and the iron framework of "feudal" tradition is reminiscent of May Fourth literature in the 1920s in China.

Yet young people in the late 1970s were themselves hardly free of practical considerations in choosing marital partners. Popular catchwords expressed the conditions that young women commonly put to young men before agreeing to marriage: "the three things that turn" stood for a watch, a bicycle, and a sewing machine, all as widely desired as they were difficult to procure; "sixty-four legs" specified the amount of furniture required in the bridal apartment. Most young people, of course, wanted both idealism and materialism, true love as well as "sixtyfour legs"; their infatuation with pure ideals was compromised in practice in a great variety of ways.

"Love Must Not Be Forgotten" was hotly debated in leading journals and newspapers during the spring of 1980. A critic named Xiao Lin wrote in *Guangming ribao* (14 May 1980) that idyllic love is an illusion, and that its pursuit can cause suffering. If the divorced woman in the present story were to succeed in marrying the senior official she loved, what would become of the official's wife? Does the fact that the official and his wife were married for "class love" rather than personal love mean their marriage is inferior? The story represented feeble thinking and moral laxity, the critic said. Two weeks later, also in *Guangming ribao*, Dai Qing (author of "Anticipation," pp. 147-67) rebutted Xiao Lin. Anyone can see, she argued, that loveless marriages are a widespread problem in China today. Why should we tolerate this condition? What is true morality - a marriage based on love or one that maintains socially required appearances?

Youth rallied in support of "Love Must Not Be Forgotten," while many in the older generation remained opposed. Yet thoughtful readers in both generations, whatever their feelings on the issues, praised the author for daring to raise the question of a person's innermost feelings, and to explore them honestly. Zhang Jie (b. 1938), a graduate of People's University in engineering, wrote nothing before 1978, but has written many fine short stories and essays since. Although "Love Must Not Be Forgotten" is certainly not the best of these, the extraordinary controversy around it has made it the work she is best known for. In 1980 she worked as a scriptwriter at the Beijing Film Studio.

Love Must Not Be Forgotten

I was born in 1949, the year our republic was founded. At thirty a republic is still very young, but a woman is in danger of reaching the "unmarriageable" age.

Don't worry about me; I have a very proper suitor these days. Have you ever seen "The Discus Thrower," by the great Greek sculptor Myron? My suitor_Qiao Lin looks like that sculpture. Even the bulky padded clothing he wears in winter cannot obscure the splendid lines of his physique. He has a swarthy face with a boldly defined nose and mouth. His large

eyes rest beneath a broad brow. His face and body build alone would be enough to attract most young women.

Yet I'm the one, strangely enough, who can't decide whether to marry, because I can't figure out just what it is about him that I love and what it is that attracts him to me.

I know that people are gossiping behind my back. "She must think she's pretty great, trying to hold out for something better than that." They see me as inferior stock trying to wangle a good price from some unsuspecting spendthrift. This makes them as indignant as if I had committed bloody murder, or betrayed masses of people.

I can't really blame them, of course. In a society where commercial goods still exist, marriage, like many other things, can hardly escape the labeling process used in commodity exchange.

Qiao Lin and I have been together for almost two years now, yet I still haven't figured out whether his habitual silence is due to an aversion to speech or to a lack of anything to say. Whenever I get the urge to give him a sort of "intelligence test" by making him surrender an opinion on something, all I get are nursery-school responses: "Good!" or "No good!" Everything seems limited to these two categories.

Once I asked him: "Qiao Lin, why do you love me?" He pondered this for a while - an exceptionally long time for him - and from the wrinkles that appeared on his brow I knew the cells inside that beautiful head must have been thinking frantically. I couldn't help feeling sorry, as if I'd done him some great wrong by asking the question.

He finally looked up with those clear, childlike eyes and said, "Because you're good!"

A profound loneliness filled my heart. "Thank you, Qiao Lin!"

I couldn't help wondering whether, when he and I became husband and wife, we would be able to fulfill our obligations to each other. Perhaps we could, because law and morality would have bound us together. But how sad it would be if we were left merely carrying out legal and moral duties! Might there be something finer and more solid than law or morality to bind us together? Whenever I have thoughts like this, I get the strange feeling that I'm not a young woman about to marry but a bookish old sociologist.

Perhaps I shouldn't have bothered thinking about all this. We could lead our lives the way they do in most households, having children and staying with each other, strictly through loyalty as defined by law. Never mind that this is the twentieth century - on this point we might as well follow what people have been doing for several thousand years: treating marriage as a means of perpetuating the family, or as a business transaction in which love and marriage are quite separable. Since so many people have made a go of it that way, who am I to break tradition?

No, I still can't decide. I remember when I was little I would cry all night for no particular reason, robbing myself and robbing others in my family of sleep. My old nursemaid, uncommonly wise despite her lack of education, said an evil draft had leaked into my ears and I would always be that way. It appears her prophesy was more than superstition, because even now I get upset for no particularly good reason, robbing myself and others of peace and quiet. It's hard to change nature, as they say.

I often find myself wondering what my mother would say, if she were still alive, about Qiao Lin's proposal and my own doubts. Would she want me to accept?

I think of her not because she was the sort of domineering mother who would want to run my life from beyond the grave. In fact, she was less like a mother than a friend and confidante. I think about her because I loved her immensely and feel a great loss when I recall that she is gone forever.

She never lectured me. She would only tell me gently, in that deep, almost masculine voice of hers, about the successes and failures in her own life, letting me discover what I needed from her experience. Yet her successes seemed so few, and her life plagued by failures. During

her last days, she would follow me around with her fine, sensitive eyes, as if she were sizing up my chances of survival on my own, and also as if she had something important to tell me but couldn't decide whether to say it. She must have been deeply worried about the way I seemed unconcerned! "Shanshan," she once blurted out, "if you can't decide what you want in a man, I think staying single is much better than marrying foolishly."

Others might think it wrong for a mother to speak this way to her daughter, but I feel that what Mother gave me was invaluable advice based on painful experience. I don't believe that she was deprecating me or my knowledge of the world. She just loved me and hoped I could live without suffering.

I said, "Mom, I don't want to get married!" I wasn't just being shy or coy. In fact, I didn't know when a girl was supposed to be shy or coy, because Mother had long since told me everything that most people feel should not be told to children. "If you find the right man, you should get married. But I mean the right one!"

"The right man probably doesn't exist."

"He exists, all right. But it's not easy. The world is too large, and I'm afraid you won't find him!" She wasn't worried about whether I could get married, only about the kind of marriage I might have.

"Actually, you've gotten along fine without anyone else, haven't you?" I asked.

"Who says I've been fine?"

"Seems that way to me."

"I had no choice -" She fell silent and became lost in her own thoughts. A plain and melancholy expression appeared on her face. That sad, wrinkled face reminded me of the flowers, now withered, that I had pressed between the pages of books as a small girl.

"Why didn't you have any choice?"

"You've got too many 'why's;" she parried. There was something she wanted to hide from me. I knew it could not be that she was too ashamed to reveal it; she was probably afraid I would miss its true import and misinterpret it. Or perhaps, like everyone else, she had something stored away that was just for herself. The thought made me uneasy, and my uneasiness drove me to ask more rash questions.

"Are you still in love with Daddy?"

"No, I never loved him."

"Did he love you?"

"No, he didn't love me, either."

"Then why did you get married in the first place?"

She paused, groping for words to explain something that would seem unusual and baffling. When she spoke, her voice was full of regret. "When people are young, they don't necessarily know what they want or need in life. They can even get married just because everyone's pushing them to. It's only when you're older and a bit more mature that you really understand what you need. But by that time, you'll have done things you'll regret so much your heart will ache. You'd pay any price for the chance to start over, and the second time around you'd be much the wiser. I once saw, 'The meek are always happy'; but not me, I'll never enjoy that kind of happiness!" She laughed ironically. "I'll always be a bitter idealist!"

That must have been where my habitual discontent came from. The genes that transmit discontent must have done their job from mother to me with perfect precision and completeness.

"Why didn't you marry again?"

"I was afraid I didn't really know what I wanted," she answered reluctantly. Obviously she was unwilling to tell me the truth.

I don't remember my father. He and Mother were separated when I was very small. All I remember about him is that Mother once shyly admitted that he was a rather handsome, dandyish sort of person. I realized she must have been embarrassed to have chased after someone so shallow and mediocre. "When I couldn't sleep at night," she once told me, "I would often force myself to remember all the foolish mistakes I made when I was young, just to clear my mind. It was all rather unpleasant, of course, and sometimes I'd get so ashamed I'd hide my face under the sheet, as if there were people out there in the dark staring at me. Yet the very unpleasantness let me feel the comfort of atoning for something."

I was really sorry she hadn't remarried. She was a lively person, and, if she had married someone she loved, certainly could have made family life lively and interesting. Though she was not terribly pretty, there was a quiet elegance about her, like the subdued quality of a monochrome landscape painting. She could write beautifully, too. A friend who was also a writer used to tease her by saying, "Somebody could fall in love with you just by reading your works!"

"... Then get scared off;" Mother would reply, "as soon as he found out his beloved was a wrinkled, white-haired old hag!"

At her age, it was impossible that she still did not know what she wanted. Her self-deprecation was obviously a way of avoiding something. I feel sure of this because certain strange habits of hers had long ago aroused my suspicions.

For example: wherever she traveled on business, she always took one volume of her twenty-seven-volume 1950-55 edition of Chekhov's fiction with her. "Don't touch my set of Chekhov's works;" she always warned me. "If you want to read Chekhov, read the other set I bought for you. The warning was obviously superfluous. I had my own set, so why should I touch hers? Besides, why repeat the warning over and over again? Yet she was still afraid of the smallest unforeseen eventuality. That set of books seemed to have an unnatural hold on her.

The reason for two sets of Chekhov in our home might have been to show that fondness for Chekhov was our family hallmark. More importantly, though, it was to give my mother a way to cope with my and other people's fondness for the author. Whenever someone wanted to borrow a volume, Mother would take it from the set in my room. Once, when she was home, a very good friend took a volume from her set. Her reaction when she found this out was as quick as if fire had singed her eyebrows. She immediately took the same volume from my set and ran to exchange it for her own.

From then on, her set has remained in her own bookcase. I could agree with her that the great Chekhov repaid a hundred, no thousands of readings; but did that mean one had to make a point of reading him every single day for over twenty years?

Sometimes, when she was tired from writing, she would sit across from her bookcase with a cup of strong tea, staring dreamily at her set of Chekhov. If I suddenly walked into her room, she would become nervous and upset, and either spill the tea on herself or begin to blush like a young girl on her first date.

"Is she in love with Chekhov?" I imagined. If Chekhov had been alive, such a thing might really have happened.

When her mind grew addled as she lay near death, her last words to me were, "Those books -". She no longer had the strength to say "That set of Chekhov's selected fiction;" but I knew perfectly well what books she meant. "And those notebooks ... that say ... 'Love must not be forgotten' on the front... cremate them ... with me."

I didn't carry out all of her last requests. I did burn the books, but couldn't part with the notebook that said "Love must not be forgotten." I always thought that if it could be published it would be the most moving piece she had ever written. But of course it could not be published.

At first I had thought that it contained only notes for future writing, because it didn't read like a novel, or like reading notes. Nor did it seem like letters or a diary. Only when I read it through from beginning to end did her cryptic comments join with my own scattered memories to suggest the vague outlines of something. After a great deal of reflection, I finally understood that what I held in my hands was not lifeless, antiseptic writing; it was the searing expression of a heart afflicted with grief and love. And I could see how that heart had had to struggle and suffer under the grief and love it bore. For more than twenty years, a man had occupied all her romantic affections, and yet had remained unattainable. She had used the notebook as his substitute, and had poured into it the thoughts she meant for him. Every hour, every day, every month, every year.

No wonder she had never gotten excited when some very ardent men had proposed to her. No wonder she had dismissed with a laugh all of the idle talk about her, never knowing for sure whether it was wellintended or malicious. Her heart was occupied, that's all; and it couldn't hold any more. I remembered the famous lines the poet Yuan Zhen [A.n 779-831 - Tr.] wrote after the death of the woman he loved:

Once you've crossed the deepest sea, can other waters vie?

Take away the great Mount Wu and clouds seem less than clouds.

Most people are incapable of love like this, I knew; and when I realized that it was unlikely anyone would ever love me in this way, I felt more discouraged than I can say.

I learned that during the 1930s, when this man was doing underground work in Shanghai, an old factory worker had been killed while protecting him, leaving the worker's wife and daughter destitute. Because he was a moral and responsible person, and felt comradely affection for the worker, he married the worker's daughter without hesitation. Whenever he encountered couples who had married for love and whose "love" made endless trouble for them, he would thank his lucky stars. "I may not have married for love; he would think, "but we have worked together in harmony, like the right hand with the left." For decades they had weathered life's storms together as companions in adversity.

This man must have worked where Mother did. Had I ever seen him? I couldn't identify a trace of him from among our normal house guests. Just who was he, anyway?

I remembered a spring day in 1962 when Mother and I were going to a concert. The concert hall was a long way from our house, and we hadn't taken a bus.

A small, black, chauffeur-driven car pulled quietly up and stopped at the curb beside us. An elderly man with white hair and a black tunic got out. How striking that white hair was! The man gave the impression of uncompromising sternness, refinement, and crystal-like clarity. His eyes, especially, had an incisive brightness as they darted from one object to another, reminding the viewer of a bolt of lightning or the flash of a sword blade. If it were possible for tenderness to fill such cold eyes, it could only come from a truly powerful love for a truly deserving woman.

He strode over and said, "How are you, Comrade Zhong Yu? Haven't seen you for a long time."

"Very well. How are you?" Mother's hand, which I was holding, suddenly turned cold and began to tremble slightly.

They stood facing each other, looking sorrowful, even stern perhaps, but neither was looking at the other. Mother was looking at the bare shrubs at the road's edge. The man was looking at me. "You've grown into quite a young woman. That's great. You look just like your mother."

He didn't shake hands with Mother, but he did with me. His hand was cold and trembling slightly, like Mother's. I felt as if I'd become an electrical conductor, sensing both impulses and resistance. I quickly withdrew my hand from his. "No," I said. "Actually it's not great, not at all!"

"Why not?" he asked in amazement. Perhaps I thought he was just pretending to be shocked, because whenever children blurt out something disarmingly frank, adults make a point of looking amazed.

I looked at my mother's face. Yes, it was true. I did indeed look like her, and that was a bit disappointing. "Because she's not very pretty!" I said.

He began laughing and spoke to me in a jocular voice. "How sad! You mean there really exist girls who think their mothers aren't pretty? Say, can you remember in 1953 when your mother was assigned to Beijing and came to the office to report in? She left you out in the hall, you little rascal, and you ran up and down all the stairs. You peeked into offices, and finally got your fingers caught in my office door. I had to carry you crying to look for your mother."

"No, I don't remember," I said, a bit put off. Why did he have to drag out things that happened when was still in open-crotchted baby pants?

"I guess such things are easier for older people to remember," he mused. Then, turning quickly to Mother, he said, "I've read your latest novel. Frankly, it's not quite right in some places. I think you shouldn't be so hard on the heroine... you should remember that loving someone is not wrong in itself, and she didn't really hurt anyone else. The hero might also have been in love, you know, only denied his love in order to preserve another person's happiness.. ."

At this moment a policeman walked over to the car and began to berate the driver for stopping in a no-parking zone. This put the driver in an awkward position. The white-haired man stopped speaking, looked in the direction of the car, and spoke to the policeman. "Sorry. It's not the driver's fault, it's mine. I ..."

I watched attentively as the elderly gentleman bent forward, listening to the policeman's lecture. When I finally turned my mischievous smile back toward Mother, she looked miserable, like a little girl in first grade cowering beneath the principal's stern gaze. It was almost as if the policeman's lecture were directed at her!

The car drove away, leaving a light haze of exhaust behind it. Very quickly even the haze was blown away, and it was as if nothing had happened at all. Yet for some reason my memory of the event did not vanish quickly.

Thinking back, it must have been the power of his spirit that had stirred Mother's feelings for him. This power came from his mature, steady political sense, developed in the life-and-death struggles of the Revolution; it came also from his nimble mind, his artistic cultivation, and -though it seems strange to say so -his love of the oboe, which Mother also loved. Yes, she must have worshipped him. She noted at one point that without a sense of adulation, her love couldn't have sustained itself for a day.

I can't guess whether he really loved Mother. But then, if he didn't, why did her notebook contain the following entry?

"This is too large a gift. How did you know I liked Chekhov, anyway?"

"You mentioned it."

"I don't remember."

"I do."

The collected works of Chekhov, then, were from him. To Mother it must have seemed almost a token of love.

Perhaps this man who didn't believe in love had grown white hair before he ever realized there was something inside him that could be called love. How tragic that would have been!

It must have been miserable to love him and to get no affection in return. How she must have strained her mind to figure out just when his car might cross a certain street on his way to and from work, so that she might catch a glimpse of the back of his head through the rear window.

Whenever he ascended the platform to make a speech, she would have sat in the audience, with distance, smoke, dim light, and jutting heads between them, looking at his dimly visible face, feeling as if there were a lump in her chest, unable to stop the tears from welling up in her eyes. She would have choked back her tears to hide them from others. When he coughed so much that he had to stop speaking, she would worry why no one kept him from smoking. She would worry that he might get bronchitis. And she would never understand why he was so near and yet so far from her.

And I suppose he must have stared until his eyes were blurry at the stream of bicycles outside the side window of his car. He'd be worried whether her handbrake was functioning properly, and whether she might have an accident. On the rare occasion when he didn't have an evening meeting, he might leave his car and walk over to our neighborhood, just in order to draw near our front gate. No matter how busy he was, he would never forget to scan the magazines and newspapers for things Mother had written. And he would never have understood why life had turned out this way.

When they had the good fortune to meet at work, they must have given each other hasty nods and brushed by as quickly as possible. Even so, this would have been enough to loosen Mother's grip on her senses, to turn the whole world momentarily into a big blank. If she met a coworker whose name was Wang, she'd be certain to call him Guo and say something that didn't really make sense, even to her.

I knew it had been a desperate struggle for her when I saw entries like the following in her notebook: "We have pledged together to forget each other. But I've cheated on that pledge. I haven't forgotten you, and I somehow feel you haven't forgotten me, either. We've merely deceived each other, while trying to hide our torment. It's not that I've wanted to deceive you. I've tried so hard to forget, I really have. Several times I've left Beijing for this purpose and gone far away. I placed my hopes in the numbing power of time and space, and sometimes felt I really had forgotten. But when my work was done and the return train was drawing nearer and nearer to Beijing, my heart would be pounding so hard that everything became a dizzy blur. I would gaze anxiously toward the platform, as if there were someone waiting for me. And, of course, there was not. Then I would understand that I had not forgotten, that everything was just as it had been before. Year by year, this obsession has become more and more deeply rooted, and to uproot it is beyond my strength.

"At the end of each day, I have a nagging feeling that I've forgotten something important, and at night I awaken with a start from my dreams, wondering if something has happened. No, nothing has ever happened. Then it comes to me with perfect clarity: I don't have you, and nothing can make up for that. You and I have already reached our declining years, yet I'm still plagued by a young girl's emotions -why is that? Why must life lead us over such a long, arduous path before the dreams we pursue finally appear before us? And because you and I once closed our eyes to our dreams, not only did we miss our chance at the crossroads of life, we placed ourselves and our dreams on opposite sides of a great chasm:'

Yes, that was it. Mother had never let me come to the station to meet her when she returned from her trips out of town. She must have preferred to stand on the platform alone, enjoying the illusion that he was meeting her. My poor white-haired mother, behaving like a lovesick schoolgirl!

She wrote very little about their romance, actually. Most of what she wrote was about the trifles of day-to-day living - why some of her efforts at writing had failed, doubts and misgivings about her own talent, why Shanshan (that was me) was so naughty and whether or not to mete out punishment. Then there was the time she misread some tickets because she wasn't thinking clearly, and missed a perfectly marvelous play. Another time she left her umbrella at home and got soaked to the skin. Her thoughts clearly were on him, day and night,

just as if they were really married. In actual fact, if you added up all the time they had ever spent together, it wouldn't total more than twenty-four hours. But those twenty-four hours were probably richer and more profound than the enjoyment some people have in an entire lifetime. Shakespeare's Juliet compared her love to riches when she said: "I cannot sum up half my sum of wealth" [Romeo and Juliet, act 2, scene 6 -Tr.J. I suppose Mother couldn't have summed up half her love, either.

It appears that he met an early death during the Cultural Revolution, though her references to this are vague and evasive, very likely because of her own situation at the time. What mystifies me is how Mother was able to keep writing at all in the midst of vicious attacks. From her veiled references, it seems one can infer that her man had questioned some of the theories of a certain ultra-Red "authority on theory" who was at the height of his power then.' "This is nothing but right-wing thought in disguise!" he apparently had said to someone. And I could tell from reading those tear-stained pages that he had been dealt with harshly, but had never given in to his powerful tormentors. Even on the verge of death, the last thing he said was, "If you send me to go see Marx, I'll take my case against you right to him.'

This must have happened in the winter of 1969, because that was the winter when Mother's hair suddenly turned completely white, even though she was only approaching fifty. She had pinned a strip of black cloth to her sleeve, and this had caused her trouble. She came under severe criticism for wearing that mourning band, which was considered a backward superstition. Then her attackers insisted on knowing just whom she was wearing it for.

"Who's this for, Mommy?" I once asked her at the time, feeling alarmed.

"A near relation!' she replied. Then, worried she might have shocked me, she added, "Someone you're not acquainted with:'

"Should I wear one, too?" I had asked. Then she did something she hadn't done for a long time: she patted my cheeks as she had when I was a small child. It had been a long time since this kind of warmth had appeared in her. I often felt that the more years and experience she had behind her, especially after those years when she was persecuted, the more she withdrew from warmth and affection -or perhaps just hid it deeper and deeper-until her apparent lack of emotion made her seem like a man.

Sadly and rather absentmindedly, she laughed. "No, you don't need to wear one;' she said.

Her eyes were dry and slightly puffy, as if every last drop of moisture had been cried out of them. I wanted to do something to console her, to make her happy, but she said, "You can go now."

At the time I wasn't sure just why, but I was overtaken by a fear that part of my dear mother had already left me in pursuit of something else.

"Mother!" I cried.

Mother must have realized instantly what was going on in my mind. "Don't be afraid;' she said, very tenderly. "Just go. Leave Mother by herself awhile:'

I was right. Mother had, in fact, written this:

"You have gone, and I feel as though part of my soul has gone with you.

"I don't even know where they've taken you, much less how I might see you one last time, since I count as neither close friend nor relative ... so we'll simply have to part like this. If only I could have undergone their inhuman tortures in your place, so that you might have lived on! How could I ever believe all those absurd charges against you?² You have been murdered, you who were among the best of them all! Would I love you like this if you were not? Yes, I am not afraid to utter those three words now.

"Snow keeps swirling down. Good Heavens! Does even God indulge in pretenses? Trying to cover your blood and the ugliness of your murder with a blanket of pure, clean whiteness!

"I never thought my own existence was very significant, but now I spend every moment wondering whether the things I do and say would bring a frown to that stern brow of yours. I find myself wanting to live right, to lead a good life, like yours, and to do something for this society of ours. Because if won't be like this forever, you know -the sword of Justice is already poised above that pack of dogs!

"I walked alone down that street, the only one we ever walked down together, and listened to my solitary footsteps in the darkness, echoing, echoing ... In the past, whenever I wandered up and down this street, lingering as long as I could, I never felt the grief that I feel now. I knew then that even though you weren't at my side, you were still living in this world, and for that reason I felt you were with me. But now you are no longer here - I just can't bring myself to believe it!

"I walked to the end of the street and back. Then I turned around and walked it once more.

"I turned around the railing, then faced back as always before. It seemed you were still there, waving goodbye to me. We had once at this spot given each other the plain, blank smiles of mere acquaintances. We were doing our best to mask the deep feelings we shared. That was one evening in early spring, but hardly an inspiring one, since chilling winter winds were still blowing. We had walked along in silence, keeping a good distance between us. You were having difficulty breathing because of your bronchitis. My heart went out to you, and I wanted to slow the pace, but for some reason could not. We nearly flew along, as if some pressing matter demanded that we cover this stretch of road as quickly as possible. How we treasured the only stroll we ever had together, yet we were afraid that one of us would speak those frightening words that had tormented us for years: 'I love you. I doubt anyone, other than ourselves, could ever believe that we never even shook hands, let alone anything else!'"

You are wrong, Mother. I believe you. I have seen inside your soul as no one else ever has.

That small street: I would never have known it to be so filled with painful memories. This shows that no small corner of the earth, however plain in appearance, should be written off as insignificant. Who knows how many secret joys and sorrows might be concealed in it?

Sometimes when she had written herself to exhaustion, she would walk back and forth in the small street outside our window. This could happen after she had written until dawn; or it could happen on black and gusty nights, even in the winter, even when the wind was howling like a crazed animal and pelting the window with sand. I always thought it was simply a strange quirk of hers. Little did I know that she was going for spiritual communion with him.

She also liked to stand in front of the window, gazing out at the street. Once she got such a look on her face that I felt sure one of our favorite guests was coming. I hurried to the window for a look. Outside, in the autumn evening, a chill wind was tossing withered brown leaves into the air and blowing them across an empty street.

It was as if he were still alive. Her habit of pouring out her thoughts to him in writing continued as before, right until she, too, was unable to lift a pen. Her parting words to him, on the last page of her notebook, were: "I am a materialist. But now I find myself longing for Heaven. If there really is a Heaven, I know you'll be there waiting for me. I'll go there and see you again. We'll stay there together and never part. We'll never have to deny ourselves for fear of hurting someone else. Darling, wait for me. I'm on my way..."

I never would have imagined that Mother, even as she lay dying, could be so taken by love. As she herself had said, it really was an immutable thing. My own feeling was that it was less like love than some kind of tortured yearning, a force somehow stronger than death.

If what people call "eternal love" really exists, then this epitomized it. She felt blessed, even to her last moment on earth. She had truly loved, and had no regrets for having done so.

By now their wrinkled skin and white hair have wasted away and turned into other forms of matter. Yet I know that whatever they have turned into, their love for each other endures. There are no legal or moral codes binding them together, and they never even so much as shook hands, but they belong completely to each other. They are inseparable. Through the ages to come, whenever one white cloud pursues another across the sky, or one blade of grass draws close to another, whenever one wave splashes another's foamy crest or light gusts of wind chase each other-they will be there.

I weep every time I see that notebook with "Love must not be forgotten" written across its front. I weep bitterly again and again, as if I were the one who had suffered through that tragic love. The whole thing was either a great tragedy or a massive joke. Beautiful or poignant as it may have been, I have no intention of reenacting it!

The great English novelist Thomas Hardy has pointed out how rare it is that those who call out and those to whom they call are able to come together. I cannot condemn my mother and her beloved for their breach of conventional morality, but will criticize them on one point: why didn't they wait to find the other soul that was calling to them?

If people could wait for each other and keep from drifting into marriage, how many tragedies of this sort would be avoided!

When communism is achieved, will love and marriage still sometimes be treated as separate things? The world is so vast that there may still be times when people whose souls beckon cannot say "yes" to each other; does that mean the problem will still be with us? How very sad. Let us hope we will have found a way to avoid this sadness by that time.

In the meantime, why do I trouble myself with such nettling problems? In the final analysis, perhaps we ourselves must accept responsibility for all this grief. Who knows? Perhaps the blame lies with the old mind set passed down from earlier times. These days, simply refusing to marry has become a direct challenge to that old style of thinking. Some will say you have psychological problems, or some shameful secret, or perhaps political misdeeds in your past. Or they might say you are too weird and wily, or think you're better than everybody else, have no respect for time-honored customs and are an evil heretic. They will find all sorts of mean, low-minded ways to undercut you until you knuckle under and marry the first person who comes along just to get it over with. Then you're shackled in a marriage without love and, unable to escape, suffer through it for the rest of your days.

I feel like shouting "Stay out of our lives! Allow us to wait patiently until that right person appears, and even if it never happens, don't make us rush blindly into marriage! Living alone is not such a terrible thing. Perhaps it's just a sign that life in our society is evolving, advancing ..."