# Dear Mei

*by* Dena Rash Guzman

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Dear Mei,

After decades of living apart I no longer can wait for you. There have been oceans and deserts, forests and swamps, homes and families, wars and commerce between us. Kilometers of longing rolled one after the other into a knot that finally tied my heart into bondage, and stopped it. Once I slept warm under the weight of our correspondence, but now my life is so full of it that I have to light a bonfire and turn it all to ash. Mei, many times you could have come to me, but every one of those time you went somewhere else. You did this and then in turn called me needy when I cried for your touch or the fragrant vibration of your lilting voice. Your freedom is the flight of a falcon and the fight of a revolution but I might have stopped it. I could have become a falconer or a diplomat and done my bit to make you mine.

Yet still we live apart. Nor more than did you, did I. I know this. Now, Mei, there is something more you need to know.

Dear Mei, I write to tell you that I have found another. I have decided to devote my life to her. When I heard of her, she was a prisoner of this world, one who I believe committed no crime other than to have been born into a world that cared not for her kind. She is a famous case and had lived in this prison for 17 years. I learned of her while in Copenhagen last year, reading the Post. Her name is Feng Yi. She is a rare sort of prisoner and yet all too common — a victim of circumstance, captured in her home and sent away because of State policies. She could not remain free, as the environment is not hospitable enough to her kind after a point, a point the world passes constantly. How is it that we as a race are so religiously destructive? It must be religion, because it is not evolution and it does not strike me as particularly scientific, Mei. No intelligent creature would so methodically make messes such as


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these — slash and burn, mine, build, destroy, rebuild, pollute, fight with the sole intent to hurt and lay claim.

Mei, Feng Yi has been hurt. Her home was destroyed not once, but twice, and she was made a prisoner, not of her conscience, but certainly of what should be our own.

I came to her last year, after the last fight we had, Mei, and I have not left. It was a long journey from Copenhagen, far longer than any you or I ever underwent to see each other. Planes, trains, buses and finally, a bicycle. Mei, I had to be near her. I knew she would need me. I had a dream in which newsprint took new forms, swirled off the page in front of my coffee, and once reformed, a pulsing headline announced GO TO FENG YI .

Mei, I once had dreams of you. It was only when they turned funereal that I stopped believing. Mei, you know I stopped sleeping or eating and then finally, believing in you and your dark hair and pale skin. I stopped believing in you, so far away in America. I set the dead's red plaque outside for you because I knew you were dead to me. You are a living, breathing soul, but I still did not want you to get lost, in case you tried to come home to me.

After the dreams of Feng Yi, and the relative death of you, Mei, I went to Yunnan Province. I left Copenhagen to return Shanghai, and then Shanghai forever. I sold my business, my books, and most of my camera equipment. I quit my jobs at the magazines and newspapers. I took those takings, and I took the money I had saved for our marriage, and bought a house on a large property up on the edge of a misty, wooded mountain near the Wolong Nature Preserve. I easily hike up to the timberline where only flowers and yaks amass in any great numbers, and where breathing is a chore. I have a fast flowing stream that is melted glacier water, and evergreen trees and bamboo. Lots of bamboo. My nearest neighbor is 3.5 kilometers away. My home is surrounded by my own Zhōngguó chángchéng, Mei. It's seven feet high and made of stone. Some great general lived in this house before, and though it is in disrepair, it is perfect for me, and I am very rich here.

Sometimes I wish you were here. Hell was wanting you.

Mei, I must finish my story.

I moved to this new home because it was very close to Feng Yi. She had just given birth to a baby when I first saw her with my own eyes, Mei. I looked through a hole in a wall to see her. She did not know I saw her. She was eating and she was so still, and she was so gentle that it was unbelievable that if aggravated she could tear a man from limb to limb. In this, Mei, she reminded me of you. I knew this of you, too. Gentle, but easily a killer.

For two weeks I went to see her, every day. She did not see me, though. I had planned to take my time in meeting her. I had planned on seeking employment through which to serve her somehow, in some small way. I did not need to make her mine, Mei. I am accustomed to not being in physical possession of the being I most covet. Still, I wanted to be as near to her as I could be. So pure, so fertile, so wise and lovely was she, Mei, that the only times I thought of you were the times I did something you liked, such as drink sugary coffee or eat cold leftover dumplings.

I had to buy a vehicle and learn to drive it to see her, as it was too far to walk, too wet to bike, and no busses will go to my house. Mine is a steep dirt road straight down the mountain and to my Feng Yi. I got a truck for roads like that, and learned to drive them just in time.

Mei, one day last May, something horrible happened. You must know what happened because you always read the papers, but you did not know I was near to the horrible thing. One afternoon in May, I was visiting Feng Yi, who was particularly playful for once, when the earth jolted and began to roll and shudder. People and animals screamed and died, crushed and broken like teacups or wishbones. Mei, the buildings jumped and splintered. The pipes spewed water and gas and the shaking came again and again. Massive pieces of earth slid down hillsides and mountains, covering roads and burying villages. Feng Yi's home is surrounded by sheer cliffs. Those cliffs became contortionists, reaching down and right back up, I swear, and spit boulders the size of cars down onto us. So much running and crying, Mei, I have never seen. I do not remember any of the

earthquake in any sort of order that makes sense. I remember it like shards of a poem or the fractured view from inside a speeding train. I sometimes feel it in my sleep. The Earth lost its cool and the suffering that resulted from the nightmare separated many a soul from a body, destroyed many a home and office and school and store and life. Mei, you were probably shopping or tending to your houseplants. I don't know if you tried to call me.

Did you?

Once the violence of the shaking stopped, the people at Feng Yi's home jumped to action—the people that could, that is. At least five people were dead, Mei, but it was Feng Yi and the other pandas most in need of help. We tended first to the human injured and then everyone was assigned a role. I was assigned the role of scout because of my familiarity with the area and terrain. I went out into the surrounding area with a group including a doctor. Mei, I was able to do this because I knew that Feng Yi was safe. She was in her courtyard when the shaking started. Her baby was in the nursery. They were safe enough and so I spent days and days in the rain, knee deep in mud, climbing over fallen trees and around huge chunks of broken mountain to find the lost and hurt. We anesthetized them and brought them back on stretchers. Some had run as far as a kilometer, having escaped through collapsed fences in a frenzy of fear, and we brought them back to utter destruction. Nearly all of the panda homes were flattened.

Talk had begun of evacuation.

Mei, I panicked. I panicked first, and then I plotted. Mei, you see, the main road out of Wolong is steep and winds like a snake. It practically coils. This place is as high as heaven, Mei, and as hard to find. I knew the road had been wiped out in places, but I also heard steady talk of the pandas being moved. As contact was reestablished with the outside world, and as the military and volunteers arrived on foot and by helicopter, news came in. The baby pandas were taken to a less destroyed area about ten kilometers upstream, and I knew the larger pandas would go next. I knew they would go as soon as traveling was possible. After three days straight of volunteering and

sleeping in tents, I went home. The road to my house was very damaged, Mei, but it was passable. I had with me a chainsaw to move fallen trees and a shovel to move fallen rocks. I had to drive off road many times, but I made the 3.5 km drive in less than four hours. It normally takes me 20 minutes to make that drive, Mei. The heavens dumped onto the world such a terrible mess.

My house was mostly destroyed, Mei. I walked the parameter of my property and saw a massive boulder had rolled into my north wall. The boulder was larger than my home, but it left no real gap in the wall. It practically sealed itself into the wall. My smaller structures, made of wood and not stone, were in slightly better shape. Exhausted and hungry and wet and cold, I found my toolbox and made quick repairs to two of the building. I had to keep moving. I patched up the old barn and its small fence, and I threw a tarp over the damaged roof of the old carriage house, because it has a wood stove. After this, I found some dry clothes in a box in my house, changed, slept for a couple of hours, and then ate a tin of fish given to me by the rescuers at Wolong. After this, I returned to Feng Yi's home, and I watched.

The pandas were safe but there were massive aftershocks occurring still, and for this reason, they were kept in steel cages most of the day. They were so scared, Mei. My poor Feng Yi had lost weight and hair and still, any real help was slow to come. I fretted and suffered with her until I realized something. I knew what to do. After days of observation, and years of reading, I knew what to do.

I began to offer my truck for official use, and for that reason was allowed to park it near to the remaining pandas. I stayed as close to sweet Feng Yi as I could. Thankfully, her cage was at the outside of the cluster.

I planned and planned. I followed the veterinarians around and I took vials of panda tranquilizers when they were not looking, and it was often that they forgot to look. The earth kept shaking, they were hungry, and many did not know what had become of their families. By the sixth day after the earthquake I had nine vials of sedative, an arsenal of panda antibiotics and vitamins and many other things

Feng Yi might need in her new life. I felt as though I was lining a pharaoh's tomb, Mei. Feng Yi was to be reborn and I did not want her to go without in her new life.

The seventh night after the quake proved perfect. It was cold and rainy, Mei, but tents, badly needed for human shelter, had arrived that day. Tins of food and bottles of water had arrived along with clothing and blankets. The workers, soldiers and volunteers were warm, well fed, and relaxed for the first time since the tragedy visited Wolong. I drank weak tea and waited for night to deepen. When it was deep enough, I snuck upon the night guards one by one, and I stabbed them with panda sedatives. They fell like the buildings had fallen all around us earlier in the week. I quickly located Feng Yi. I used the nearby lift to pick her cage up and place it in the bed of my truck.

Mei, I drove away with her. I put her in the barn with a huge pile of bamboo and some old apples, and I felt the deepest joy you can fathom.

But Mei, I had to leave Feng Yi so as not to draw suspicion to myself. I was anxious about leaving, but I had to leave and return her cage. As I drove back to Wolong, I imagined her new life with me. No more babies forced upon Feng Yi. No more people staring in through the holes in the walls of her home. I imagined all good things for Feng Yi and myself, Mei. I returned to camp just before sunrise and acted as though I had been sleeping the whole night.

I returned the cage to its original location, but left the door open. Later on that morning, amidst the panic that ensued when the guards and other people awoke to a missing Feng Yi, I feigned stomach discomfort and drove home.

Mei, I still have Feng Yi. No one has come to look for her. No one has come to me, and I return regularly to site of her former home, where I now work supervising the clean up, which still is ongoing, though most of the pandas are now relocated to a safer place. Yes, I still have Feng Yi, but Mei, you should come to me too. You should see her. The news is still reporting one missing panda, but the only thing missing, Mei, is you.

Or not. Maybe you are not missing at all Mei, because you never really were there. Perhaps you are not missing at all.

I must go now Mei. It is time to feed Feng Yi.

It's cold out, Mei, and this letter is going to light my fire.

x,

Li Weibing

Wolong, Sichuan, China