

MY NAME IS HSU LIANG-LIANG

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* 2011 Taipei Book Fair Award

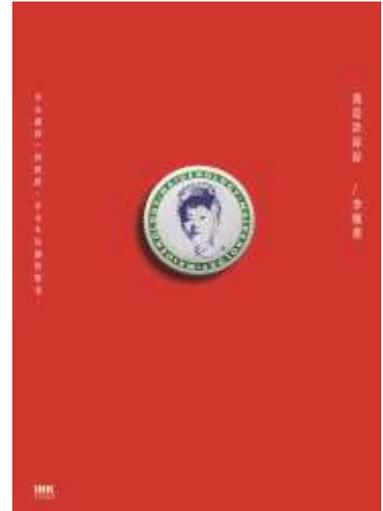
As with every big city, Taipei is a jungle of love and dating, and those who aren't careful can lose themselves permanently. Hsu Liang-Liang may be one such soul: thirty-eight, well-educated, and financially independent, she presents a polished facade to the outside world. Yet her love life is an absolute shambles, like so many of her tribe. When she falls in love with a man twelve years her junior, her friends predict that it can't possibly end well. Yet he seems so nice, and so in love with her at first that she can't help but dive in.

As his attentions waver and things get worse, the chorus of voices around her and in her head get louder. He won't introduce her to his family; there is a younger woman who stays in the picture. This chapter in her history as an ex-girlfriend is told with vigor, bravery, and painful attention to ironic detail, deconstructing love and sex with a cold, modern eye.

My Name is Hsu Liang-Liang is a Taipei-style *Sex and the City* with the spice and elegance of Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* thrown in. Urban women step one by one up to the author's microphone and tell their tales of motel rooms, shopping malls, text messages, and dreams in the vocabulary of contemporary attraction.

Lee Wei-Jing 李維菁

Lee Wei-Jing is an author and cultural critic, known for her collection of stories and poems *The Importance of Old-School Dating*, her novel *Barging Into Heaven*, and this collection of short stories.



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MY NAME IS HSU-LIANG LIANG

By Lee Wei Jing

Translated by Scott Rainen and Jack Hargreaves

Edited by Duncan McHenry

Additional Assistance by Liu Le and Li Xiaofan

1

Call me Hsu Liang-Liang. I'm 38 years old, and I've just been dumped, but I can't tell if I've come to terms with that yet.

My boyfriend, Sun Ta-Wei, was 12 years younger. He dumped me because I was too old. "Our age difference doesn't seem all too great now," he'd say, "but give it a few years and it'll be more and more obvious. I can't handle it. I want to be able to face my friends and family with my wife...I've tried to introduce you to my friends...To my parents...But I just can't bring myself to do it. I get that, given our current appearances, the difference is the least obvious that it's going to be, but I still can't do it. A few years later, and I'll be even more certain about this feeling. I don't want that kind of life. I tried, and I just can't do it."

If you're still reading, you probably think I'm ugly, but that's actually not true. I look ten years younger than I am. I'm slender; my eyes are big, and my face is an oval. I have nice legs. I look better now than I've ever looked before. When I was young, I was a little fat and had acne. Constant overwork in my twenties made me so thin that I didn't look human. Nobody called me pretty back then, but today people compliment my looks relatively often.

Ever since I was a child, I've wanted to marry, have a stable family and a relationship. When he showed up, I thanked the heavens. There was an age gap, but our love was mutual, and I felt the heavens were looking out for me. I wanted to spend my life with him and have my happily ever after.

I first fell for him a year and a half ago. I was deeply drawn to him, but my rationality told me it wasn't a good idea, that our age difference was too great for it to lead anywhere. I wanted to have a life of marriage and children and my own family.

"I'm not trying to fool around with my life and I don't want some kind of friends-with-benefits thing," I told him. "So please don't mess with me. We don't have a future."

But he replied, "How can we not have a future? I love you. You're my one. We'll get married before you're 40. Even if my mother doesn't accept you at first, she'll figure out that you're a good person, and get over her hesitations."

"It's not about age," he told me. "It's about two souls becoming one."

I took his hand and felt the heavens shine down on me.

I truly loved him. We viewed marriage as the goal of our relationship, and he called my cat his "son." When he went abroad, he'd come back with toys for our "son." Sometimes we strolled around markets together and fantasized about the design of the home we'd someday have or what our children would look like when they were grown. Since I couldn't be around for

Ta-Wei's childhood, I hoped to have a son just like him: the same pale skin, single eyelids, and bushy eyebrows. I'd cradle him in my arms, and hold his little hand as I walked him to school.

"I hope our child looks like you," he told me. "With your same big eyes and oval face."

"Eventually, we'll have a house of our own," he said. "Hopefully with a pond in the courtyard." Ta-Wei liked fishing, swimming, and diving. He kept a fish tank at his place. Every Saturday we went to Keelung, and I watched him dive into the water to catch fish for his tank. Then he happily returned home with his "fresh blood."

I asked him if in the future he'd take our children swimming, and he grasped my hands, saying, "Of course. Of course I will." Then he kissed me with his soft lips. I loved it when he kissed me.

Ta-Wei always called me babe. He always called me that.

He worked in Taichung and I in Taipei. Every morning I called him at exactly seven to wake him up. In the evening when I got off, I always called to wish him goodnight. I avoided smoking and drinking so that my body would be able to bear our dear little children inside me. I diligently applied facial masks so we'd look a good match, and managed my finances in order to pay for our children's education, along with other life expenses. Perhaps after the wedding I'd want hyaluronic acid or Botox treatments so that our age difference wouldn't look that considerable.

As I flip through the diary that spans the past year and a half, I find it overflowing with happiness. A friend who hadn't seen me for a long time commented, "You look completely different," while another congratulated me on finding a home.

Still, Ta-Wei and I had moments of inexplicable tension that led to arguments.

Things came between us. After a year and a half of dating, he still wouldn't let me meet his family. He bluntly told his mother that he had broken up with his girlfriend in order to avoid her questions. In the past, he had immediately introduced his girlfriends to his family. I cried in the car. I asked him why. He said he'd find the right time.

Once, we fought because he stayed close with an old middle school classmate. He admitted to me that they had had feelings for each other before but hadn't gotten together because he had a girlfriend at the time. When he broke up with his ex, the two thought they might be together, but then I came along. They always stayed in touch. "But," he told me, "I've already made changes for you. She and I have always gotten coffee together, but I've reduced how often I meet up with her one-on-one, for your sake."

We ran into one of his colleagues in Kaohsiung once, and for a moment his grip on my hand stiffened, but then he waved and said hello.

"Did you hesitate because you weren't sure if you wanted to introduce me or not?"

"Yes," he said. "But I've gotten over it already. Didn't I say hello?"

Half a year passed, and I hadn't met his parents. Half a year more, and I was still waiting. We fought over this.

"I can't stand you anymore," he told me. "I just want to break up. I know I said I wanted to marry you, but not so fast."

I was weeping. "But didn't you promise?"

"I'm not saying we definitely have no future, just that we need to push marriage back a little. You can't just think about your own age. Think about how young I am for a moment. Why would I settle down so early? If you can't accept this, then it would be best for us to break up."

We kept arguing until I fell apart. "Don't leave me," I pleaded. "We can marry a little later. I can wait. I don't want to fight with you. I promise I won't fight with you again."

Ta-Wei's birthday was last week. He decided to have a party at his family home and invite his friends, former classmates, and me.

I was very happy. I'd never been to his house before, and what was even more important is that he was lowering the guard that I had fought against for so long. He was always at my place playing with my cat, and once, when he went to sleep on the bed gifted to me by my dead grandmother, he told me to get some rest so that I'd look pretty – "you might run into my mother." I rushed to buy a box of expensive face masks and applied them every day.

Three days before his birthday, he told me that he'd asked his mother to leave during the party since he was worried that parents would stifle the atmosphere.

I blankly stared at him, but I told myself that I loved him and that I could wait.

I went to the department store three days in a row before his birthday and tried to find an appropriate gift. I assumed that he'd like a new wallet. Since he always put it in his pocket and needed one made of soft leather that would fit more smoothly.

The day before his birthday, he told me that I might still meet his mom. "If she leaves late, you might bump into her."

I was so nervous.

I took the metro to meet up with Ta-Wei on the big day. I opened his car door, and the girl from his middle school was seated next to him wearing a tight, black tank top with thin shoulder straps that hugged her boobs. She'd made her face up very white, and carefully applied eyeliner and mascara to make her eyes pop.

When we got to his house, his mother had already left. He jumped into the noise and fervor of his friends without me.

I stood in the courtyard where they were barbecuing. No one spoke to me. Then I went to his living room to lay down and nap.

Ta-Wei's mother came home as the party was tailing off. He rushed to hand me my phone, and said he'd take me home.

"But my handbag's still in the living room..."

"I'll get it for you."

He whisked me out the door hurriedly, but as we were heading out I had a chance to say goodbye to his mom.

I thought we'd spend the evening together at my place, but he just wanted to leave. My eyes welled up with tears. "Wait a minute," I said, and handed him the leather wallet that I'd spent so much time picking out. He took it from me, then left.

We argued on the phone that night. He told me that his friends didn't like me because my face looked sour for the whole party and that he just wanted me to go away. I told him that

none of his friends had spoken to me. They were all having fun with each other, and I didn't know anybody, so why should I get involved?

"Who do you think you are?" Ta-Wei asked me. "Why should they be making the effort to speak to you? That's your responsibility." He told me they all thought I was quiet at first and didn't like talking, but later just thought I just couldn't be bothered to pay any attention to them.

"Why didn't you introduce me to your mom?" I asked. "I was right in front of her."

"I was too embarrassed to say anything."

"Why are you like this?" I started to cry. "I was embarrassed when we ran into my parents and brother unexpectedly, but I still introduced you to them. It's basic manners!"

"Just be honest for a minute. At your age it doesn't matter if you're with a younger boy. Why would your parents have reason to be concerned? It's obviously mine that would be hurt."

"How are you always so cruel?" I yelled at him. "Are my parents not actually parents? Or is a girl my age incapable of getting hurt? Don't you have an older sister yourself?"

"What the fuck do you want me to do about it? Let's just break up!"

I called him again several days later.

"It's over," he said. "I tried, but I just can't. When you turn 50 I'll have just turned 38. How could I leave the house with you as my wife? What would my friends think?"

I swallowed. "You don't want me to go out with you? That's all? I won't push you to introduce me to your parents or friends anymore."

"I don't want a woman I can't go outside with."

"Should I be ashamed of my age?"

"We don't have a future," he said. "We just don't fit."

"Don't say that!" I said. "I'm begging you not to say that. Don't say that to me now that I love you."

He asked me why I was being so irrational. "You only think of your future – never mine!"

I became hysterical. I was shouting and crying. "Don't leave me!" I begged. "Don't leave me—don't be so cruel! I won't force you to marry me. When I'm ugly, I'll just leave. Give me a few more years...I'm begging you...Baby...I'm begging you. It doesn't matter if you don't want to marry me or take me out in public. I just want to be with the person I love. Give me a few more years. Just one. Just a little more time to be with you. I won't do it again. I won't argue with you anymore. I'm begging you..."

"I don't want this either," he responded. "We don't have a future together. I can't get over our age difference."

"It doesn't matter. I'll just hide."

"I've told you that I don't want a wife like that."

"I don't want you to marry me. It doesn't matter if you don't. Just give me a little more time. Or have I already gotten ugly? Am I already too old, and you can't stand me anymore?"

"Just let me go," he said. "You're scaring me."

My friend knew I was heartbroken. She hadn't seen me for less than a week, and I'd already gotten skinnier. I couldn't eat or sleep. She asked what had happened, and I told her that I was too old for him to bear.

“Did his mom have a problem with you being too old?” she asked.

“No,” I responded. “He didn’t even introduce me to his mom because he couldn’t get over my age. He wouldn’t introduce me to his friends either. What was true yesterday is not true today, and what was untrue yesterday is true today; we cast a blind eye to whatever violates our notions of loyalty or morality when it comes to love....” I tried not to cry as I said this to her.

“Bullshit!” my friend said over the phone. “If you were Lin Chi-Ling and 20 years older than him, he would still happily drag you around to meet his parents and friends. Or even if you were Nita Ing and 30 years his senior, he’d still marry you with a smile and take you back home to live harmoniously, and he’d keep on loving you up to your last breath. It’s just that it’s you. Your looks are fine, but you’re no famous model; you have a decent job, but you’re no CEO, and you’re not wealthy.” She paused. “Honestly, how could you be so naïve? Almost 40 and you really think there’s somebody out there who wants to marry you at that age? How can you be so old and still think to fall in love, marry, and have kids? Just let it go. Come out and kill your time drinking instead.”

I hung up the phone, and stood up on shaking legs. Then I fell to the ground and began dry heaving.

It had nothing to do with two souls.

My name is Hsu Liang-Liang, and I’m 38 years old. I still believe in love and marriage, and this makes me feel a profound shame.

2

I’m the type of woman who looks like a totally different person after I put my makeup on. Sometimes I wish I could have someone who sees my thin and feeble face without makeup and still loves me, but of course I’ve never dared to try (show them).

He and I played on the soccer pitch and children’s playground. The wind blew, and the sun shone down on us. We ran and walked and lay down on the grass to look at the sky. We stared off in a daze and laughed childishly. We scurried between the rollercoasters and the Ferris wheels, and I demonstrated my brutal superiority at bumper cars.

We parted in the restroom, and came back together to wash our hands at communal sinks, which were installed below a large mirror. Instinctively, we both looked up toward the mirror, and in a moment all of the afternoon’s warmth, intimacy, and joy were suddenly sapped away.

The mirror reflected our faces and upper bodies.

My face was attractive and still flushed red from our prancing about, and my eyes still glistened. His handsome, thick eyebrows still smiled as he looked sidelong at me.

And then, suddenly, I was old. Standing next to his fair, clear face, I was old.

We both reacted to this, and could tell the other had noticed as well. We desperately tried to suppress the mixture of shock, alarm, and sadness that had swept over us. I lowered my head.

He asked me what I was thinking about.

“What are you thinking about?” I countered probingly, pointlessly, praying that the response wouldn’t hurt.

He didn’t say anything. He just gazed at the mirror motionlessly, waiting for me. I finally decided to lift my head and look directly at our reflections. Our own faces solemnly stared back at us, pressed tightly up to each other. It felt like a photograph reflecting our relationship. In synchrony, we squeezed out a little, eternal smile.

But it was too horrible, and I couldn’t keep it up, so I winked at him and contorted my face goofily. He noticed and laughed, then stretched his eyebrow up handsomely.

We laughed excessively and unusually loudly. Then, after a moment of drama, the laughter faded away altogether, and we went back to sadly and silently staring at each other in the mirror.

I let out a low sigh. “I’m so old. I look older than you.”

“No,” he said. “No you don’t.”

It was hard to tell how long we stood in front of the mirror. It was as though a new universe had come into existence and melted away around us before we turned and left.

The dusk’s sunshine was golden, and I felt like I foresaw some future sadness that had been the basis of our relationship from start to finish.

3

He caresses me the way he caressed you, and kisses me just like he kissed you. His sweetness and intimacy are the same sweetness and intimacy he used on you, and when he fucks me, he does it just the same as when he fucked you.

We’re different, but he uses us in the same way.

He took a picture of you out of his leather wallet to show everyone. I’d just met him and was with a group of people I didn’t know well, and he showed us a picture of him holding you from behind. Both of you wore black and had big smiles on your faces. There’s another photograph with you standing between two of your best girlfriends. Your eyes are open wide and your lips and boobs are voluptuous. Your makeup is applied carefully, and your eyes sparkle with an indiscriminate attractive power. You’re the type of girl who likes to stand in the middle of the group during pictures.

Thinking back on all the groups of girls I’ve been with, I envy you. You’re the kind of girl that lots of Taiwanese men like. You like to put yourself in the middle of the group because it draws eyes or so you can be at the center of the conversation. Smarter women do it without leaving a trace. The stupid ones do it by constantly inserting themselves into a discussion or controlling the pace. It’s not a matter of whether or not they have confidence, but of getting everyone to notice the confidence they think they possess.

I’m not like you. I don’t like your kind. But I wouldn’t mind if I were to become like you. I don’t care whether or not I’m special because those people represent a minority. I want to be liked by lots of people. I’m scared of loneliness. I’d rather have a hundred people infatuated with me than have one who understands who I am.

You can't be described as beautiful either. You're not worth a second glance; in truth, you're as attractive as just about any other ordinary girl.

And that's just what gets me: as a girl of average beauty, you're loved and have never suffered.

You're 13 years younger than I.

What was I doing 13 years ago?

Back then I still didn't shine. I've never shone. When I was a child, others aggressively excluded me, and when I grew up I was still scared. You seem to like social activities and meeting people; you've got charisma.

And when his date with you is over, he'll come find me. We'll sit in the center of the city in the middle of the night. We both like this. But we don't know how to fix it. We can't decide if we should be together or not. There are big differences between us: age, background, environment – it's all very different. We don't know what we'd have to deal with if we were together. And then there's you.

But if you never try, then you'll never know.

With passion pulsating in the air, I let him take me by the hand.

I get into his car and we cruise through the Taipei night.

"When did you last have sex?" I don't know why I asked; I was just suddenly curious.

"Two hours ago."