

# THE GAP YEAR

## 婚前一年

\* *Match Point* meets *The Perfect Marriage*

*Romantic prospects are popping up everywhere in the life of successful lawyer Alan Yang. The only problem: he is already engaged to be married in one year's time. Starting from this seemingly rom-com premise, the novel proceeds to steer readers through a dark maze of dubious intentions, guiding them to a masterful final reveal.*

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While seeing his girlfriend Hsin-ching off at the airport, successful young lawyer Alan Yang spontaneously proposes, promising to prepare everything for their marriage on her return from graduate school in one year's time.

Not long after, Alan's ex-girlfriend appears at the law firm where he is employed asking him to represent her in divorce proceedings. The two had once been the "perfect couple" in university, but eventually split due to their differing ideals. Alan, however, has continued to harbor feelings for her over the intervening years.

Meanwhile, a beautiful new employee arrives at the company that is cooperating with the firm on an important commercial deal. She is a recent grad of Alan's alma mater, so he naturally takes her under his wing. As the divorce case and the commercial deal negotiations simultaneously heat up, Alan seeks assistance from one of his closest associates at the firm, who also happens to be his childhood sweetheart. With seemingly ideal romantic partners circling him like sharks, how is Alan going to keep his promise to Hsin-ching?

At first glance a lighthearted rom-com, *The Gap Year* plays with the ambiguous language of daily life, skillfully manipulating readers' perceptions and keeping them guessing as to Alan's ultimate intentions. Complex business and emotional relationships intertwine, and the gallery of potential romantic pairings keeps expanding, until



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the meticulously constructed final reveal forces a reinterpretation – à la *Sixth Sense* – of all that has come before.

## Lee Po-Ching 李柏青

In his ideal world, Lee Po-Ching is a professional writer who practices law on the side; unfortunately, reality is exactly the opposite. Honored as one of the fifty most representative popular fiction writers of 21<sup>st</sup> century Taiwan by *Wenhsun* magazine, Lee has published numerous books, including the historical novel *The Destruction of Shu*, and the mystery novels *Dearest You* and *The Last Train Home*. Rights to his crime novel *The Grand Candidus Hotel* have been sold in Thailand and Korea. *The Gap Year* was one of the top three mystery novels, and one of the top ten most popular novels of 2022 on Readmoo, Taiwan's largest e-book platform. Rights have already been sold in mainland China.

# THE GAP YEAR

By Lee Po-Ching

Translated by Roddy Flagg

## 1. Love that needs vows isn't true love

"Any love that needs vows isn't true love... So don't even talk about it. I'm not listening."

"How do you work that out?"

"Would your mother ever say 'Alan, I promise I will always love you'? Of course not. Because she just loves you. And you know she does, whether she promises to or not. Turn that around and you find any love that relies on promises can't be true love."

"That's a logical fallacy. 'If P then Q' doesn't mean 'If not P, not Q'. Even if your proposition that love without promises must be true love is correct, you can't reverse that to conclude it's impossible for love with promises to be true love. You can have true love either way, with or without commitment. Don't you think?"

"So, you agree love and promises are two separate things?"

"I do."

"Marriage is a kind of promise."

I laughed. I knew what she meant.

"So you can't go telling me now you want to get married," she said.

"We'll get married when you come back. A year's time," I said. "I'll have everything ready. We can do it."

"You call that a proposal?"

"In contract law, we'd call it an invitation to treat."

Hsin-ching didn't laugh. She just looked at me, taking deep belly-breaths. I reached out to embrace her and, when she started to sob, I embraced her a little tighter.

I hadn't expected seeing her off at the airport to be like that. I wouldn't think she had either.

Her flight was at 8 am and our planning had been meticulous. We needed to check in three hours before departure and have two hours to travel to the airport, an hour to do the last of the packing, and a solid six hours of sleep to be able to cope with the big day. That meant we had to be in bed by 8 p.m. the night before. Early to bed, early to rise.

But it turned out our fool-proof safety-first approach resulted in unnecessary worry and wasted time. We went to bed at 8 pm and completely failed to sleep. After tossing and turning until 2:30 am we dragged our now-sleepy selves out of bed to shower and dress. Realizing there was no more packing to do, so we sat opposite each other, scrolling. At 3:30 am her parents picked us up in their car. There were next to no other vehicles on the highway and we were at the airport

in a little over forty minutes. The check-in desk wasn't open, so the four of us sat in the food court gazing at the midnight snacks or early breakfasts we had no appetite for.

At 5:30 am Hsin-ching and I went to the desk, where she became the flight's first passenger to check-in. We were standing shoulder-to-shoulder at the conveyor belt, watching her luggage be checked, when she made her speech about the necessity or lack thereof for promises and marriage. I knew what she meant.

I had imagined countless iterations of our airport parting. In theory, I should have been sad, unwilling to see my lover set off for distant shores. But I could not forget we had the internet now. No matter how distant that shore, sight and sound of Hsin-ching were no more than a screen swipe away. Plus she would be gone for a mere year, and only to New York. Hardly the back of beyond. A dozen performative airport farewells and chasing the airplane down the runway would only have left me feeling ashamed of myself.

I think Hsin-ching felt the same, and so was treating it as if it was a brief business trip. And so her sudden outbreak of tears was a shock for her as much as it was for me. My instinctive response was to crack a joke to lower the tension ("Don't cry now, your eyes are already puffy from being awake all night.") but it occurred to me I had never seen Hsin-ching cry before. Our three years of ups and downs had seen anger, anxiety, and sadness, but not once had she shed a tear in my presence. Those tears were because of my proposal, and I knew I should respond sincerely. So I said nothing and held her.

Oddly enough, a round of hugs and crying seemed to serve as some kind of ritual and, as surely as if an officiant had declared proceedings complete, the uncertainty and awkwardness of the parting was gone. We were back to our normal selves, with Hsin-ching reminding me of minor errands to complete, with joking asides. She told me to find a cleaner for the apartment ("...and no making passes at the cleaner!") and to retrieve a pair of high heels from her friend, Lu Yu-ching ("... and no making passes at Lu Yu-ching!"). I laughed and agreed.

At 6:30 am, Hsin-ching disappeared behind the partitions leading to airport security.

The last moment of our farewell was a wave of her hand, passport and boarding card pinched between her fingers. The woolen camel-colored jersey she wore, a gift from me, clung pleasingly to her slender frame. Her ponytail swung as she turned back to look at me; a loose strand of hair clung to her cheek. She smiled and her cheek dimpled, pulling the strand of hair with it. She brushed the hair loose with her passport and walked onwards, pulling her luggage behind.

For some time afterwards, that image would appear in my mind in the form of a movie poster for a Wong Kar-wai film. The kind I don't usually watch.

Hsin-ching's mother cried all the way back to Taipei. Her husband tried to calm her down at first, but soon gave up. She finally stopped crying only when we came off the highway. She passed me a folder: "My husband and I have been thinking and we feel it'd be best if you lived in Neihu. There are plenty of new buildings there and it's close to your work. Take this and have a look. No rush though, you've got plenty of time. And don't worry about money."

The folder bore the logo of a real-estate company and contained sheaves of information on various apartments, each with annotations and comments.

By 7:30 am I was back in our Jinan Road apartment. I had planned to sleep a little before going to the office, but having been up all night my brain was now too active to sleep, and I decided I might as well be at work. I changed and left again. The metro was empty, except for a few teenagers in school uniforms, presumably doing summer classes. I listened to the girls next to me giggling about the following week's trip to the beaches of Kenting and teasing each other about who dared wear a bikini in front of the boys. An early start, I realized, was not always a bad thing.

The office was deserted. I turned on the lights and air-con then sat down to work. I replied to emails, reviewed files, edited documents. I was super-efficient, the most productive I'd ever been. By just past 9 am I had edited the entire Tailun draft. The arriving secretaries were questioning my early appearance. I had, I told them, turned over a new leaf.

At 10:07 am, Chiang En strode into my office, bag in one hand and coffee in the other. "What's this I hear about you getting in early today?" she asked, suspicious. "Are you taking your work seriously now you're a pretend bachelor?"

I grabbed her coffee and took a gulp. "So what if I work hard? At least I'm not turning up just in time to plan lunch, like some I could mention."

"How dare you..." She retrieved her coffee and slipped into a lower, warning tone: "Careful, though, you need to behave. I promised to keep an eye on you."

"Have you got a boyfriend?"

"None of your business!"

"Because if you don't, maybe you're not the best boyfriend-watcher. Why not find one?"

"What's that got to do with it? And you're being mean. I'll tell your mother."

"I was just taking an interest in an old friend's love life, that's all. Anyway, enough chat. I've gone over the Tailun draft. You have a look too and this afternoon we can..."

But the rush of adrenaline from the early morning work soon faded. After lunch I was dizzy and dazed. Washing my face and guzzling coffee did nothing to clear the fog. When the 2 pm meeting finished I asked Brenda if I could leave early, promising to finalize the Tailun document the following day. Brenda was not amused: "Dead by lunchtime, Alan? What were you doing last night?"

Chiang En butted in before I could respond. "He's a bachelor again. He can't pass up the opportunity to go drinking and dancing every night."

Again, I didn't get a chance to speak before Brenda continued: "Okay, listen to me. I've seen plenty of young lawyers like you. They have bright futures but ruin things for themselves by getting caught up in romantic entanglements. So watch out for yourself, Alan. Now go home and get some rest."

On the way home, I found myself pondering Brenda's advice. She was the second-most senior member of staff at the practice, ranking below only Eric Chang. Unfortunately for Brenda, she lacked a lawyer's license. But with thirty years of real experience, she was secure in her post and her words carried weight. I couldn't help but wonder who those "young lawyers" were.

I arrived home and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. I expected vivid dreams, falling asleep at that odd hour. Butterflies, rowing boats, shooting stars, all that. But no. I slept the deepest of sleeps, a computer fully powered down rather than left to turn on its screensaver. When I opened my eyes again the room was dim and the air still. I had no idea of the date, or even the year. I felt stitched into the mattress, and it took me several attempts to get up.

I checked my phone: no urgent emails or messages. A pang of hunger hit, so I slipped into my flip-flops and went to the bento place on the corner. I bought two pork rib boxes and then went to the convenience store for beer and lemon soda. At home, I turned on the light and set out the food and tableware. Only then did I realize I had one portion too many.

I was alone now.

Hsin-ching and I had been in the same year at college, but only got to know each other much later.

Our meeting came during a tough time for me, with work stress and home stress piling up. I would wake up in the morning and immediately feel suffocated. The three-day Dragon Boat Festival holiday offered an opportunity to leave it all behind, to flee to Penghu to “reconnect with my lost self”. A friend, Cheng-han, was interning at the Penghu District Prosecutor’s Office and had an apartment in the office’s accommodation block, so I asked if I could have use of his sofa. He replied saying he could do better than a sofa: the apartment building was old but a decent size and despite being single he had been allocated a two-bedroom apartment. Unfortunately, though, he would be back on the main island for the holiday and would not be able to hang out. But he would leave the key to the door under the mat, the key to his scooter on top of the dresser, and beer and sea urchins in the fridge. Everything else I could take care of myself.

And at the end, this: “Oh, almost forgot. I’ve got another friend coming at the same time. But there’s two rooms, you can work it out.”

I didn’t enquire any further and he did not volunteer the fact that his friend was a woman.

I flew to Magong Airport and took a taxi to the address Cheng-han had given me. It was a four-story apartment building, as old and as big as reported, with space for seven or eight cars out front and flowers and vegetables growing out back. Cheng-han’s apartment was on the top floor. I found the key and opened the door. The apartment was not a mess, but nor was it particularly tidy: it was the apartment of a single man, in the same state it would have been if I lived in it. But the two bedrooms had been tidied – or the sheets changed, at least. I staked a polite claim to the one with the sea view by leaving my bag there.

I took Cheng-han’s scooter out, skipping the town of Magong and opting for the scenic North Ring route and stopping here and there. In Kangmei, I ate three freshly shucked sea urchins (only an idiot would eat sea urchins from the freezer). In Erkan, I had a fried rice cake stuffed full of squid and shrimp. But I spent most of my time on Nei-an beach in Xiyu, where the people were sparse, the sands broad, and the sea the blue of a touched-up photo. I took off my jacket and paddled towards a rock, where I sat and watched my sun-reddened feet through the water. How burned was my face going to be, I wondered.

It was almost 6 pm when I got back to the apartment. I walked in to find Hsu Hsin-ching, clad in shorts and a tank top, drying her hair with a towel.

Hsin-ching and I had been in the same university faculty but on different courses, and our friend groups did not overlap. I knew of her, and we would nod to each other when our paths crossed on campus. But I didn't remember ever saying hello to her, much less having a conversation. And that vague familiarity made this unexpected meeting particularly awkward. Did I need to introduce myself?

"Hey, hi. I'm Alan Yang, from Financial Law... I think we both went to..."

"Yeah. I'm Hsu Hsin-ching. You know Lai Hsiao-yu, don't you?"

"Er, yes, I do. Cheng-han didn't say you were coming... I mean, he said someone was coming. But not that it was you."

"Yeah, and he didn't tell me you were a boy."

Later, we would laugh about how we met. She would recall how I was sunburned red like a pig and how she almost burst out laughing when, trying to act cool, I removed my sunglasses only to reveal two white circles around my eyes. And I would retort that I wasn't trying to act cool: the sun had gone down, and it would have been weirder to leave the sunglasses on... and, damnit, she did burst out laughing.

I can't remember how the awkward introduction ended. I do remember carrying my towel and a change of clothes into the bathroom, images of those slim, toned, chocolate-milk thighs running through my brain. I closed the shower curtain and opened the cold tap, reminding myself I was on this trip to "reconnect with my lost self". I reminded myself of the Heart Sutra: I was to know my own mind; see my own nature; realize all appearances and non-appearances are the same suchness. Form is none other than emptiness; emptiness is none other than form; and all existence is suffering. And then I opened my eyes to see a sea-blue bikini top hanging in front of me.

And I bet you think I'm enough of a creep to stroke the bikini top and think of what it had held, don't you? I won't deny having the urge, but I resisted it. I carefully relocated the bikini to the towel rack outside the shower and then considered whether even that had been wrong of me.

Back in my room after showering, I found a hairdryer in the cupboard. I took it to Hsin-ching and apologized for having claimed the better bedroom, saying we could swap if she preferred. She smiled as she declined, her eyes squeezing into crescent moons. My heart skipped several beats and I asked, without a thought, if she would like to have dinner with me. She hesitated and I quickly bent to find a socket for the hairdryer.

Then, we chatted on and off over the white noise of the hairdryer and the local news. We spoke of our trips. She said she had arrived at 4 pm but gone directly to snorkel for two hours:

"I wasn't expecting much. I've gone snorkeling on the main island and hardly seen a thing. But it's different here. The coral is so beautiful and there are so many fish. And the sunlight makes it all so colorful. Did you know cuttlefish are transparent? They're like clear plastic bags. All you see is a slight change in the light somewhere in the water. It's incredible, you'd never imagine it could be an animal..."

She became more talkative, her tone rising and falling with her hair, which was giving off a warm scent. I told her of my trip along the North Ring. She said she too would like to find a deserted beach to sit on quietly while she thought things over.

“What things?”

“Just things,” she said, with a glance at her phone.

It took me a moment or two to decide to try again. I was, I told her, going to take a boat trip to Wangan the following day, to Wangankou Beach, a paradise untouched by human foot where we might see green sea turtles. She turned off the hairdryer and, smiling, thanked me. But she had signed up for a diving course and she had wanted to learn to dive for ages. She couldn't miss it. “And you'll have to go diving to see green sea turtles, I think. They won't crawl up on the beach in daylight.”

I managed a smile in response and asked her to give the turtles my regards. She tied her long hair into a ponytail: “Okay, let's go!”

“Go where?”

“To dinner. You're taking me out for a delicious meal, remember?”

We followed our phone maps to a restaurant Cheng-han had recommended, a small place under a banyan tree by a temple gate. It had about ten tables out front of the temple and looked like a simple noodle joint, but the dishes written on the red lanterns were all Japanese. The restaurant was basic but the food a delight. Thick slabs of the freshest sashimi; temaki overflowing with sea urchin; squid fried rice each grain distinct. And best of all the squid wrapped around vinegared rice, the combination of sweet and sour with the firm and chewy wrapping almost inspiring a celebratory dance. We started out drinking beer, but she complained it wasn't strong enough. So when it was finished we switched to Kinmen sorghum liquor. 58%.

And we started talking. We talked of mutual friends: of who was now a judge, a lawyer, or a professor. Of who had had an epiphany and left law to live on a hillside farm. We talked of who was doing what in Taipei and what package they got for doing it, and of who had moved to Hong Kong and what package they got there. Of who was married and divorced, of who had gone off the rails or come out of the closet. Of which college couples had broken up and got back together, or become sworn enemies, or settled down to start families.

“So are you and Hsu Chien-fan still together?” she asked.

“We broke up a long while back... I didn't know you knew her.”

“Not well. But you two were famous,” she said, knocking back another mouthful of liquor.

I was intensely curious about what we were famous for but felt awkward asking. I changed the topic to Feng Hsin-yuan and his hobby of matching girls with mahjong tiles. Chang Wan-chi, for example, had her name reversed to associate her with *chi-wan*, the Seven of Characters tile. This allowed for plenty of banter during play: “Chang Wan-chi is mine!”, “Let's get Chang Wan-chi paired up!”, “Chang Wan-chi is coming!” And so on and on.

“What about Lai Hsiao-yu?”

“Two of Coins.”

“Why?”



I held my two hands flat against my chest. She doubled over laughing: "I'm going to tell Hsiao-yu to watch out for you boys. You're disgusting."

"That was all Feng Hsin-yuan. I'm not like that."

"Is that so?" she asked, narrowing her eyes. "So what about me? What tile was I?"

"You didn't have one. We didn't know you very well."

At some point, her phone had started giving off flurries of text message alerts. She never interrupted our conversation with a "Sorry, I'll just reply to this", but kept talking and listening while typing on her phone. I noticed her neck contracted as she typed, and she pouted her lips, making her look like a little girl: a little reluctant, a little apprehensive. Her reply texts were short, taking little more than ten seconds to tap out.

Once we had eaten and drunk our fill, I asked, braced for refusal, if she wanted to take in the evening air on a deserted beach. To my surprise, she happily accepted. We took Cheng-han's scooter along the South Ring and, after several wrong turns, found his secret night-swimming beach. It was behind a small apartment complex, accessed by sneaking through gardens. The beach had no facilities but was clean and well-kept. We sat close to the water, though not so close the waves rolling softly onto the sand would splash us. The dark ocean surface reflected the blazing lights fishing vessels hung to attract fish.

I lay down and took a few photos. The sand held the residual heat of day, dry and warm. I suddenly felt exhausted and that taking the bar had been the stupidest decision ever. I wasn't lawyer material. I wasn't a man made to bear burdens or to act in the world. I shirked any responsibility I met. Maybe I should have moved to an island like this and lived a simple life. Cheap tea, plain food.

And a woman, ideally.

I turned to Hsin-ching. She was hugging her knees, gazing out to sea lost in thought. Her phone pinged again; she sighed and lowered her head to reply.

"What do you think about those lights," I asked.

"What about them? They're just fishing for squid, aren't they?" she said.

"Don't they annoy you? The sea should be dark at night. Silent and lonely. But those boats are there with those blazing lights. And I can hear them working from here."

"They've got to work. And the beach would be too dark without the lights." She looked around, then her phone pinged once more and she tapped out a reply as she spoke: "If there weren't any lights we might not have been brave enough to come."

"So you want the lights on the boats to be there?"

"They've always been here. We're the newcomers."

"I mean, if you could choose, would you rather a pitch-black ocean, or one that's all lit up?"

She laughed, her phone pinged, she answered as she typed: "Do you have to get all philosophical when I'm drunk? Oh, I don't know. If I wasn't drunk I'd want there to be lights. But when I'm drunk I prefer it to be dark, because I look a mess when I'm drunk."

"As if. You're prettier when you're drunk. You're just using being drunk as an excuse to escape."

“Escape? Am I in prison?” She looked up at me as her phone pinged over and over.

“Have you read *Fortress Besieged*?” I asked. “That’s what life is like, a castle under siege. Those inside want out, those outside want in.”

“Well, I don’t want to end up like that. I plan to enjoy my life!”

She moved a finger to tap at her screen; I snatched the phone from her hand before it arrived. She turned and grabbed for the phone. “Hey! What are you doing? Give that back!”

“If you want to escape, why keep the chains?” And with a swing of my arm, I sent her phone arcing into the ocean.

Hsin-ching ran into the water, seeking her phone in the surf. Some time later she returned, panting and dripping wet. First, she slapped me. Then, she kissed me.