

MESSAGE FROM ANOTHER WORLD

跨界通訊

We joke about spending our lives on Facebook; for the protagonists of Message from Another World, it's no joke at all. They've found a private group that lets them talk "across the divide," where they can share pictures and experiences with the dead. Chen Yu-Chin brings us to another world and back in this funny, racy illustrated fiction that shows us how hard it can be just to die and stay dead.

How would you prefer to die? It is the last and perhaps the most important question of one's life. Yet in a modern age in which death can be easily hidden, medically forestalled, or forgotten about, dying the way you want to can be more difficult than you think.

A young hitchhiker named Chiang Tzu-Wu gets picked up by a pair of remarkable old men in a green Honda sedan. They've escaped from their nursing home, and are headed toward an end of their own making. Tzu-Wu notices that both are avid Facebook users, particularly involved in a huge, closed group chat of people who are facing – or have already faced – death. The group, which is managed by a mysterious young woman named Lili, appears to include members from both sides of the grave, who constantly encourage, guide, and protect each other in the face of the great transition.

Chen Yu-Chin's story rides the very cutting edge of our information-based society, mixing online text media into a fast-paced narrative sparkling with dry humor.

Chen Yu-Chin 陳又津

Chen Yu-Chin is definitely a rising star of Taiwanese fiction, who first came into the spotlight at twenty-four years old when she won the Kadadowa Mandarin Light Novel Award. At twenty-seven,



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booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

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she published *Young Miss Kublai*, which was extremely well-received. A subsequent work, *Real Tales of Taipei*, which describes the lives of second-generation immigrants, further cemented her position on the cutting edge of Taiwan's world of letters.

MESSAGE FROM ANOTHER WORLD

By Chen Yu-Chin

Translated by A.C. Baecker

I'm starving.

I slept in until after nine. Oddly, the old man hadn't woken up yet. He usually got up by six to work out, and would pick up breakfast for me. Even though we were only separated by one room, out of courtesy I gave him a wake-up call on his phone. He always wakes up. But this time, he didn't. I went into his room to find him still under the covers. I figured he was probably just tired from yesterday, so I took some money and went downstairs to get breakfast. When I got back, he still wasn't up. He always snored like a chainsaw, so loud even the neighbors could hear it. But now he was quiet. I went in his room; everything looked normal, with nothing out of order and no blood anywhere. I stuck my finger under his nose. He really wasn't breathing.

Death comes suddenly, and leaves without a trace. It comes for us all.

Should I call the ambulance? But there was no life to save, so maybe the police instead? It's such a hassle when someone dies, much more so than I had imagined. It's not like people just disappear after they stop breathing, and the cops are liable to show up at your house at any time. Think about it in terms of the size of the organism: every living thing decays, but he was decaying at a much faster rate. Luckily, his corpse didn't smell yet, so I turned the air conditioning down as low as it would go. Before long, the temperature in the room had sunk to sixteen degrees Celsius. I took my overcoat from out of the closet and put it on, but I didn't know how much longer I could stand it.

If I didn't say anything, no one would know he'd died. The people at the Internet café didn't know where he lived. I should get out of here, even though it wasn't my fault he was dead. But my fingerprints, hair – all the evidence was here, and the security camera downstairs had already filmed me going by. How could I not be a suspect?

The ironic thing is that he had gotten a physical just a few days ago, and the doctor had been impressed with his stats. And yet now he was dead. It wasn't fair, I was so screwed – if I ran, they'd say I was trying to avoid being caught, and if I died they'd say I'd committed suicide out of shame. It was hard to find innocent reasons for wanting to die. I could just imagine the newspaper headlines, something like, "Sexually confused youth surnamed Chen commits suicide over school pressure." If I died it would still be my fault. I'd only have a young girl to defend me, and people would say all kinds of things.

Could I text her to ask? No, if I got in touch with her then there'd be a record of our communication, and she could be implicated as an accomplice or a co-conspirator. I couldn't do that, for both her sake and mine. No, I definitely shouldn't flee, that would just be admitting that I'd done it. But at least I'd be tried as a minor and couldn't be sentenced to death.

So it was my battle to fight. Only one person could possibly die, right?

She absolutely could not and should not come over. When I read her message this morning, I couldn't respond. Even if I could have, it would have been to break things off: *When I woke up today, I didn't feel anything toward you. Don't come looking for me. I hate you.* But if I'd sent it,

she'd just come looking for me at the Internet café or to the old man's house, right? No, I should just leave it be. After all, she was doing fine at school, and didn't lack for friends. I had no way of knowing what would happen if I messaged her, so I left it in the drafts folder.

I went over the scene again.

Should I chop up the corpse and then dissolve it in hydrochloric acid? I regretted not paying more attention in chemistry, but I didn't even know where they kept the chainsaw. I'd known for a long time that it was impossible to die without involving others. Rot breeds maggots, and the smell spreads. I didn't really like it here either. He was gone and there was no use dwelling on it, but inevitably there'd be gossip. The whole thing was annoying.

I thought I'd wait until it got dark. If no one came, I'd set the place on fire. After all, it would be impossible to get rid of all the traces we'd left behind – fingerprints, hair, DNA. Running was the only option.

But the neighbors had all seen us. Did I need to silence them? How would I even do that? One of the neighbors seemed to have dementia. Everyone figured he was delusional, so no one would take his word. And if they asked his caregiver, the caregiver didn't speak great Mandarin. They weren't likely to cause problems. They just wanted to work and get paid on time. But I definitely didn't want people online to start talking about it. Everyone had fake accounts and didn't care what they said. We were the ones who were going to be smeared. Suddenly, the old man's cell phone lit up with a message.

The text came from Uncle Mei, but I couldn't see what it said. Damned passcode. Obviously this was my phone, but he'd changed the passcode. That's right; the old man had sent me a message before asking me to look after his accounts. When I searched through my own phone, his message hadn't somehow been deleted, and he'd sent me all sorts of passwords. I opened the phone right away. The inbox was full of various greetings that didn't look important; the issue was his chatroom, "Veterans 47."

Every day around ten in the morning he'd get online to chat. His computer didn't have a password, probably because he thought they were too much trouble. I entered the Veterans 47 chatroom. Everyone was over sixty, and their conversations were all boring. I typed in an arbitrary greeting.

Skywalker: *Morning*

SpringsSmile: *Uncle Liu is up a bit late today eh*

A lie had caught on, and it had to be followed by one after another.

Skywalker: *Not feeling so great*

As soon as I'd sent the message, I knew it was a mistake; it would upset them even more. Sure enough, messages asking after the old man's health poured in. Even Sun, who rarely replied to anything, said something. They all asked how he was feeling, where it hurt. These old codgers had spent so much time as patients that they proved themselves to be knowledgeable doctors. They could recommend medicine for nearly every ailment, and were well-versed in the side effects: hypersomnia, bloating, thirstiness, et cetera. They would share everything with me. Even if they suffered from night blindness, they were going to bring over medication. I was getting tangled deeper and deeper into lies. I replied saying that I'd think it over. I wouldn't be

able to take all this medication at once, and that I'd probably feel better after resting. The near-constant flow of messages started to ebb.

I went over to the old man. His expression hadn't changed much. It was hard to tell if he were alive or not. Maybe I only believed he'd died, maybe it was all in my head. I pushed the covers aside and felt his wrist. It seemed like he still had a faint pulse, but I quickly realized that I was simply feeling my own arteries. The guy was still dead. I pinched myself: I could still feel pain, so it wasn't a dream.

When you die, you're just dead. Everything ends. There's no use going back and forth over it. But if I were the one who died, I would try not to make as much trouble for other people. Sure, just being alive is a burden on others, but death only makes everything worse. But I was being a hypocrite for putting things this way. No, there had to be a way of acting on my better intentions, I just couldn't think of it. Things would end here. I'd be thrown into the back seat of a cop car and put in jail. I'd have a criminal record when I got out that I'd carry with me for the rest of my life. Maybe it was better if things ended now.

I kept scrolling aimlessly through his phone. His inbox was full of messages from his friends. They'd say something every five or ten days, that was the kind of relationship they had. That was fine; if the old man died, then they wouldn't suspect anything.

I opened the voicemail and discovered that he'd gone and called himself:

"I don't care when I die. I never thought I'd get the chance to touch a young person's foot. I got my pants and clothes wet, and swallowed a bit of water. I'll probably come down with a cold soon. It's too bad my phone isn't waterproof otherwise I would have taken a photo to burn with me in my coffin. If only my tombstone could be in the shape of a foot with the same dimensions, that would be so wonderful. You wouldn't have to carve my name on it; no one knows me by my real name now anyway. If only I could rot under that foot, and become the weeds surrounding it. They talk about 'the glory of dying in the throes of passion,' and I've only understood the true meaning of the expression now that it's too late."

That had been our agreement. Had I known, I would have turned off the water. But I guess if he was okay with it, I had no objection.

As I listened to the recording again, I realized that he was using his voice inbox as a diary. Was he trying to reveal his secrets to everyone? But when I thought it over, his secrets would probably be safer with robots than with people. The next voice message said:

"You know, when you're young you go through tough times with your friends, but you don't share the good times. When you're old, you share in the good times with your friends and you do it without feeling guilty. I never expected it would be so, but now it's all clear to me, and I shouldn't be so stubborn."

Was he treating his phone like a pet? The next message sounded like a reminder to himself:

"The next time I leave the house I need to remember to lock the door and to turn off the gas. That American friend of mine forgot to turn the gas off and lost their kitchen. Even their art went up in flames, they lost so much."

"You know, this bot isn't responding. I'd heard about voicemail before, can't they talk with you? Forget about it."

“Is it recording? Has it started? So, what should I say? Bots can’t chat with people? You should know that my bank passbook is in the dresser.”

“Last time you mentioned hard drive updates, what is that? Didn’t I just pay for some? Why do I have to update it again? This is extortion! I’m always being prompted to enter my password, how am I supposed to remember it?”

“Hello. This is my first time using this phone. I had the same one before but I accidentally broke it. I’ll sing a song for you, I love singing, hope you like it....” The sound of the old man singing, from the first line, “If I’d never met you,” to the irrepressible “I can’t go on living only relying on fragments of memories.”

That was his first and last message. Listening to his voice, his life seemed so sad: only bots to talk to, telling the same stories over and over. There probably weren’t any people as patient as the bot. When he got together with those old folks at the Internet café they’d talk about the same things. Even when I told them I’d heard it all before, they’d still go on. In the end, what he needed wasn’t a spiritual connection with someone old or young. They’d all talk back to him. What he actually needed was just a pair of ears, so a bot would probably make a good friend.

Screw it, I should just burn it all down. So long as the fire burned hot enough, it would solve everything. There wouldn’t be any way to tell what the cause of death was. I could never have imagined that I’d use the words “murder” and “arson” and mean it, but suddenly here I was. I looked around the apartment for combustibles – bedsheets, curtains, clothing – when suddenly my own cell phone lit up with a message:

Unknown: *Don’t get rid of me*

The sender’s number appeared as twelve zeros. I’d heard when I was little that if you dialed twelve zeros at midnight, you could reach hell by phone. What kind of joke was this? Hadn’t he died? Did the old man have another phone somewhere? No, it had to be scammers somewhere messing with the number. I picked up my phone to respond.

Lili: *What?*

I could see that someone was composing a response, so I waited a while. Finally, a single word appeared:

Unknown: *Chao*

That seemed like something the old man would say, or so it seemed to me.

Lili: *Are you saying you’re the old man?*

Unknown: *Yes*

Lili: *How are you not dead?*

Unknown: *The dead are still conscious*

What the hell was this? A dead person shouldn’t be able to use a phone, right? A little while later, another message appeared:

Unknown: *Please lay me to rest*

But I’d never organized a funeral before, it wasn’t right for you to ask me to do this. You have so many friends, couldn’t one of them be trusted? And I’m not sure what I’d say to the cops about us.

Unknown: *If I rot here no one will know*

Just how long had we even known each other? You're really going to ask me to do something like this? Isn't there somebody else on this earth that you can count on?

Unknown: *No I'll give you my gold*

I was an actual gravedigger. I responded:

Lili: *Deal d (·A·)b*

What the hell were you supposed to do after someone died, anyway? I wasn't afraid of death. If the cops suspected me, I'd just admit that I'd done it, otherwise why was I so worried about dying? If you take sleeping pills you might barf, drinking pesticides hurts, people who hang themselves lose control of their bowels, if you're not careful breathing gas you could cause an explosion. Nothing was perfect. It was all so scary I couldn't even bring myself to talk about it; I had to type it out. I switched back to my account and addressed the Veterans 47 chatroom:

Lili: *Grandpa Liu died. What should I do?*

SpringsSmile: *Call the police and find a doctor*

I might as well not have asked. I already knew that, so why am I asking you guys about it? I didn't realize that the chatroom would so quickly be flooded with images with phrases like "Go in peace," "Godspeed," "R.L.P." (they must've meant R.I.P.), "The gods envy us," "Only the young die good," and "Flying atop a crane to the Western paradise." The couplets made me feel a pang of digital forlorn, but God knows the death had happened right here, so of course the old man hadn't hesitated to saddle everything on me.

Lili: *I'm not even a relative. Is it weird that he spent his final moments with me?*

Sun: *Not at all we don't live with our kids anymore so of course this is what happens*

Lili: *You guys should come over*

Mei: *I'm busy playing chess with friends in the park*

Wu: *I had a stroke, can't get down the stairs gotta wait for my daughter-in-law to come back from errands*

SpringsSmile: *Hold on, about to go into surgery*

Forget it, these old people were all worthless. I decided to report it to the cops.

The cops came over. Two of them seemed a bit sleep-deprived. They asked a few questions, and then it was over. The doctor from the medical clinic pushed the body around a bit. He confirmed with a practiced hand that there were no signs of breathing, and that the pupils weren't reflecting anything. It didn't feel like they were treating this as a homicide. He connected his computer to a database of medical records, confirmed that the old man had a history of heart disease, and that he'd been unwilling to undergo surgery to treat it. It only took a moment to finish the death certificate.

"Here's my card, if you need anything get in touch." The doctor said, "Taking care of grandpa isn't easy."

"He's not my—"

"You don't have to explain it to me." The doctor left with the cops. "You'll need a bit of time, but it won't be long."

Was he hitting on me? What else could I possibly need from him?

I realized while looking at the corpse that the doctor had given me the card for a funeral home. What on earth was I supposed to do next with this body? The old folks in the chat room

decided that the cremation should be tomorrow, and that there would be no obituary. Those who could make it tonight would come to say their goodbyes.

Lili: *Okay I guess I'll go buy burial clothes then* ㄍ (ㄉㄨㄣˋ)ㄥ

When I got back to Grandpa Liu's room, everyone had arrived.

They all had keys to each others' homes, and when someone didn't visit the chatroom for more than three days, they always visited their home to check. Grandpa Chiang said that was camaraderie. They didn't want the body to rot under the blankets while the house cat or dog chewed on the corpse. Uncle Mei said they worried even more about the value of their homes dipping if the house was seen as haunted, and leaving their children with a reduced inheritance.

"That's what you're worried about?" I said.

"Of course. The only reason we're living is pass on those retirement savings to our kids," said Uncle Mei.

That's fine, it's none of my business. I placed the lilies I'd bought next to the old man's coffin. When I went to the bathroom, I found his dentures soaking in a cup. They seemed dirty, but they were going to be used again. I opened the freezer and took a look. He didn't exactly have the most glowing face. Sorry, but I really can't put these in your mouth for you. I'll put them next to you, and when you're in the ground you can do it yourself.

I turned on my iPod and downloaded an album of Teresa Teng's hits. "When Will You Return" started playing faintly over the audio system.

After we part tonight, when will you return

Finish your drink, and taste a few of these dishes

We only get drunk so often in life, what are we waiting for

Come, finish your drink and then we'll continue

Compared to the *suona* performances and flower drum dances that I'd seen before at funerals for distant relatives, it felt nicer to say goodbye to the people you'd known with the music you liked playing. Wouldn't it have been better to talk more while he was alive than after he'd passed? I thought over the playlist that I'd like to have at my own funeral, then realized how absurd it was for someone who hadn't even gotten married to be thinking about this. But then, you don't necessarily know whether or not you'll get married either, so thinking about your wedding first is equally useless. Even if you do, you'll most likely end up like those women I ran into at the warehouse, who'd compromised so much it wasn't even what they wanted themselves. People who hadn't gotten married by age sixty made up forty percent of the population, not including divorcees and widows. But everybody was going to die, so thinking about the playlist at your funeral was actually the more pragmatic thing to do. And after seeing my cousin get married, there were so many songs that couldn't be played. Everything had to be as auspicious as possible, but that has little to do with good music. Honor the dead above all else, what a great saying. Whether you wanted to see strippers dance on a neon float or two-dimensional cartoons, it was all same so long as you were being true to yourself.

“Grandpa Liu is online!”

A commotion arose; they were saying the old man had appeared in the chat room.

Skywalker: *Thank you everybody for coming to see me in my final days. My life has drawn to a beautiful close. There were no emergencies, no need for intubation, no ribs broken and my arteries remained clear. I was lucky and have nothing to complain about. I hope you can all help me with the part of my journey that still remains. A simple funeral is best. I didn't have a wife or any children, and everything that I have left I leave to Lili.*

In just a few hours, he could type in complete sentences with proper punctuation. It seemed like things were pretty boring in that other world. He was learning faster. Being dead didn't seem so different from being alive. I was shocked, and the old man replied in the chatroom a few seconds later:

Skywalker: *Electrical signals are very similar to consciousness. This is the direction that science will develop in in the future, not hardware.*

Lili: *When you put it like that I think it might be better for the science not to improve. (...)...*
`~ %g%g

SpringsSmile: *We're all family No need for formality We'll look after Lili*

I rolled my eyes so hard I saw my brain. Who wants your help?

Old Mei: *The young lady is handling things very well*

I really wanted to say, “By the time you guys get here, the body will already be rotting.”

SpringsSmile: *The young lady is so talented, it's a shame she's not working in intelligence.*

“Spies are everywhere!” They were all laughing, though I had no idea why.

“Grandpa Liu didn't tell you? We're all spies.”

It was hard to see this group of old folks as dashing secret agents. They might as well have told me how to swap bodies and run away from my parents. They said there was nothing special to it. Lots of people come to Taiwan but aren't able to get out intelligence reports. Some of them die, and some of them are just afraid and decide to simply remain as civilians. The only thing different about them is that they're ready to die at any moment. The jade pendant that Sun wore around his neck had a small hole carved out on the inside, where he kept poison that could kill him within ten seconds. Grandpa Chiang said it was a talisman for intelligence officers, and they all had one so they could avoid torture and keep their secrets in case of capture. Only, after half a century, all their secrets had become worthless – just like them.

“Artists don't really have that much money, and artwork is only good for laundering money. Back then, when you wanted to leave the country you had to have a reason. Art exchanges worked the best. We all grew up drinking the Party's Kool-aid, but once we got to Taiwan, we realized life here wasn't so bad, so we decided not to go back.” Hu Bei spoke constantly, and I had no idea whether or not to believe him.

“But he was a real artist. He became a spy so he could keep making art. That's how things were back then,” Sun said.

“We're pros at forging handwriting.” Sun said he'd fill in a signature so that the insurance payout went directly to me, the designated heir, but I would have to wait until I was twenty to access the money.

“Why can't you just give it to me now?”

“The young are not wise. We’ll wait until you get a little older.”

“I’ll have a beard by then,” I protested.

The *qipao* in the dresser hadn’t been left behind by Grandpa Liu’s wife; he’d bought it for himself, because dressing up as a woman was his only way of escaping. But he must’ve liked going in drag, otherwise why would he have been so happy to receive us?

I relaxed a bit when I finally realized what was wrong with this whole thing. Everyone seemed so jealous at how the old man had died. Not a single person there seemed upset. No one was crying; everyone was acting as if it was a happy affair. I thought it over for a while. He had had a great meal with friends the day before, and they’d talked and laughed together. And then all of a sudden, his life was taken from him. His expression didn’t even seem that pained.

“It’s good luck, you know.”

They chatted about those who had passed away before them, and I realized that having lived for so long was really quite improbable for this group. Most of the people they’d known before had already passed away. When they lost their first relative, they’d all cried regardless of how far away they’d been, and it felt like losing a part of themselves. But then the second came, and then the third. Once they got used to it, there was nothing to cry over. It felt like their souls had withered away.

“It seems like dying after living a long life devalues the meaning of your life a bit,” I said.

“Because all of life’s possibilities have run out. Apart from what you have in the present, you won’t ever become another person or have a different life,” Sun replied.