

# FROM TOMORROW, I WILL BE A HAPPY PERSON

## 二十歲

*A young woman and her close friends come of age during the political upheaval, rapid globalization, and unprecedented opportunity of 1980s Taiwan. Fearlessly, they set out to pursue their dreams, but it will take decades to finally make sense of the painful contradictions and disappointments they encounter along the way.*

At twenty, Yueh-Ching believes her future is limitless. It's the late 1980s, Taiwan is flourishing in the glow of an economic miracle, and as a student at the nation's most prestigious university, she is certain that her life will rise alongside her country's newfound prosperity.

However, as the years pass, her optimism slowly fades as she finds herself eventually reduced to a faceless office worker. Now in her forties, a chance encounter with a former college friend forces her to confront the past two decades and the unsettling realization that she has become exactly what she once feared – ordinary.

Yueh-Ching's life unfolds against a backdrop of global and local upheavals: Taiwan's student-led democracy movement, the Tiananmen Square protests, the fall of the Berlin Wall, China's rapid economic rise and the associated disillusionment in Taiwan, and the haunting collapse of the Twin Towers. It is an era of both turmoil and hope, a time when she and her friends truly believed they could change the world – until life teaches them otherwise.

*From Tomorrow, I Will Be a Happy Person* is a sweeping and evocative novel that captures a generation caught between the passionate idealism of youth and the sobering realities of adulthood. Through Yueh-Ching's intimate and bittersweet journey, it explores the tension



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between personal ambition and the unrelenting forces of history, offering a poignant meditation on time, disillusionment, and the quiet resilience of the human spirit.

## Hu Ching-Fang 胡晴舫

Hu Ching-Fang has published more than a dozen books, including novels and essays. She is the winner of several prestigious literary awards, including the Taipei Book Fair Award and the Golden Tripod Award. Her novel, *Islands*, was made into a TV series available on Amazon Prime, Netflix, and other streaming platforms. Hu's writing explores the nature of identity in a globalized world, the impact of technology on everyday life, and cultural alienation. Hu holds a BA in Foreign Languages and Literatures from National Taiwan University and MA from in Theatre from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

# FROM TOMORROW, I WILL BE A HAPPY PERSON

By Hu Ching-Fang

Translated by Jeremy Tiang

## One: Those Who Leave

Snow in April would probably look like this.

Deep blue sky, clear and windless. All living things burgeoned with spring that April day, leaving the campus verdant as jade. Old fringe trees in full bloom, scattering white petals to dance in the air like flurries of snow, landing in a pristine blanket before the brown-brick Literature Building. Maybe because she was born in winter, Yueh-Ching always preferred cold weather, and her personality could be frosty too. Having grown up in Taiwan, a tropical island, she'd never seen snow and was rapt at the wintry landscape outside.

The classroom was stifling. Summer was still a ways off, but already Taipei was scorching, and the students' sweat fell like rain. Handkerchiefs dabbing foreheads, shirts soaked through in the back. Absolute silence as everyone scribbled away at their test papers. Yueh-Ching hadn't expected Tommy to show up for the mid-terms, but still she looked around the room for him. She sat in a corner, distractedly scribbling something on her paper now and then, looking back out as the fallen flowers piled up. Gazing and gazing, slipping back into daydreams.

Time's up. As soon as the TA collected the papers and left, the dam broke and a flood of sound engulfed the classroom, raucous and chaotic. Someone spoke and someone else yelled, What? Then a cry, and others hurried over, some running in excitement, surrounding the person with the news, insisting she repeat what she'd just said. A wave of shrieks arresting the messenger, who honestly hadn't intended to cause such a stir. The noise ebbed swiftly like receding water, leaving a lone voice – Chen Yu-Hui's – to echo round the classroom, landing crisply on everyone's eardrums: "Lai Shui-Yin killed herself."

A burst of shock, and the babble started up again.

"How do you know?"

"It was in the papers this morning," said Yu-Hui. Long face, long hair, and a fondness for long skirts. Her features were slightly too small for her face, which had the puffy texture of flatbread.

"What happened?"

"Is she dead?" said someone else anxiously.

"Can you kill yourself and not end up dead?"

"I mean, attempted suicide is a thing."

Yu-Hui pushed her hair off her face and tucked it behind her ears, revealing high cheekbones. “She’s dead,” she said, nodding solemnly.

“That’s awful.” These innocent college students had fear all over their faces, their chests rising and falling.

“Where did it happen?”

“Her rented room,” said Yu-Hui.

“Who found her?”

“Flatmate.”

“How did she die?” The crowd held its breath.

“Potassium cyanide,” said Yu-Hui. “The report said she took potassium cyanide.”

“What’s that?”

Yu-Hui shook her head. “No idea.”

“It’s used for poisoning fish,” said Wang Hsiao-Lan, whose general knowledge was excellent. They called her Encyclopedia Wang.

That’s right, a bespectacled girl chimed in. You only need as much as your little fingertip, swallow that and you’ll be dead within a minute.

“Never mind a minute,” said Hsiao-Lan. “You’ll start bleeding from every orifice right away. Two seconds would be enough.”

*Bleeding from every orifice* – like something from a *Wuxia* novel. Crimson fluid seeping from Lai Shui-Yin’s nostrils, ears, eyes and mouth. Why so cinematic? Two girls clutched each other, as if they were watching a midnight horror film. “Swallow it how?” asked one tentatively.

It’s a powder you dissolve in water. (Hsiao-Lan mimed raising a glass) Tip your head back and swallow it down – every orifice spurts blood, and in a flash you’re dead.

“Like taking cold medicine?” Someone else giggled nervously.

Hsiao-Lan had to laugh at that too. That’s right – she held up her right little finger and rested it on her left hand, demonstrating how an amount as little as her little fingernail could poison a whole school of fish. You wouldn’t need that much for a person, just a few grains dissolved in water and you’d lose consciousness before you even had time to put the glass back down on the table. Your breathing stops, you feel so disoriented, your heart no longer beats. Potassium cyanide often gets used in military situations. When the Nazis fell, Hitler’s girlfriend took cyanide to die alongside him. After the war, Goebbels was sentenced to hang, but two hours before that he swallowed cyanide and they never got to execute him.

“Who’s Goebbels?” asked someone, and immediately got ridiculed. “You know, Goebbels! The Number Two Nazi,” Encyclopedia Wang explained. “There was Hitler, then right below there was him.”

“But – ” someone else blurted out. “Who’s Lai Shui-Yin?”

More laughter. Imagine not knowing your own classmate! The questioner got annoyed. “Why should I know who she is?”

“She’s that girl who got kept back.”

“No, not kept back, she took a year off after finishing first year. So we were starting third year when she went back to second, that’s why she’s now our junior.”

“So she’s actually our age?”

“Yes, but we’re in fourth year and she was still in third.”

More pressingly, how had she managed to get hold of potassium cyanide? They chattered away, youthful faces reddening with agitation, eyes gleaming with curiosity, as if they were discussing some once-in-a-century event like a comet crashing into earth. As far as they were concerned, Lai Shui-Yin swallowing cyanide was as momentous an event as South Korea’s Gwangju massacre or the Falklands War, headlines to make you tremble – yet too far removed from daily life to really affect them.

In the corner, Yueh-Ching stood, put away her things, picked up her canvas rucksack and walked out. The blazing noontime sun poured down, and the skin on her face felt like it might burst into flame. She reached the main road and hesitated a moment after passing a news stand, then turned back to buy a paper, which she held rolled up as she walked into Fengcheng Cantonese Restaurant. She sat and ordered soy sauce chicken and roast pork with rice, which arrived with a side of dark green kailan. Turning to the local news, she found the headline, “Co-Ed Swallows Poison in Rented Room, Dies Nude.” Apparently Shui-Yin had lain dead in her room for an entire day before her flatmate, concerned at her silence, knocked on her door and found her underwear-clad body, face puffy and dark purple, splayed on the ground bleeding from every orifice, ready for reporters to turn her into a salacious corpse. No one knew why she did it – there was no suicide note – and her parents were on their way to Taipei from Kaohsiung. Yueh-Ching closed the newspaper and gobbled her food. She was always starving after an exam.

The meal done, she stuffed the paper into her bag. She’d planned to spend the afternoon catching a movie at Showtime Cinemas, but now she doesn’t feel like it anymore. She was done with exams for the time being. Instead she ducked into the underground space of Tonsan Bookstore and browsed the new arrivals, only to find she couldn’t take in a single word. Mostly college students were in there, bristling with arrogance like they were covered in spikes. Probably they’d read all the translated Western theory texts on the shelves; that’s why they seemed so impenetrable, completely certain in their own knowledge, ready with definite answers and elevated thoughts on any subject under the sun. Yueh-Ching envied their intellectual prowess. She never felt confident enough to have any answers and got easily confused, plus she was always forgetting things, even things she’d just read.

She climbed the stairs back to street level. The delicious aroma from a nearby pepper bun stall was making her famished all over again. She turned towards Xinhai Road and walked down an alleyway, passing other bookstores, coffee shops, teahouses, snack bars, all filled with young people about her age, some looking like they’d also just finished their college exams, relaxed and joyful as they chatted away, each of their faces radiant as a tiny sun. In the bright daylight, the ground beneath her feet was once the irrigation ditches of Liugongzun, but Taipei City expanded over it, and it had already been filled in before she was born, covered in tarmac and turned into streets. Sooner or later she’d end up buried in the ground, just like forgotten Liugongzun. Time is

a river without banks. Like the Chagall painting. Tommy once wrote those words on his dorm room wall. Yueh-Ching arrived at the junction of Xinhai Road. Ahead of her was an enormous elevated highway. Rays of sun fell through gaps in the concrete like darts piercing her eyes, forcing her to squint. For a moment she saw houses floating in mid-air, an amorous pair of lovers drifting past, a white one-horned beast on a purple cloud, a winged fish playing the violin. She'd thought ludicrous images like these only existed in dreams, but actually they were fragments of memory with the bright colors of fairy tales, and as time flowed in all directions they permeated every corner of reality.

This summer, she would graduate from university.

When Yueh-Ching first enrolled, every year group had to produce a play for the school's drama competition. There was this student from Chiayi, Ku Jung-Tang, with a broad, pale face behind glasses with thin black rims, who wrote poetry and had seen arthouse films that no one else had even heard of. Everyone called him by the English name he'd given himself, Tommy, until they all but forgot his actual Chinese name. Tommy was a bit magical. He knew everything and wanted to know everything. He could do anything and wanted to do everything. In their first few weeks, he adventurously joined many societies, got to know huge numbers of people and helped organize plenty of events. When he proclaimed that he would direct the first year show, it felt like salvation – everyone was brand new with no friends yet, still getting lost on campus, with no idea what a play should look like, let alone how to begin putting one on. Tommy's enthusiasm was a lifeline. Everyone let out a sigh of relief and collectively agreed to support him.

God knows how he came across Wilde, but he was nineteen and full of confidence, and so without hesitation he announced that these Taiwanese teenagers would be performing *The Importance of Being Earnest* in English. With much fanfare, he invited any interested classmates to come for auditions. He spent some time torn between Lin Yueh-Ching and Lai Shui-Yin for the part of eighteen-year-old Cecily, a naïve girl from the countryside, before finally settling on Yueh-Ching, with their classmate Kuo Shih-Wei as her paramour. Tommy solemnly wrote out a rehearsal schedule by hand, allocated everyone their tasks, and told the actors to meet for rehearsal at seven every Tuesday and Thursday in an empty classroom in Sin Sheng Building.

At the start of week three, Shi-Wei stopped mid-rehearsal, script in his hand and despair in his eyes, and quietly said to Tommy, "Hey."

Tommy pursed his lips but didn't respond.

"You need to tell her. Otherwise I can't go on."

Unsure what was going on, Yueh-Ching looked from one boy to the other. An awkward moment. Then Tommy said to her, "Let's go."

She followed behind him, neither of them speaking, to the McDonald's on South Xinsheng Road by the university's side gate. It was the late eighties, and American fast food chains in Taipei were clean and light-filled, offering good food at a low price, with abundant air-conditioning in the summer. The college students had naturally made this their study center. Tommy ordered a milkshake and Yueh-Ching got a hot tea. They sat across from each other.

"Shi-Wei says he can't rehearse if I'm watching the two of you," he said.

“What does he expect? You’re the director.”

“That’s right, I am.”

“You’re the director.”

“He says it feels weird.”

“But why does he...” Yueh-Ching frowned.

Tommy stuck the knife straight in. “Because I like you.”

Yueh-Ching froze. They hadn’t rehearsed this scene; she didn’t know how to react.

Tommy smiled in an attempt to lighten the weight of his confession. “Shi-Wei came to my dorm last weekend to complain that I never look at him. He loves acting, and this opportunity means a lot to him, but he thinks I’m not paying any attention to his performance, and I’ve never given him notes or direction. I focus too much on your part. He says there’s something unnatural about the way I watch your scenes: there are two people on stage, but I only seem to see you. He actually used the word *besotted*. He said I stare at you, your every move, like I’m *besotted*. So he suspects I have feelings for you, but he has to do a love scene with you, to seduce you with honeyed words and take your hand, maybe even kiss you and make you love him, um, I mean make your character love his character. And there I am, the director, sitting there with my glasses, four eyes staring at the two of you flirting. Shi-Wei says he really can’t go on until I’ve cleared things up with you.”

Countless thoughts flew through Yueh-Ching’s mind, but she wasn’t able to say a word. Her whole body felt limp. She’d thought she was the loneliest person in the entire world. Solitary from her childhood through her teenage years, she’d been so sure that her peculiar temperament and unremarkable looks meant no one would ever want to talk to a misfit like her, and she was enough of a misfit not to want to talk to anyone either. She was both self-loathing and self-aggrandizing. Not believing she would ever find a kindred soul, she’d allowed her heart to slowly become callused, leaving her detached and unwilling to fall in step with others. She was scrawny as a fourteen-year-old boy, yet her feet were enormous, and her chin was perpetually covered in pimples, which apparently was a sign of poor digestion. Like Jo in *Little Women*, her one beauty was her long, lustrous dark hair. Also her slender, elegant fingers looked like an artist’s, which made her imagine she might do something creative, perhaps write a novel or be in a play. Even so, she still saw herself as a bizarrely shaped rock that was destined to stand alone forever. No one would ever befriend her, never mind hold her hand, fall in love with her, watch the sunrise at the beach with her, share an oyster omelet with her at the night market, or buy her a cake on her birthday. She’d never imagined or hoped for someone to *like* her. Not that it matters, she’d always thought, I’m not going to live past thirty anyway.

She listened to her heartbeat, *lub-dub, lub-dub*, I’m alive, this isn’t a dream. And still her face was blank. She had no idea what to do. How was this possible?

Tommy drank his milkshake. The air was filled with the aroma of French fries, American pop tunes, and the chatter of college students all around. Only the two of them sat in silence. A play with no lines.

“Hey, no pressure. I didn’t mean anything by that,” said Tommy kindly.

Yueh-Ching nodded numbly.

The evening ended in a muddle. Yueh-Ching no longer remembered how they said goodbye, only her relief that at no point did he ask her directly if she liked him back – she wouldn't have known how to answer. He didn't seem particularly interested in her thoughts. He simply wanted to say what he had to say and smile his dazzling smile. Very Tommy.

The following Tuesday, rehearsal was at seven as usual. Only four people were called: Yueh-Ching, Shi-Wei, Tommy and his assistant (who was also the stage manager), a boy whom everyone called Stewed Egg. Yueh-Ching climbed the stairs to the second floor of the classroom block, and right away spotted Tommy at the far end of the corridor. The tall window was wide open. Outside, coconut trees swayed and the evening breeze blew in. Tommy's face was pale, his eyes lifeless, his back hunched. The wind tugged his shirt tight against his back, his shoulder blades sharp enough to slice through the material. Yueh-Ching sensed he was waiting for her. Reluctant to approach him, she kept her head down and headed to their rehearsal classroom. Before she could get there, he grinned at her. Tommy's smile, his round head, his sparkling eyes, his white teeth, the dimple on his left cheek – he looked like Disney's Pinocchio. He had the happiest face on earth, and yet something about the curve of his eyes made it seem they might shed tears at any moment. He waved at Yueh-Ching as if to say goodbye. Hesitantly she walked towards him, but she was less than halfway there when, without warning, he flung himself from the window.

Yueh-Ching sprinted over. Inky black outside. Wind rustling the coconut trees. She leaned halfway out the window, scanning the ground for Tommy's body. There he was, on the first-floor awning. Just a small jump, like vaulting a pommel horse, though he might have twisted his ankle – when he tried to pull himself back up, he found he couldn't stand. Yueh-Ching ran to the classroom and called for help. Shi-Wei and Stewed Egg, who'd been waiting for rehearsal to start, quickly came to the window. Stewed Egg, almost six feet tall with long limbs, had a hedgehog-like crew cut and a freckled face. He jumped out, picked up skinny Tommy like a rag doll, and shoved him back through the window, where Shi-Wei grabbed him. A moment of confusion as they tussled like firemen rescuing a trapped puppy. When Tommy was safely inside, Shi-Wei reached out but Stewed Egg ignored him and, in a burst of athleticism, grabbed the window frame with both hands. With a spring of his powerful legs, he propelled himself back into the corridor.

Shi-Wei looked sidelong at Yueh-Ching. "What happened?"

Her face was white with shock. "I don't know. I got here and I saw him jump."

"Hey," said Stewed Egg to Tommy. "Are you okay?"

Shi-Wei pushed his long hair out of his eyes. His expression was tender, but there was mockery in his voice. "I guess that hurt, huh? Falling all the way from the second floor window to the first floor awning? If you wanted to jump, couldn't you have found somewhere higher? Second floor to first floor. Well done."