

WISH YOU A LOVED LIFE

是花季的關係

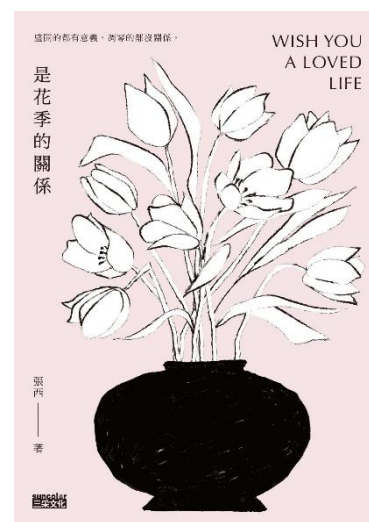
The six stories in this collection from influential post-90s writer Ayri Chang are snapshots at critical stages in the lives of three young women. Taken together, these fictional portraits combine to form a nuanced study of young women in the process of embracing their adult selves.

Since getting her start online, author Ayri Chang has earned praise for her nuanced observations of the interior lives of young women. In this, her latest short story collection, she once again delivers the goods with six snapshots from the lives of three women that will evoke readers' memories of youth, and unveil new vistas for their imagined futures.

A group of high school classmates reunites at age thirty, reawakening yearnings which have been left slumbering for a decade and a half. With the reunion approaching, Hsu An receives a call from ex-boyfriend Shu-wei, who is recently divorced and hopes to rekindle their romance. Hsu An rejects him, but still hopes to understand why Shu-wei broke her heart many years before. The surprising answer rewrites Hsu An's past, revealing that Shu-wei's unwaning affection for her was only thwarted through a series of missed opportunities.

Lu Chen has long accepted that she is ordinary, largely because she perceives others to be far more talented. She had dreams of being an independent freelance illustrator, but in the end, she only gained a modicum of recognition for her work. She occasionally travels abroad, or dines out at a classy restaurant, but only because sometimes a friend is willing to treat. One might consider this a hard life, but not Lu Chen. Rather, all lives are hard, and Lu Chen knows better than to hope she will be the exception.

When her family was beset by misfortune, Lu Pin-han sacrificed much more than the opportunity to study abroad; the tally of her losses includes a respectable career, a comfortable life, and her hopes for the future. As a result, she has been unable to face up to the successes



Category: Women's Fiction, Short Stories

Publisher: Sun Color

Date: 2/2024

Pages: 268

Length: 70,000 characters
(approx. 45,500 words in English)

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enjoyed by those around her, until one day, by some mysterious process, she suddenly can... and shockingly, it's no big deal. Lu Pin-han discovers that, in truth, she never sacrificed anything – she simply chose to let things go.

Under Ayri Chang's pen, the lives of these post-90s women spring from the page in living detail. Taken at the ages of fifteen and thirty, Chang's snapshots capture the thoughts and dilemmas of women at critical thresholds, when youthful dreams are revealed to be flawed, new choices must be made, and life must be lived without regrets. More than just deft portraits of three young women in transition, these six stories are a tribute to the predicaments, perseverance, and personal growth undertaken by all women as they fully embrace their adult selves.

Ayri Chang 張西

Ayri Chang is widely recognized as one of Taiwan's most influential voices of the post-90s generation. Born in 1992, she is the creator of the *Story Trading Company* Facebook page. Based on the concept of "sharing stories with strangers over dessert", the page has amassed nearly 90k followers since its founding in 2013. Her first essay collection *Drying Your Name in the Sun* was published in 2016. The following year, her follow-up collection *Slowed Down My Time* earned her numerous accolades, including inclusion in Kingstone Bookstore's Ten Most Influential Writers list and Eslite Bookstore's Best Books Awards.

WISH YOU A LOVED LIFE

By Ayri Chang

Translated by Michelle Chan Schmidt

01/ Angels Never Grow Old

1

From the corner of Hsu An's right eye, a fine line grows.

The late summer evening breeze sighs in through the window. Hsu An stands in front of the mirror, looking at the fate of her body: the parts where age first reveals itself were predetermined long ago. She's never tried to fight against it, but somehow, getting old has started to scare her a little. When she stops overreacting to the traumas of her youth, then she'll be able to accept the vicissitudes of her life, no matter where it goes.

Hsu An rubs her temples, pats her cheeks, then picks up her phone, which has been vibrating for the last while.

Lu Pin-han's name appears, but so does Shen Shu-wei's, a few times in a row.

Was it fifteen years ago or thirteen? The end of first love is already as blurry, as impossible to recall, as his face. Hsu An can more or less guess Shu-wei's reason for calling; six or seven years ago, he'd tried to reach her just as urgently. But she doesn't think any further – she knows she shouldn't try to understand Shu-wei that way. The better she knows him, the harder it'll be for her to avoid her feelings and look clearly at where they stand, and as they've chosen lives that lead in opposite directions, she shouldn't search for any more reasons to get entangled with him.

Let's talk tomorrow, she texts him.

An already-married man who, for whatever reason, finds himself in the middle of the night thinking about a past lover, always spells danger.

2

When she first met Shen Shu-wei, she was fifteen years old.

He had a bright, open face, and at an age when it was still funny to mock other people, Shu-wei had already learned to be considerate of the troubles of being different. It was what had attracted Hsu An to him.

A game called Angels and Humans was all the rage in school at the time. Students chosen to be Angels had to care for the Human they'd been secretly assigned to, without the Human discovering their identity. So Shu-wei bought a pack of cookies for the class monitor, and got to draw Hsu An's name.

To like someone can be sudden, but never random. Shu-wei and Hsu An had to learn how

to read each other's innocent expressions, step by step, to clarify the other's intentions. After two weeks of buying Hsu An breakfast and writing her anonymous notes, Shu-wei couldn't resist any longer.

Hey, he whispered to Hsu An, so, your Angel is me.

That's breaking the rules, Hsu An answered.

Help me keep it a secret, Shu-wei said. Sharing a secret always strengthens the complicity between two people.

The day the game ended, there was a rainstorm. Before the last bell, Shu-wei slipped Hsu An a note, asking if she wanted to go to the bookshop together.

Before a row of reference books, he said: So, um, can I keep on being your Angel?

What do you mean? Hsu An asked, her eyes on the books.

Um. I want to keep being your Angel. You know, the kind without a deadline. Shu-wei looked at her.

You...

I like you.

Hsu An kept staring at the reference books.

I said, I like you.

Outside the bookshop, the storm thundered, and inside, Hsu An's heart pounded. She couldn't hear the music playing over the speakers anymore; all she knew was her angel's gaze on her. First love had begun.

3

When Hsu An and Shu-wei broke up, she was seventeen. It was a month before final exams.

Hsu An carried a box of cake she'd bought from a chain café, its slices arrayed in a semicircle. She and Shu-wei had planned this together: on his eighteenth birthday, they'd celebrate with half a cake, and when she turned eighteen he'd buy the other half, so the two halves would form a whole. But for some immature, embarrassing reason, they'd been arguing the last few weeks. This was a chance to make peace, Hsu An thought.

The bus wound its way from one end of the city to the other. Hsu An carefully balanced the box of cake on her knees. She took out her flip phone and sent a message to Shu-wei:

We promised to celebrate your birthday today, I'm on my way.

Shu-wei didn't answer.

I'm about fifteen minutes awayyy.

Shu-wei still didn't answer.

To break up can be sudden, but never random. There are always omens before the other's intentions become clear. Hsu An deliberately avoided them; she was scared of getting lost in their depths, disintegrating, splitting apart like the slices of cake on her knees. To lose hope is to lose meaning.

I've already celebrated with my mom and dad.

Hsu An sat in the park near Shu-wei's home, on a bench they'd often hung out on. Another message from Shu-wei slid onto her screen:

You should go home.

Hsu An called him immediately, but nobody answered.

Come down for a bit, I'll give you your card, she wrote to him.

Go home. Two curt words. Five minutes later, he texted again:

We're better off as friends.

The line that separates a heartbeat from a heartbreak is a fine one. She wanted to remove the pain stinging every inch of her, but there was nowhere to put it outside the shell of her body. And if there was, she'd have to throw away every memory of Shu-wei, too. Hsu An clenched her hands into fists and released them, clenched them again and released them. The slices of cake, separated from each other, were a cruel joke that he'd no longer care for.

Is there anything in the world with no expiry date? Even angels have time limits.

4

The next time she saw Shu-wei, she was nineteen.

After exams, Shu-wei was accepted to a mid-level national university and left high school early. Hsu An caught a flash of him at their graduation ceremony, then heard nothing more about him. She tried to sneakily ask their mutual friend and high school classmate, Sun Cheng-yang, for updates, but all Cheng-yang said was, Give him a little more time.

Hsu An wasn't sure what that time was meant for: to fall in love with each other again, or to leave each other in peace and begin to heal. At any rate, when Shu-wei texted her and asked to meet, Hsu An hoped for the former.

They arranged to meet at the McDonald's near their high school. When Hsu An crossed the street toward it, she saw Shu-wei sitting by the floor-to-ceiling window, holding his phone in his hands as though he were typing. He looked unfamiliar, but bright and full of energy. Maybe because he wasn't wearing a school uniform anymore, his new maturity brought a sense of distance to Hsu An. She swallowed.

Shu-wei waved to her as naturally as if they were just old classmates, crossing paths by chance at the corner shop. Hsu An felt awkward: as she sat down, she placed her bag on her knees unthinkingly, then forced herself to seem at ease.

Why did you suddenly want to see me?

Not much, just, since we're at university now, I thought it would be okay to see each other again.

Oh.

Do you have a new boyfriend?

What?

Nothing, I... You need to take care of yourself, you know.

Hsu An gazed steadily at Shu-wei. She wasn't sure if he meant what she thought he meant,

if he still remembered what she'd told him about her childhood. Shu-wei looked at her. She held his eye without saying anything until one of their phones, lying on the table, vibrated. It was Shu-wei's.

Hsu An angled her head to look at his screen. A girl's name had appeared.

Instead of picking up his smartphone to unlock it, Shu-wei looked at Hsu An, then looked away.

Do you like cookies? he asked, out of the blue.

Without replying, Hsu An reached into her bag and gripped her phone. Shu-wei pulled a small transparent bag of cookies out from his coat pocket, tied with a beautiful bow.

Here, this is for you, he said. His phone vibrated again. It was the same girl.

Have you got a girlfriend? Hsu An asked. She looked at the packet of cookies, sprinkled with chocolate chips and almond flakes, and her hand in her bag squeezed her phone a little tighter, hiding the name it concealed.

Shu-wei looked away again. No, he said. Hsu An recognized the expression he wore when he wasn't being honest.

Oh, give me the cookies, she said.

Shu-wei nodded as if nothing had happened and pushed the packet towards her. She released her phone, pulled her hand out of her bag, picked up the packet, stood, and made to leave. Shu-wei seemed caught off guard.

Hey, Hsu An! he called. She turned around and looked at him: he'd finally said her name again. She couldn't figure out what emotion should play across her face, so she froze her gaze. Shu-wei still appeared bewildered.

So, he said, get home safely.

Hsu An nodded, and still with a stony face, clutching the packet of handmade cookies, she left the McDonald's. She crossed the street quickly, but when she turned around, Shu-wei still sat there, holding his phone like when she'd arrived.

So he was texting someone when I came, Hsu An thought. She lowered her eyes to the little bag she'd had to accept. He'd already forgotten that she hated almond cookies.

A few days later, Hsu An saw online that Shu-wei had a girlfriend, the girl who'd been texting him. She suddenly realized that maybe what Shu-wei had meant to say that day wasn't *Get home safely*. Maybe what he'd meant was what he'd failed to say when they broke up, and which would never be appropriate to say again – goodbye.

She took out her phone and pulled up Shu-wei's contact information. There, his name wasn't Shen Shu-wei, but Shen Tzu-chen, her sun, her dawn: that was the nickname she'd hidden for him. He'd once said that if he and Hsu An ever had a child, they'd name the child Hsiao-chen, Little Dawn. Sometimes, to be young was also to be naïve to the point of absurdity. But without experiencing that absurdity, how can anyone grow up?

Hsu An deleted *Shen Tzu-chen* and typed in *Shen Shu-wei*. Three short words.

As simple as it used to be.

Hsu An didn't see Shu-wei again. The next time his name appeared before her eyes was eight years later, on a random weekend, just as she and her boyfriend Chung Yu were finally about to break up.

Shu-wei seemed frantic. Hsu An had gone out to get a takeaway lunch and left her phone at home, but by the time she returned its screen displayed five missed calls, all from the same person.

Something's happened, Hsu An speculated, though she and Shu-wei had long since moved past asking the other for help in times of emergency. Even so, she couldn't help but push aside the soup noodles she'd just bought.

What happened, she texted.

Can you call? Shu-wei replied immediately.

Hsu An entered an *OK* emoji in the message bar.

It turned out that Shu-wei was agonizing over getting married.

I just want to hear what you think.

Why are you asking me?

Because, I feel like you've known me so well, this whole time.

No, I don't, Hsu An laughed into the phone. It's been so long since we've talked, how should I know what you're like now?

I'm probably just the same as I was before, Shu-wei said.

Hsu An laughed again. With the years, Hsu An had begun to wonder what someone should feel if they stayed the same despite getting older – proud or ashamed, grateful or fearful.

I think she suits you, Hsu An said. Shu-wei and his girlfriend were old university classmates, and Hsu An had heard that they'd gotten to know each other in their sophomore year, organizing department activities, and later became a couple. Shu-wei and the girl were both the kind of people who stood out in a crowd, as different as possible from Hsu An; she preferred to be low-key.

Why do you think that? Shu-wei asked.

Oh... I didn't get into the university you both went to, Hsu An said. The bitterness of it had been lodged in Hsu An's chest for a long time. That was also why, when she'd learned years ago that Shu-wei and his girlfriend were together, she'd decided to let Shu-wei go. It wasn't because she thought she didn't deserve him, but on discovering that he'd found someone more brilliant than her to stand by his side, how could she not leave him be? Any attempt at subjective comparison was an act of self-harm, but how could she possibly be objective?

And since you've been together so long, you must know each other very well, Hsu An added.

But you know me, too, Shu-wei said.

No, I don't, Hsu An said again, and this time she didn't laugh.

Do you really think I should marry her? Shu-wei's voice gave a faint tremor. Hsu An had

never heard him sound like this before.

That's something you should ask yourself, Hsu An said. Is this something you want?

Shu-wei let out a long breath.

When Hsu An opened her lunchbox, the noodles had already congealed into a lump.

She felt a lifetime away from herself.

6

Cheng-yang called to tell Hsu An that some old high school classmates were planning to meet for hotpot in the Eastern District. Shu-wei was also going.

You haven't seen each other in a while, have you? Cheng-yang said on the phone. How long has it been, ten years?

I'd need to count to know, Hsu An said.

That's good.

Why do you say that?

Means you haven't been building your life around him.

On her end of the phone, Hsu An smiled; she liked Cheng-yang's explanation. If she hadn't been tallying up the days and months that passed, it was because her feelings towards Shu-wei had entirely dissipated; and if she had to count the years, she would mostly consider the experiences and changes she'd gone through herself. Human memory has limits: some people tend to recall their own lives, while some prefer to remember the lives of others. Hsu An is the former, and without the flow of time, she'd never have learned that Shu-wei is one of the latter.

During their meal, the former classmates chatted about their jobs. One worked at an advertising company, another as a deputy manager in a foreign firm; someone else had inherited the family business, and others had just returned from studying abroad. Cheng-yang earnestly announced that he was engaged to be married, and Hsu An talked excitedly about the first time she'd ever gotten drunk, because of work, how someone had even thoughtfully given her a can of pepper spray.

Hah, as if working in the magazine industry gives you enough of a reason to drink, someone said.

You have to interview these rich old men who just want to have their fun with women editors, Hsu An shrugged. Her face had already lost its youthful innocence, replaced by a subtle layer of makeup, the few bottles of beer by her hand. They all went on laughing and joking, and the conversation turned to other matters.

Shu-wei didn't show. Apparently, he'd meant to rush over from somewhere else, but because of a traffic jam he hadn't been able to make it. Hsu An let out an actual sigh of relief when she heard: everyone knew that she and Shu-wei had once been together, but since their relationship had changed, she'd sealed away some of the memories they'd shared. She didn't want to pull out the memories again, because once they were revealed they would only add to the burden she already carried, no matter what they contained.

When the gathering ended, Cheng-yang offered to drive Hsu An home. It was only in the darkness of his car that she learned: Shu-wei had decided to get married after all.

Oh, I figured this was coming, Hsu An said placidly. He phoned me a few months ago.

Yes, he wanted to announce it to everyone tonight, or rather, he wanted to tell you in person, but, you know, since the two of you can't really meet up alone anymore, he had the idea of getting everyone together.

Hsu An nodded. By the way, I only broke up with my ex-boyfriend a little while ago. Her tone was still calm.

Cheng-yang looked straight ahead. Looks like you've both chosen different lives again.

Maybe, Hsu An said as she gazed out the window. Taipei's nightscapes were always so lovely, so lively, whether she was seventeen or twenty-seven. She suddenly had the sense that her childhood dreams were too vast, so vast they couldn't possibly slip through the cracks of growing up, coming of age. And if she were to force her dreams through that crack, a lot of things would have to stay behind; they might once upon a time have been the most important things in the world to her, but they had to stay behind.

That shows how considerate Shu-wei is. Hsu An's voice was light. He's not a very sensitive person; he'll never give you a compliment, he doesn't know how to comfort you, but he's also the most considerate person I've ever met.

Yes, he is. Cheng-yang's eyes were still fixed on the road ahead, but he nodded softly.

The scenes whipped by beyond the window, and joy rose from the bottom of her heart at the sight of the glittering city. Although she hadn't seen Shu-wei, she'd been able to hear about him, such good news about him. Hsu An wasn't aware of the gentle smile on her face. First love wasn't always the prettiest, but she was grateful to have had him, once.

Yesterday was too far away, tomorrow would always come, as today wound to its ending.

7

When Hsu An finally saw Shu-wei again, it was at Cheng-yang's wedding.

Cheng-yang had thoughtfully assigned the two to different tables, and Shu-wei's was slightly closer to the front of the room. Hsu An only had to look in his general direction to see him and his wife with their heads bent, whispering to each other. Their smiles turned the moment into a vista unrelated to Hsu An.

Shu-wei had also spotted Hsu An. From time to time, she leaned in to speak to the man next to her, but Shu-wei hadn't heard anything about Hsu An getting married, so he guessed it had to be her boyfriend. He didn't look directly at Hsu An once; he only left little sidelong glances in her direction, which made Hsu An think that, all along, he hadn't noticed her.

Hsu An sat next to her high school best friend, Lu Pin-han, with their partners on either side. As Pin-han refilled Hsu An's juice, she whispered, Who'd have thought things would turn out this way, ten years later?

And she looked at the man next to Hsu An and said louder, Hey, Hsiao-tse, would you like

some juice too?

He doesn't drink sugary things, Hsu An said, as she opened a bottle of unsweetened green tea from the other side of the table and poured it into Hsiao-tse's glass.

Thanks. Hsiao-tse flashed Pin-han a bashful smile.

Pin-han lowered her voice again. I wouldn't have guessed you'd find a new boyfriend so quickly this time.

Hsu An smiled. I'm not like you, with eyes only for Hao-ting. She glanced at the man sitting next to Pin-han, then nudged Pin-han with her left elbow and sipped at the juice. The little glass was half full.