

DEAR CHILD

親愛的小孩

* Film rights to *Dear Child* have been sold, currently in development.

* Her story 'Lightning Bolt' was adapted for screen by the Golden Horse Film Academy, with Hou Hsiao-Hsien as executive producer.

Dear Child is Essay Liu's first short story collection, containing stories written in the decade between 2003 and 2013. Many readers had been expecting a book of essays, and were surprised to see Liu take this new direction in her work.

The ten stories contained within focus on the dramas of everyday life. In 'Dear Child,' for example, we follow one woman's longing for, as well as her struggles and doubts about, having children. The collection contains grieving women and the men who have hurt them deeply, the hopelessness as well as the promise of love. Liu's prose is as humorous as it is bleak, reflecting a true range of human emotion and contradiction.

Liu is a confident writer taking on one of our biggest questions: what is love?

Essay Liu 劉梓潔

Essay Liu knew from a young age that she wanted to be a writer. Her publishing career started after winning the 2003 Unitas Newcomer Fiction Prize for her story 'Blinded,' but she only decided to pursue it full time after she won the Lin Rung-San Literary Award for her essay 'Seven Days of Mourning,' a deeply personal reflection on the pain of losing her father which was later adapted for the big screen. Her first collection of essays of the same title was a huge hit in Taiwan, selling over 70,000 copies. The movie *7 Days in Heaven*, adapted from her essay *Seven Days of Mourning*, hit \$1.5 million at the box office, winning Liu the 2010 Golden Horse Award For Best Adapted Screenplay. Her writing is heavily influenced by Lawrence Block, with its taut elegance tinged with cynicism. She is currently working on a novel based on her own family history, while continuing to write screenplays.



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By Essay Liu. Translated by Jeremy Tiang.

Gift

1.

Li Chun-Chuan stared for some time at the penis keychain in the post office parcel, uncertain what to do. Finally, she sighed and slammed the lid back on, then flung it into a drawer she seldom opened, full of corporate souvenirs and the like. She shook her head and thought, 'This is difficult, far too difficult. Training someone from scratch is far too difficult.'

This was Ah-Chao's gift to her from his graduation holiday. He said it had to come in the mail, in order to be a surprise. If his starting point had been entirely erotic, if this had been a way of teasing or flirting with her, she might have got a little excited. But she knew that wasn't the case, he actually did think this was a good present. The wood carving was artistic, and the penis was creative, so this key ring was an object of innovation and craft, and wasn't that what literary folk like her were always on about? Her heart softened at this evidence of thoughtfulness, but then her head clouded at his vulgar taste. Did anyone still buy those 'Forever-Well' train tickets as lucky charms? She thought about texting that to Ah-Chao, but put her phone down. She didn't want to be annoying—that line would just confuse his innocent, overgrown boy-mind. Instead she sent him a sticker full of love-hearts.

Far too difficult. All the good things available for purchase on Bali Island—what about a tub of coconut oil or exfoliating cream, something the two of them could get good and greasy with, massaging each other? Or coffee? Although actually maybe not, Ah-Chao would probably buy that sickly-sweet 'man-strengthening' three-in-one instant stuff. So hey, maybe she was the problem. It was her fault for being so hard to please.

A short while before she finished university, her parents managed to leave the country for the first time, joining a package tour to Shanghai—six days and five nights. By the time they returned, they'd bought enough stuff to need a whole new suitcase. The next time the family got together, her mother summoned all the girls to come get their gifts. From a huge black plastic bag, she pulled out item after item, counterfeit goods from Xiangyang Market, leather wallets, little purses, evening bags. Her female cousins were surprised and delighted, excitedly tearing open their packages and comparing presents. When it came to her turn, there was a flat little envelope that, when she opened it, contained only a couple of standard postcard sets. Nothing special about them. She looked in shock at her mother, who seemed to be searching for the appropriate words, a little shame-faced. 'Uh... I thought these would be more suitable for you.' Her wavering tone told her the meaning beneath her mother's words: You're always looking down on the things we like, you think they're vulgar.

She remembered this so clearly, because that was around the time she'd started going out with Hundred Best.

'My Ma really doesn't understand me, you know. Of course I like those girly things too!' the twenty-two year Li Chun-Chuan said as she lay next to Hundred Best on the enormous bed at

Hot Springs Hotel. She spread the overly-photoshopped scenes over his body, old Shanghai alleyways, the soon-to-be-completed Pearl Tower, a nine-turn bridge at Yuyuan Gardens, one landmark for each erogenous zone and then some. Just for fun, she knelt at his feet and, puffing out her cheeks, blew hard, so the postcards tumbled onto the bed and made Hundred Best's abundant body hair quiver. She chuckled at that. Hundred Best clamped his legs around her, pulling her close. 'Why bother with fakes, I'll buy the real thing for you.'

Li Chun-Chuan was too rational to ever allow herself to become a gold-digger, but it was hard to avoid being overwhelmed by this good fortune, like a sparrow flying up a tree. In order to make sense of her feelings for Hundred Best, she went to the bookshop and leafed through a bunch of relationship manuals. Sure enough, one of them dealt with exactly this situation.

Q: How do you know if you love him or his money?

A: When you love someone, you want them to be happy.

Undoubtedly, Li Chun-Chuan would do anything to make Hundred Best happy. And she knew all she had to do to achieve this was to make the most of her natural youthful allure.

'Tell me a secret.' Hundred Best nodded. She gently stroked his luxuriantly hairy leg. 'When your body aches all over, do you cover it in Salonpas pain patches?'

Clever, nimble, humorous, cheerful, elegant, respectable, caring, biddable. Two weeks later, Hundred Best brought Li Chun-Chuan to Hong Kong. As she showered, he wrote on the hotel notepad and forgot to put it away. She looked at the paper and smiled smugly to herself, secretly pleased. 'Is this about me?' Hundred Best nodded. 'Any flaws?' the young woman pouted at him. 'I haven't discovered those yet.'

'What does 'biddable' mean?' 'You'll find out.'

They were only together for a month, most of which they spent in bed. During that time, Li Chun-Chuan believed everything Hundred Best told her.

Q: Are you married?

A: Divorced five years ago.

Q: Why aren't we using contraception?

A: I've had a vasectomy.

Q: Why?

A: My ex-wife didn't like condoms, and we didn't plan to have kids.

Q: Why don't we ever go to your house?

A: I live with my parents.

Q: When will you bring me to meet your parents?

A: After a while.

Q: My parents are rural public servants. Are we good enough for you?

A: What are you worried about? You're fine.

Twenty years later, Li Chun-Chuan still wasn't sure whether some demon had blinded her, or if she'd been dizzy from all the orgasms. (She wasn't a virgin, she'd already been with boys her age, but it had never been this good. Addendum: it would never be this good again.) Perhaps it was more accurate to say, everything ended before she'd had time to get it straight. This was one of her biggest fears in life.

She was forty-two now, the age Hundred Best had been back then.

Now and then she'd pouted at Ah-Chao, 'Ah, if only we'd met two years earlier, we could have said you were in your twenties and me in my thirties, and that wouldn't have sounded like such a big gap.' Ah-Chao once replied, you don't look your age. He was twenty-seven, and it would be a whole three years before she could tell people she was in her forties but dating a thirtysomething.

Her first date with Ah-Chao was in Tainan. After she got home, she soaked in the bathtub for a long time, as if trying to sort out the contents of her head. Finally, the water grew cold and her skin wrinkly (this won't do, quick, apply some firming cream), so she wrapped herself in a bathrobe and went to check on little Thomas, who was sleeping soundly. She signed the teachers' book already placed on the desk (as usual, adding lots of hearts and smiley faces, writing thanks to the teacher; she'd always been a careful, thoughtful parent, the sort who gave the teacher a voucher for afternoon tea at a high-class hotel on Teachers' Day), and closed it. Then she grabbed one of little Thomas's *One Piece* post-it notes and went to the living room sofa, where she thought back over the entire evening, and wrote: innocent, thoughtful, long eyelashes, clean and neat fingernails... Then she stopped, creasing the paper into accordion folds, the sticky side leaving a lingering sensation on her palm. Oh my god, she thought, I've turned into Hundred Best.

2.

How can we most quickly deal with the first half of Li Chun-Chuan's life? Maybe we should take that consultation she had with the gynaecologist, nine years ago.

She walked into the room and sat down. The female doctor held a stick with two purple lines on it. 'Miss Li, the test shows that you're pregnant. I'll have to ask you a few questions that might sound intrusive, please answer them as best you can, all right?' Li Chun-Chuan nodded.

'Are you married?'

'No.'

'Was this a planned pregnancy?'

'No.'

'Have you been pregnant, given birth or had a miscarriage before?'

'Given birth, once.'

'When was that?'

'Um... ten years ago.'

Next, the doctor started advising her: She was already thirty-three. She wasn't getting any younger, she might not have a chance again after this. Would she consider keeping it? The doctor even got out a rotating chart like a zodiac to help her work out the due date. But she was adamant, she couldn't keep it.

'Fine, then let's do an ultrasound, and we can discuss what comes next.'

When she had arranged herself on the bed, the doctor came in and started waving a wand over her belly. 'This is your womb. We're looking for a little black speck.' She rubbed this way and that, then called, 'Found it!' Li Chun-Chuan couldn't see clearly, but was very comfortable lying there.

The doctor tapped the mouse and measured the diameter of the speck. '0.8 centimetres. That's about three weeks.'

She pulled her trousers back on and went back into the consulting room. The doctor

scribbled in her chart as she said, 'So small. You have the choice between either surgery or a chemically-induced miscarriage.'

Should she say this clinic was too specialised, or that the doctors had too much empathy? Perhaps the best word was an English one, *considerate*. Yes, they were too *considerate*. Only now did Li Chun-Chuan realise what that thing was that made her feel so odd, yet so comfortable.

The doctor's description contained no subject nouns or pronouns at all, such as baby, child, kid or little one. She didn't say 'the little one is 0.8 cm now,' 'the baby is about three weeks old,' 'the child is still very small.' Knowing she'd already made up her mind to get rid of the little black speck, the doctor was helpfully omitting any words that might cause feelings of tenderness. Presumably she wasn't like this with the joyous couples who arrived hand-in-hand? She was grateful for how *considerate* the doctor was being, yet she also found it faintly off-putting.

The doctor went through the plus and minus points of each method of abortion. 'Which would you prefer?'

As if deciding whether she wanted Set Meal A or B, she placed a finger on her lips, murmuring, 'It's so small...' She'd unconsciously added a subject to the sentence.

The doctor repeated, 'Yes, it's very small.'

Suddenly, those four words flipped a switch, and her tears streamed as if a dam had burst. She clamped her mouth shut, unable to say another word. With professional speed, the nurse grabbed a good handful of tissues and handed them over, and the doctor said, 'Miss Li, please don't worry, you can go home and think about it, you don't have to decide today, because it's still very small...'

Li Chun-Chuan decided to let herself cry properly. The attractive thirty-three-year-old fund manager with a PhD in business sat weeping like a little girl on the small round stool reserved for patients, repeating in a broken voice, 'I'm sorry... I'm sorry...' Her sobs grew louder with each utterance, with no sign of stopping. She had utterly lost control.

The doctor said, 'It's all right, Miss Li. You will be rather fragile and sensitive during the early stages of pregnancy. If you like, we can have the nurse take you to a room where you can rest...' Now Li Chun-Chuan switched to rapidly shaking her head, first like a child throwing a tantrum, refusing everything, then slowing down. Her tears ceased.

She took a few deep breaths, accepted the tissue paper proffered by the nurse, dried her eyes, wiped her nose, and said in a steady voice, 'Thanks.' She was back. Dragging herself ashore from the brink of weakness and collapse had only taken a couple of minutes, and she hadn't even delayed the next patient. Squeezing out a smile, she told the doctor, 'Thank you. I'll go back and think about it.'

There was no need to think, because by that point she already knew the answer—that she would keep the little black speck, and share her life with him. (For the whole of the pregnancy, she referred to him as the little black speck, and it was only when he was born, and ah! white and plump as a Goddess of Mercy, that she switched to calling him little Thomas.)

And so she obediently submitted herself to the usual tests. At a different hospital, obviously.

3.

Those heart-rending cries of 'sorry' weren't an apology for the doctor or nurse, but rather were directed at her child with Hundred Best, the one she'd never met. She recalled only resounding

howls at the time, and being startled to realise they sounded exactly the same as the canned sound effects in the movies. All associations and imaginings were immediately cut off, however. Even lying there half-dead as she was, she summoned the strength to bark like a drill sergeant, a cry from deep within her ripped-apart belly, 'Take it away! Quickly!'

It wasn't that she couldn't bear to look, afraid that even one glance would haunt her for the rest of her days or anything like that, not at all. She simply didn't want to see. For a whole nine months before that, she hadn't looked at the ultrasounds, just pulled up her trousers and hurried off. In any case, Hundred Best's subordinate, or more accurately Li Chun-Chuan's housekeeper and nanny at the time, Julie, would go see the doctor and hear a complete report, then send it together with the scans to Hundred Best and his wife across the ocean.

A fool proof scam. But no, what they called it was an exchange. Each party getting what they wanted.

After returning from Hong Kong, Hundred Best asked Li Chun-Chuan if she fancied studying in America? She replied that was her plan, though she'd have to find a job and put aside some money first, all the while studying for scholarship exams. 'I don't need you to support me,' she added.

He tossed a document at her—an application form for his family's entrepreneurial foundation scholarship, restricted to fourth-year students graduating that year from business school in the top twenty percent of their class. The award covered a year of language classes, all school fees, and living expenses. It could have been tailor-made for her. 'Is this some undercover operation?' she asked.

'It's my graduation present to you,' said Hundred Best.

'But if I went abroad to study, I wouldn't see you again.'

'I'd accompany you to start with, and then visit often.' His words were so warm, she all but melted away.

Her parents, who believed firmly in education above all else, were so overjoyed to receive the scholarship notification that they had no time to be suspicious. As for Li Chun-Chuan, ever rational, she couldn't help thinking of the English phrase *too good to be true*. Trying to be sure this wasn't a case of pumpkin coaches and glass slippers, she asked her mother to take her to a fortune teller before she left the country.

Li Chun-Chuan was initially afraid that the fortune teller would reveal something he shouldn't (for instance, taking her mother to one side and whispering, your daughter's setting the sheets on fire with a man twenty years older than her), but after carefully studying her name, birthday, palm and face, the man merely said, 'From a young age, you've had very little in common with your parents—am I right? And now you've grown up, you do exactly as you please, not afraid of anything, yes? The gods are watching over everything you do. It's perfectly normal for someone like you not to get on with your parents or siblings in this lifetime.'

She stole a glance at her mother. The simple, vulgar woman's face bore an expression that suggested she was ready to believe every word he said.

The fortune teller went on, 'You were the offspring of a god in a past life, but did something wrong and got sent down to the mortal world. You'll have to use this lifetime to make amends.' He turned to her mother. 'So the best way to deal with her is to let her be, give her the freedom to fly. When she has the spoils in her mouth, she'll naturally bring them back to share with the rest of you. The more you vex her, the more you'll stunt her karmic reward.'

And so, California at the end of summer, warm and bright, just like in the movies. Route One along the Pacific coast, wearing sunglasses and a patterned backless dress, a fancy convertible with its top down, her silk scarf waving alluringly in the breeze. She turned to the driver, her dashing lover, and planted a firm kiss on his face. Li Chun-Chuan experienced all this. Hundred Best was even more unrestrained in America, producing a new set of sexy lingerie each night for her to change into. He seemed to like bows he could untie as if unwrapping a present to reveal young flesh. Only one set came without bows, but rather lace and gauze with three holes revealing her nipples and cunt. Hundred Best spent all night splayed on her body, kissing those three holes.

They played different games by darkness:

'Today, you have to pick a porno at random, and whatever it is you'll have to do that.'

'What if it's with a dog?'

'Or eating shit? That'd be worse.' For once, Hundred Best was laughing out loud.

'You could produce some shit quite easily, but where'd you find a dog in the middle of the night?' She wasn't afraid of anything.

Sexy, slutty, loud in bed. She hoped he'd written all those down on his bit of paper. She screamed herself hoarse over those few days. And each morning as she gargled before brushing her teeth, she thought, my god, what's going to happen next?

