

MY SLIGHT PROBLEM WITH INFIDELITY

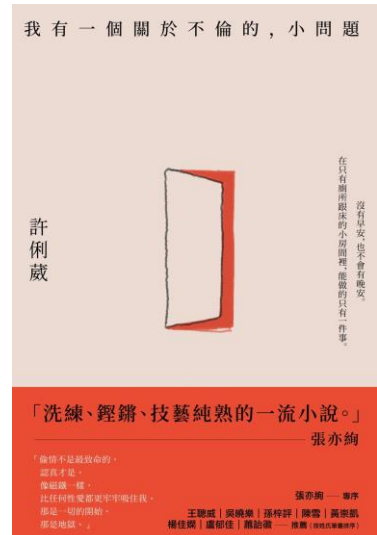
我有一個關於不倫的，小問題

Why is their true love condemned to lurk in the shadows? Told from the female protagonist's first-person perspective, this story immerses readers in the emotional journey of a couple entangled in an adulterous affair.

This is a story of little rooms and a furtive romance between a writer and her lover – a film director and ostensible family man. As they pursue their passion in nondescript room after nondescript room, their affair grows from raw, mutual lust into a sweet and stimulating romance before devolving into a consuming jealousy that ultimately ropes the writer's good friend into the fray.

The writer, finding herself crushed under a maelstrom of conflicting emotions about their still-hidden affair, falls back on what she knows best – writing – to bring their love into the light. But, will this bring the respect she craves to their relationship or will it send both of their lives into an irretrievable tailspin? Does the writer, now battered and bruised, have any real hope of redeeming her love, her relationships, or her life?

Despite the prominence given to “problem” in the title, this story orbits around issues such as love, intimacy, power, deceit, jealous enmity, despair, and self-doubt that invariably arise with infidelity, with the narrative pertly plumbing the nature of love, relationships, and family, and fleshing out the state of women in society today. The first-person perspective enhances the immersiveness of this work, while key passages cut to the chase, exposing its underlying essence and plunging the reader headfirst into the emotional dilemmas faced by the protagonist. These insights may even turn the mirror around on the reader's own innermost thoughts and experiences, enhancing



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self-awareness and providing the wherewithal to continue facing life's myriad challenges.

Hsu Li-Wei 許俐葳

Born in 1984, Hsu Li-Wei holds an MFA degree in Creative Writing from National Dong Hwa University. She has accumulated numerous domestic novel and essay awards, reflecting a distinguished career as a writer of novels, essays, and film scripts. *My Slight Problem with Infidelity* is Hsu's latest major work. Hsu currently works for the literary magazine *Unitas* and is a Golden Tripod Editor's Award winner (magazine category).

MY SLIGHT PROBLEM WITH INFIDELITY

By Hsu Li-Wei

Translated by Shanna Tan

“There are places in the heart that do not yet exist; suffering has to enter in for them to come to be.” – Léon Bloy

1.

“The human body is scary.”

Hsiao Chuan’s voice had trembled when she told me that, fear seeping into each syllable. In other words: *The body is honest.*

The first time Charlie told me to touch him, we were on my couch in the middle of the living room. It was a L-shaped fabric couch, firm yet comfortable, big enough to fit five. It’d come with the rental, a typical family apartment with three bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, and common bathroom. Elections were on for the next day and my flatmates had all gone back to their hometown to vote. So, for once, I had the entire place to myself.

Charlie had called, saying he wanted to come over.

We’d been wanting to get more undisturbed time together, but only once did the suggestion of a motel come up...and not for an overnight trip, if you get what I mean. We tried searching online for a suitable place and later he told me he’d even phoned the motels one by one to ask if they might have rooms available for “a rest”. I took that as evidence he was also new to this. In any case, considering his age – mine too, in fact – to be asking such a question was a real “throwback-to-our-teens” moment.

His place also came up as a possibility. But back then, our status was unclear. We were holding hands, caressing cheeks...our conversations deeper than normal among friends. But, what next?

Are you ready? He had asked. I wasn’t. I was actually okay either way, but I couldn’t deny that I was very curious about his home. And when humans get horny, nothing seems impossible. It makes us feel powerful, sexy, and delusionally confident.

But in the end, it was Charlie who chickened out. He was very careful to make sure I wouldn’t see something I shouldn’t, be it a picture frame, or traces of his private life. This included the possibility of being recognized by the guard. He even had a ready script in case there were questions. I was to be a photographer, or a journalist. To be allowed into his home, I had to don a

disposable identity. “I’m just worried that you’ll get hurt if you see something,” he said. I had my doubts. Were those his rules, or just an excuse? After all, home was the last line of defense when it came to privacy. Was he telling me not to overstep the boundaries?

The answer revealed itself before I had the chance to ask. The day I was supposed to go over, there was a water outage in his apartment complex.

—I can’t even brush my teeth or wash my face.

The text was followed by a proof shot of the emergency notice.

I replied.

—I guess it’s fate.

Charlie sent a link.

—There’s a motel close by, wanna come over?

—You’re asking me to go all the way for a motel? That’s different from going to your place you know, right?

Charlie didn’t reply. And the conversation ended there. The next time we met, no matter how I tried to wheedle or pacify him, he refused to open his mouth, although he still ate his dinner just fine. We worked our knives and forks in silence. Still, he chose my favorite restaurant. Only when dessert was served did I quietly say, “Let’s take it slow.”

Back then, Charlie was so desperate about taking things forward that it felt as though we were in different time zones. Whenever I found myself swept up by his momentum, I would remind myself, *Of course, he can’t wait to screw me.* But there were times I wondered if his anxiety stemmed from not knowing how to get our relationship going, like the reflex to tighten our grip just to make sure that what we were holding was real, and not merely a figment of our imagination.

We sat on the couch. Finally, he leaned over, dropping a trail of light kisses on my ears and neck before his lips sought mine. It took him so long I was starting to wonder if he’d really come over for a cup of tea, but of course, who were we kidding? A song lyric came to mind – *I’ve got no time to waste.* We had done plenty of platonic tea chats, the kind where even our fingertips remained a polite distance away. Sitting opposite from him, I was unflustered. Sure, if he wanted a chat, I was fine. But to act like we were in a relationship? Impossible. Why should I? Back when we had first started hanging out, Charlie would always ask to meet at an old-school café near his office. The shop only sold a single NT\$380 set (about US\$12), that included egg sandwiches and a pot of Ceylon tea. Back then, my enthusiasm had not yet worn thin, and I was still happy to dance to his tunes. I sat there sipping my tea, while he would watch me. Not quite a date, but never once did he ask me to pay my share.

When we bumped into his colleagues – girls much younger than me – Charlie would greet them. After a couple more times, I started to grow uncomfortable.

“Should we find another place?” I asked.

“No matter,” he replied. “They don’t take much notice of me anyway.”

"But it's so expensive here. Shall we go MOS Burger next time?"

"MOS? Do I look like a high school kid to you?"

"But their iced tea is nice."

"I'm not your friend. And I'm forty-five. I don't go on dates at fast food chains."

Hmm. So this is a date? But nothing's happening. I didn't want to get into a debate on what constitutes a date, so I kept my mouth shut and continued munching on my sandwich.

Several times, Charlie would call for a "breakfast meeting" to chat about story ideas for his next movie. I knew he was trying to find a topic to talk about, but our conversation never got anywhere. I didn't have anything constructive to say; his true intentions lay elsewhere too. Sunlight streamed into the café through the large windows. Outside was a busy street with pedestrians walking past constantly. Charlie sat there, clearly upset we weren't getting a private moment. He struggled to get a conversation going, which frustrated him. "A teenage puppy in love" was how he would later describe himself back then.

"How about we hold hands, or our pinkies?" Seeing how woebegone he looked, I tried to coax him, wiggling my finger like E.T.

"How about legs?" He asked, suddenly sticking out his foot.

That was unsexy as hell. Quite stupid in fact. But feeling generous, I reciprocated, my sandals tapping a gentle rhythm on Charlie's sneakers. *Tap. Tap, tap.* The curious weight below my foot made it feel like I was stepping on a gold bar. My heartbeat was getting louder. *Thump thump.* The fact that we couldn't touch only fueled my craving for some skin on skin.

Was that our start?

The start...But now that we'd come so far, to reflect on the beginning at that point felt a little like trying to shirk responsibility. And honestly, I had no idea what could be considered our beginning.

My yardstick for measuring relationships was something I dubbed "The Elevator Theory". I borrowed the idea from the common onscreen trope of two acquaintances stuck in an elevator, both either trying to find a way out or chatting as they waited for help. Not that it really had to be an elevator. The point was the spending of time together in darkness. Take Hsiao Chuan and I as an example. We were vastly different in terms of age, family background, career...Heck, even our ideal types were different. We didn't hang out that often – only if we crossed each other's mind. But, when we did, it always filled me with a sense of security, and that feeling, I know, was mutual. As to how we'd gotten closer, it was an ordinary story, nothing to shout about. We'd happened to sit next to each other at a film festival and she turned to ask me something about scriptwriting. It happened to be the exact same thing I'd been mulling over for the longest time. At first, we were chatting to while away time before the film started, but we became so engrossed in the conversation that, in the end, neither of us remembered much from the movie. It might seem like trivial complaints or anxieties, but no...not to me. We had been in the same elevator, the one named "discussing the craft of writing". She knew her subject matter. I trusted her completely;

she knew it too. Every time we met, I'd be reminded – *We were together in that elevator. We've shared the same darkness.*

Then what about Charlie? Had we ever taken the same elevator? Not that it was completely necessary in order to get close to someone, but without that kind of shared experience, I found it hard to trust completely. It was just regular socializing. Our relationship wasn't built on anything concrete. I could miss a step and fall at any time. When we first got together, Charlie kept asking why I'd agreed to be in a relationship with him. It was as if the mood between us had shifted in an instant, the euphoria of festive celebrations evaporating in the next moment into the dull hum of the daily grind. Even the change in seasons gives at least a hint – a gust of wind, a change in temperature. Perhaps Charlie was asking an elevator-type question. He'd asked the question, but I think I was more desperate about the answer. If only I knew where the switch between us was, I'd have pounced on it the way I would a leaky faucet and turn it off. And never...never ever to turn it back on again.

Before Charlie came over, he texted.

—Your housemates aren't going to come home today, right?

Less than two seconds later, he unsent it.

I scoffed. *Getting cold feet? He's overthinking it.*

—No, don't worry.

—Oh, you saw that. Sorry.

"What do you want me to do?" Charlie asked. "Your house, your territory. Your wish is my command." He was courteous, behaving like a polite guest. But I knew what he really meant – *Do you want me?* My face flushed pink. Very rarely did my date want me to initiate intimacy. We sat, hugged, and before I knew it, I'd arched into him, my limbs molded against his. I'd seen this position on a movie poster and had been wanting to try it. The top of my head graced his chin, and I could hear the thrumming of a heartbeat. His or mine – I could no longer tell.

On the table were the drinks he'd bought, condensation droplets still clinging to the paper box. The opened flaps on both sides looked like two kite birds perched on the left and right.

"Sorry, we ran out of drinks at home." I said.

"Small matter. But helping you buy stuff makes me feel as if I'm really your friend," said Charlie.

I didn't take off my clothes. Neither did Charlie. His hand roamed under my blouse, touching every inch of skin. I wore a bra, although I'd mulled over whether I should before he came. It was noon. Sunlight was streaming into the living room. I'd taken a liking to this apartment because there were windows on all four sides. But now it felt too bright for what we were doing. To be safe, we should go into my room. But I didn't want to. The main reason was because my bedsheets were ugly. The big gaudy floral print looked cheap. My mum had brought them over from home, and I absolutely didn't want Charlie to see them. Even though I was sure they wouldn't be his main focus of attention.

When Charlie stepped inside the apartment, he stood in the living room for a while, taking time to compliment the big dining table, which, like the sofa, belonged to the landlord. “I was dirt poor when I’d started my first job,” said Charlie. “My rented place then was nowhere as nice.” That sounded like an uncle speaking to a niece. I suppressed my laughter. Sometimes Charlie gave me the impression that if he wasn’t complimenting me about something, he would have no idea what to say.

His hands started to knead my flesh as he kissed me slowly. Everything was progressing the way I’d expected, but his body felt alien. The warmth of his tongue, the brush of his fingers – everything was new. Even with my eyes closed, I could tell that Charlie was experienced. *He’s an old hand*, I thought. But there was a layer of carefulness, as if he’d rehearsed the moves in his head dozens of times. His touch oozed technique. It felt as though we could kiss forever. I didn’t need to feel my feelings to know that I was aroused. Charlie, too. The mood intensified; a spark was ignited. I moaned loudly, the sounds vibrating in the air. The curious unfamiliarity of it all made the apartment feel different. It made me different too. The question on the tip of my tongue melted away; it no longer mattered. His touch felt good. It was like an invitation. It was impossible for someone with experience to pretend otherwise. And when a man was working hard to lick you, to touch you, to make you happy, he was also hoping you might return the favor. Even if you couldn’t match up, you could at least reciprocate a one-third of what you were being given.

Charlie was wearing a knitted sweater. I loved this look. It made his figure look slim, his chest look broad and flat. He looked good. He lifted his sweater, revealing the undershirt beneath. *Ah, so he likes this color*. The act of taking off clothes usually made people a little clumsier than usual, a little more honest. Charlie had an average body, not the drool-worthy kind. Just average, like mine. Flabby skin and spots. I thumbed his nipple and felt his body tremble.

“Can you touch me here? Kiss that spot?” Charlie pleaded. His hands roamed from my body to his and he grabbed my hand to trail down his body. “Can you lick me from here to there?” I started to panic. Usually, I was the one being touched. Not that I was against initiating. But right now, should I pretend to be shy, or do my best to please him? He was already trying so hard. I stuck out my tongue. I must’ve looked so clumsy, but I didn’t stop. My hands reached for his zipper.

Charlie’s hand slipped under my skirt. I heard the slosh of wetness beneath.

Charlie was the kind of person who had never voted. Not everyone could afford the time and cost necessary to return to their hometown to vote, something you had to do if your household registration was in a different administrative division. Some of my friends in that predicament – and there were quite a few of them – dared not tell anyone they don’t vote. While others were enthusiastically discussing the elections, they would hang their heads in shame at not being able to be part of “Team Democracy”. There was also the other type, like Hsi-Te, with whom I went to grad school. Hsi-Te was from Kaohsiung, and whenever the topic turned to elections, he’d lament, “It’s so darn expensive for us from the south to vote.” The more he talked about it, the more agitated he’d become. People who grew up in Taipei could easily shout their love and passion for

Taiwan, all those slogans about upholding democracy, about how each vote was too precious to lose...But, in the end, they were just lucky to be in Taipei. Although he complained incessantly, he would still book the ticket back home in the end. Charlie belonged to neither type. "I don't vote," he said. As to what that meant, I had no idea.

I called him Charlie, but that was not his real name, his social media handle, or anything like that. Early on, he suggested we come up with cute nicknames for each other, but somehow, it felt like we'd already advanced past that stage. I decided to call him Charlie – a name far-removed from my life, yet so commonplace. That somehow made me feel safe.

"What should I call you?" Charlie asked. He rattled off a couple of names that sounded like what one would call a kitten or puppy. "What do your parents call you?"

"Darling. My exes called me that, too."

Charlie laughed. And when he spoke again, his expression was a little awkward. "What have your exes got to do with me? Anyway, that's such a lazy nickname." At that point, I was already conscious of the fact that I desired him both in and out of my life concurrently.

A voice rang in my head whenever I looked at him. It was me, standing on the opposite side when it came to sex. This version of me was more logical, wise, and proudly feminist. In other words, a woman with brains. It was she who was grilling me. *How did all this happen? How could you have let yourself sink so deep?*

I didn't, I replied. *Everything's in my control*. Such debates with myself happened often. Whenever I was walking along a stretch of road, or sitting in the bus, I'd end up mulling over it.

We became acquainted when Charlie came to my university to give a lecture. At that time, his movie was newly released in theaters. I was assigned to take care of the event. Charlie recognized my name and asked if I'd contributed to a newspaper column. Of course, back then, Charlie wasn't Charlie. I called him by his real name.

I accompanied him on a walk around the lake on campus. Back then I was a university student, and in my eyes, he wasn't particularly attractive. His round glasses made him look like a man getting on in years but still trying to look young. As we headed to the Humanities building, we tried to make small talk. He was critical of everything, including my school and, as quite a lot of heterosexual men do, he cracked a few jokes, albeit not particularly funny ones, attempting to lighten the mood. That was how we got acquainted.

When we met again, my impression of him had changed completely. At that point, I was already several years out of university, and he was the one reaching out to me, asking if I'd like to work on a script for a movie he was directing. A long-time scriptwriter colleague of mine had said that making a full feature film was every director's dream. It was the same as writing. The thicker the book, the more deserving it was of a place in the hall of literary fame.

The invitation stroked my ego. But I messed up. I flew with their team to Beijing to attend a film and media networking session. Yes, that was before the "National Security Law" was in place. I'd forgotten what kind of networking we'd done. I only remembered blabbering on and on

when it wasn't my turn to speak and acting like a fish out of water when I was supposed to talk. All of the other scriptwriters on that junket did much better than me. Some of them were younger, but as the Chinese saying goes, they had the bearing of a general. *There's no place for me here.* I remember bursting into tears in front of Charlie back in the hotel room. I was completely useless.

"No need to belittle yourself," said Charlie.

I was sitting on the bed. Charlie was leaning on the couch several steps away. There was no one else in the room.