

OH, AND HAPPY BIRTHDAY 然後，生日快樂

Sometimes new love emerges from the remnants of old love; sometimes you can't see where love begins because you're looking at it from the inside.

Throughout her career, Tsao Hsiao-Ju has fashioned a distinctive “aesthetic of loneliness” by defying the conventions of the traditional romance novel. In *Oh, and Happy Birthday* she introduces a new formal innovation, presenting ten seemingly unconnected stories that are in fact deftly woven together in unexpected ways.

A vet finds one of his customers uncannily reminiscent of a girl he fell for in his grad student days. It's not just the physical resemblance: both women are proud owners of a British bulldog. That first girl ended up marrying the artist she had always been secretly besotted with, but now it seems like fate is offering up another chance at love. Elsewhere, a famous blogger struggles with writer's block for three years, until the day he crosses paths with a new editor. The nature of their online friendship allows him to open up to her in ways he never imagined possible, and with her encouragement he slowly begins to rediscover his passion for writing.

These are the chance encounters, the miraculous moments of fate, that stitch together the narratives of *Oh, and Happy Birthday*. With her trademark blend of perspicacity and readability, Tsao Hsiao Ju perfectly captures that moment at the inception of something that might just turn out to be love.

Tsao Hsiao-Ju 曹筱如（橘子）

Regarded by some readers as Taiwan's answer to Kaori Ekuni, Tsao Hsiao-Ju has become a permanent fixture in the bestseller list, with combined sales exceeding the two million mark. Her bestselling works include *Sorry, I Love You*, *More Than Just Friends*, and *Don't Cry*; she also penned the script to the TV series *Devil Beside You*, as well as the novelization of the Jay Chou movie *Secret* and the South Korean dramas *Sad Love Story* and *My Girl*. *Oh, and Happy Birthday* is her most recent release.



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OH, AND HAPPY BIRTHDAY

By Tsao Hsiao-Ju

Translated by Jim Weldon

Chapter Nine: Sharing a Memory

*That feeling
Of going back
To an earlier time.*

That was my beer time. I would start around ten o'clock at night and drink steadily until eleven then I would brush my teeth and give them a proper flossing after which I would pick a book and go to bed to read until I felt sleepy. I had no set preference for the type of book. Back when I was still writing all I read was detective novels even though I wrote love stories. Recently I'd begun reading history with the sole aim of helping me get to sleep. My psychiatrist had not long since told me that while it was best to stop taking sleeping pills if possible and on my last visit she had changed my prescription to anti-anxiety meds instead.

"They help you sleep too," she explained.

I wanted to tell her that my life was pretty dull at the moment so I had absolutely no problem with anxiety. If you insisted on coming up with something for me to be worried about that would most likely just be that I wanted to train my abs so my four-pack became an eight-pack and also I was hoping to maintain my body fat percentage at thirteen.

But as usual I said nothing; just nodded my head, thanked her then turned and left down the stairs.

I'm not sure if this is why recently I've changed to reading really dry and dull books on psychoanalysis in bed as a way of getting to sleep. I actually really like my psychiatrist, she's pretty to look at and very keen and doesn't seem to mind at all that I only come to pick up drugs and never answer any of her questions. I even lied when she asked about my work, pretending to be unemployed. You could see by her face she didn't believe me but she didn't say anything. I've thought a few times that I might as well use her as the subject for a novel but that never was more than an idle thought and I haven't actually done it.

That last year I was still writing it got so bad that I only had to open up my laptop and I'd start feeling dizzy and nauseous.

It's been a whole three years now since I wrote anything.

It was the year I turned thirty when I decided to stop writing and retire. Retiring at thirty sounds like a wonderful life but the reality was by that age I'd already worked like crazy for fifteen years and I really mean working like crazy. I started working when I was fifteen and not because my family were hard up, it was entirely down to me enjoying it. I got in with a bad crowd in high school and afterwards I became someone most people would consider bad company myself – smoking, drinking, fighting and acting the bully. I really did get up to a lot of

bad stuff though I never touched drugs. Back then I'd hit someone just because I didn't like the way they looked or because a friend had asked me to but I don't know why, when it came to drugs I'd always turn them down.

It was the same with running scams.

I had a few friends at the time who worked as runners and bagmen for fraudsters. Because you'd get off with a lighter sentence if you were a minor it was easy for these fraudsters to exploit a bunch of kids going astray who had no real experience of the world, plus I heard the pay was pretty good. They never managed to get me to do it though. I don't like cheating people. I can't explain why I wouldn't do that when I was prepared to run illegal gambling dens, but it did feel like there was some kind of difference between innocent victims and willing gamblers. Whatever, however far off the rails I went in those three years of high school, somewhere inside I still had standards.

"Probably you always were a good person at heart but you didn't know it for a while there."

That's what a friend said to me afterwards.

She was a writer friend. We were around the same age and had started writing at about the same time, though afterwards our careers had gone completely differently. My very first book sold really well, then the next, and the next, and the next... So I ended up a full-time author and it led to me doing commercials, getting interviewed and appearing on the popular chat shows. I even got a few offers to do cameos in idol soaps.

She on the other hand stayed under the radar for years before finally starting to crop up on the bestseller lists.

"I actually dreamed about you quite a few times. They were all nightmares." She said that to me one time, only half joking. "Most likely subconscious envy don't you think? We started out as writers at exactly the same time so how come you had all the luck right from the get-go? I really did envy you during those years so I'd dream about you whenever I despaired about the future or was feeling life was unfair. Classic anxiety dream."

To be honest it wasn't until she told me that I realised we had started out writing at the same time.

It was the era of the Wretch.cc blog community and that's how we met. I knew about her and she knew about me and our books passed each other by on the bestseller list a couple of times so I got to thinking perhaps I ought to get in touch and that's why I left a message for her on her blog. After that we started to get to know each other. Later on we had a few opportunities to meet face to face at work-related events but we never took them. Wretch.cc closed down in the end and after that I friended her on Facebook so now we'd known each other right from the days of Wretch.cc into the Facebook era.

How many years is that?

We both started writing while we were at university. That was a golden age for the publishing industry from the point of view of writers of our generation. We all got a number of works under our belt in those years. Then I stopped writing but she carried on. She had asked me why I first began to write but she never asked me why later on I stopped. She kept suggesting that I turn my own life story into a novel.

"You went from young hoodlum to bestselling author! Surely that counts as an amazing life story? And to look at you now no one could tell you used to be a hoodlum. By the time I got to know you you were already a little softy!"

Yep, she really did say that to me straight.

How many years ago was all that? What was this hoodlum she kept going on about really like?

I never gave her suggestion much thought because it seemed like a weird idea to me, something I'd find really awkward, though I did accept a couple of offers to speak at colleges that she passed on to me. Although I'd stuck by my resolve not to write over the past three years I had been willing to accept invitations to speak on campus, most likely because I enjoyed interacting with the students. It was also probably because at some subconscious level I wished that when I was their age someone could have told me that there are other options available to you in life.

The feeling I got about that young woman was very similar to the one I got from her. They both had the sort of personality that loves to encourage other people. There was even a time when I wondered if the young woman was a friend of hers that she'd introduced to me. But then when I got to know her better I realized that wasn't the case, neither knew the other at all, it was just a coincidence that they had very similar personalities. They reminded me very much of cheerleaders for a high school baseball team: enthusiastic, full of positive energy and very keen on encouraging other people. Of course this was just a fancy of mine based on very little, I'd never known any cheerleaders and when I was at high school I hit people not baseballs.

Coincidence.

When the young woman messaged me that night it so happened I was two thirds of the way through a bottle of Gold Medal. If she'd messaged me an hour earlier I'd have turned her down with a few polite formalities. An hour later then I'd already have shut down my computer and gone to bed to read a bit of Carl Jung to send me off to sleep. I'd have seen her message the next day when I turned the computer on and turned her down politely then. But she happened to message me right at that moment when I was feeling my most relaxed. Did I mention that I can't hold my beer and one bottle of Gold Medal is my limit?

Coincidence.

Whatever, she just so happened to message me at a moment like that, when I was feeling relaxed and a bit bored but still not ready to go to sleep. She let me know she worked as an editor and I recognised the publishing house she worked at. Some years ago when American, British and Japanese novels in translation were the fashion in the Taiwanese publishing market they had specialised solely in authors from Taiwan. I imagine it must have been pretty hard work in the beginning for a new publishing house publishing works by new Taiwanese authors, but they stuck at it and eventually they had a few bestselling writers and then slowly but surely there was a subtle change in the book market in Taiwan and this publisher and their Taiwanese authors found themselves featuring on the bestseller lists with increasing frequency. I didn't know anyone who worked for that publisher though and I had no idea why this young woman who worked for them had suddenly got in touch with me.

Coincidence.

I'd had a lot of mail over the past few years from editors, some making polite inquiries and some directly proposing projects and it all received my standard reply: I currently have no plans to write anything. After that we'd exchange a few friendly lines then disappear altogether from each other's lives. They'd move on to editing their next book and I'd carry on with my boring life as a confirmed non-writer. Truth to tell I was actually quite pleased that after three years out of sight any editors still remembered me, even if most of the time I really did prefer it if they forgot all about me.

The feeling I got about this young woman was completely different to those editors. It seemed like she simply wanted to get to know me but also like she'd known me for a very long time and was very curious about me. This was a rare conversational experience so far as I was concerned – she was the first publishing editor to chat with me for more than three minutes without trying to get me to submit a manuscript.

I'd actually worked out in my head that with my old editor it didn't matter what we were talking about, before three minutes were up he'd be asking about my next book or how my writing was getting on. Like I wasn't a person, just a writing machine made of meat.

So that's how we became friends, the sort who chat online but don't meet, one evening just as the time was right, when I'd drunk two thirds of a half-litre bottle of Gold Medal.

She'd always message me just at the right time of an evening and we'd get to chatting, that very laid-back sort of chat where you don't have to worry about bringing up some topic the other person won't like. There was one time when we probably went a bit too deep. She asked me why I'd stopped writing.

"You're the first person ever to ask me that in all these three years."

"Your editor never asked?"

"No. I expect he doesn't want to admit that's what's happening."

"Well then, why did you just stop writing?"

"Because Murakami started writing when he was thirty so I decided thirty was the age I'd retire at, not a bad creative concept don't you think?"

"I don't believe you."

"My last book didn't sell so I've given up writing in a huff."

"Come off it."

"No inspiration, I've written everything I wanted to write."

"You're lying."

Suddenly I felt like she had me cornered. But because it was just the right evening I finally got round to asking a question I'd always wanted to ask her by way of reply.

"You used to read my books, didn't you?"

"Yes!"

She admitted it quite openly and then shared a memory with me:

"And the first interaction we ever had was when I asked you a question right back when I was still just your reader, not an editor."

"What question?"

"I was trying to find someone."

She told me about it. She'd been looking for someone and a search had led her to my blog because of a post on there about one of my book signings that included the contact for my promoter. It was this promoter she had asked about.

I remembered the incident and I also remembered that my promoter hadn't been the person she was looking for, they just happened to share the same name.

"So did you find the person you'd been looking for in the end?"

"No, but I did end up becoming a publishing editor because of it. It's strange the little chance happenings that change your life. By the way, that old promoter of yours doesn't work in publishing anymore."

That came as no surprise, his attitude to his work had been pretty slack, I remember that particular book signing he'd almost driven me crazy. What *was* something of a surprise was that she went on to ask:

"Well then, so why did you stop writing?"

Quite a persistent woman, this one.