

# RING OF THE DAY: TAIPEI MET-ROMANCE

## Ring of the Day: 台北捷運×戀愛小說

\* Adapted into the TV series *Adventure of the Ring*

*Five short stories of love, loss, and illusion, all revolving around the Taipei metro, where convenience often meets coincidence. Soon to air as a television series entitled Adventure of the Ring.*

The Taipei Metro is simultaneously a place of great human concentration and of powerful solitude. Millions of people congregate within it every single day, many at the exact same time of day. Habitual metro riders will often recognize each other, and will notice when familiar faces go missing or suddenly reappear. Yet nowhere is the gulf between people so great as when they are sitting right next to each other in a crowded subway car.

The Taipei metro – this theater of convenience and coincidence – is the backdrop of each of the five stories collected here. Friends, requited and unrequited lovers, and even ghosts meet and split within this space. Imagine the stories of *Dubliners* taking place in a modern metro system, with a healthy dash of O. Henry's dry humor and dramatic flair thrown in.

These stories of Taipei locals and their magical, heart-breaking, or once-in-a-lifetime encounters on the subway have recently been adapted into a television series entitled *Adventure of the Ring*, set to air in 2020.

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literacy platform Numeracy Lab. He believes that writing a love story is like constructing a beautiful math problem: human relationships are equations, probabilities lurk behind chance encounters, and conclusions are variables waiting to be solved.

# RING OF THE DAY: TAIPEI MET-ROMANCE

By Lai I-Wei

Translated by Roddy Flagg

## 01 The Proposer: Huang Yi-Chih

Age: 29. Favorite book: Parade, by Shuichi Yoshida.

In Taipei, only two types of people carry an engagement ring in their pocket: Those who have just bought one, and those who are about to propose.

Wait! I've thought of a third: those who have just found an engagement ring.

"I left my bag on the train!"

I heard my own voice echo back and forth across the metro platform as I struggled to escape the grip of the platform attendant. The gap between the train doors was rapidly closing, but I had to try, until it was clear not even a fly could have squeezed through.

Unfortunately for me, the attendant's grip was too strong. Lovers reunited at the airport after a decade-long separation have not been held so tight. The train pulled away from the platform, taking my last chance with it. This wasn't a busy street. I couldn't flag down a passing car like they do in the movies and demand the stunned driver follow that bus.

"Why did you stop me?!"

I must have sounded like I were angry about a foiled suicide attempt, which only attracted more stares.

I'm usually quiet (on the metro, at least) and would never choose to make myself the center of attention. But the metro is a dull place; any unusual event is bound to attract spectators, gathering like sharks scenting blood.

"Sir, the doors were closing. It wasn't safe."

The attendant, a man in older middle-age, showed no signs of anger, despite my shouting. This was all part of his job: stopping people from injuring themselves then calmly absorbing the subsequent abuse. Life is not easy on the customer service frontline.

Normally, I'd remember that. But right then...I yelled again, drowning out even the station announcements.

"My ring! My engagement ring!"

And at this point, I hope you'll understand why I lost control.

\*

Losing an engagement ring is the kind of thing that should only happen in a romantic comedy. Probably somewhere like Paris or New York, or perhaps London or Abu Dhabi. Somewhere people are so rich they don't notice diamond rings slipping from their pockets.

The chances of it happening at Zhongshan Metro Station in Taipei? Somewhere at the lower end, just like our salaries.

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"Was it expensive?"

"Yes! And if you'd let me get a hand in the doors would have opened!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but that would have been against regulations. There's nothing else I could have done. I'll get in touch with the driver right away and we'll get it back. Your name, sir?"

"Huang Yi-Chih," I told him, before specifying the particular Chinese characters used in my name: "Huang as in yellow, Yi-Chih as in powerful."

How was my name going to help get my ring back? It wasn't a lost schoolbag. I did not have my name, class and seat-number engraved on the inside of the ring.

That said, I had lost several bags during my school days.

\*

I've always lost things. I would place my wallet in my briefcase and then, at the metro turnstile – usually when the train was just pulling in – it would invariably disappear.

I've often thought that the Doraemon comics failed to explain one thing: how did Doraemon manage to find exactly what Nobita needed so quickly in that four-dimensional pouch of his?

Was my briefcase even bigger than Doraemon's pouch?

Forgetting where you've put things is just one step away from losing them.

But I always accepted this: our brains have limited capacity, and there are more important things to remember. If you forget where something is and lose it, the brain must have decided it was unimportant. 131071 could be six random numbers or it could be a reminder your girlfriend was born on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October, 1971. One will be forgotten in a few seconds, the other remembered forever – unless you're a mathematician who loves numbers more than his girlfriend, in which case the reverse may be true. As he would explain to his distraught love: "I'm sorry. 131071 is the first six-digit Mersenne prime."

Some would disagree, reminding us that even Einstein used only one-tenth of his brain and that human potential is unlimited.

Would you agree?

What I mean is: if you yourself only use one-tenth of your brain, what right do you have to judge others who may well be using more of their brain than you? I think people who believe this really are using less than one-tenth of their brain. But I'll tell you one way to increase the amount of your brain you use: don't believe anything you read online.

It seems to me there's just too much information today. There's more news than we can possibly read, plus Facebook status updates and cartoons to keep up with. I feel like I'm already using 100% – no, 120%! – of my brain. If I don't limit how much of my brain I'm using, I'm going to end up like Toguru in the Yu Yu Hakusho manga: able to expend 120% of my strength in a single blow, only to then collapse.

\*

The platform attendant spoke into his radio for a while before turning to me: "Mr. Huang, could you describe the bag the ring was in?"

"A pink gift bag, about this big," I said, putting my mobile into the pocket of my suit jacket so I could indicate the size of the bag.

\*

Back to what we were talking about. There's no way I could explain this mishap as a case of my brain choosing to forget something unimportant. A ring worth twice my monthly salary could never be unimportant. The ring was more likely to become sentient, spot something more interesting on the metro and forget me!

All because I hadn't wanted to cram the paper gift bag containing the ring into my briefcase (appearances are important to me, I'm afraid, and my briefcase is so slim a MacBook Air makes it strain at the seams). I had wanted to play a game on my phone (What else can you do on the metro? And if you are accused of groping someone, you can show your high score record to prove your innocence: "See, look at those scores. My hands were clearly occupied!"), but since I couldn't play and holding the bag at the same time, I put both briefcase and gift bag on the floor.

Then, upon reaching the station, I picked up the briefcase and forgot the gift bag.

Such a stupid thing to do! How could I have been so careless?

\*

"Thanks, sorry for the trouble. The young man's very anxious, so please do see what you can do."

The attendant clicked off his radio and turned to me.

"We'll do everything we can to find it. Please don't worry, very often valuables get handed in. The people are the best thing about Taiwan, remember."

He was being polite and doing his best to make me feel better, and I refrained from pointing out he must have forgotten about all the rude metro passengers he dealt with. I did feel

ashamed of myself for yelling at him while he was just doing his job. Instead of yelling back, he was trying to help me.

And, I realized, I must have looked like one of those rude passengers to everyone else. Probably best to keep quiet.

He seemed to be around fifty, greying at the temples, and with lines on his face which might have been due to his age, or possibly to the concern he was showing for my plight.

He was a good person.

“But why did you have such a valuable thing with you, Mr. Huang?”

A good person, but clearly not a fan of detective novels, or he would have figured it out for himself. Excluding rich tourists from Abu Dhabi, only two types of people would carry an engagement ring around Taipei: Those who’ve just bought one, and those who are about to propose.

Wait! I’ve thought of a third: those who’ve just found an engagement ring.

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The plan was to get down on one knee that evening and ask Socks, my girlfriend of ten years, to marry me. It was to be a carefully planned surprise – although one that Socks herself might miss, as she had no idea it was happening and might work late. Or I might miss it, due to last minute cold feet. Just like in the movies. But if it was to happen, the ring had to be there. No overtime or stage fright for the ring.

Can you imagine it? Me on one knee popping that all-important question, Socks clasping her hand to her mouth in surprise, and then me being unable to place a ring on her finger and just ... what? Pressing my palms together in prayer?

That would not do. I was meant to be proposing, not praying. Or maybe I could find a glass slipper she’d lost, and slip it onto its rightful foot?

Many people think a typical proposal involves a woman sobbing with joy and a man smiling in contentment. It would be more accurate to admit that we also break down in tears – but beforehand. Once it’s time to propose, we’re already cried out.

We do our crying at the jewelers.

I admit this is partly because diamonds are extortionately priced. These stones could be used in mobile phone accelerometers or perform some other useful function. I don’t see the point of carrying them around in a ring.

But more saddening is that as we pay for the ring, we realize we’re about to lose our freedom.

Don’t get me wrong – I love Socks. Get me drunk, inject me with a truth serum, I’ll still tell you I love her. That I want to spend the rest of my life with her, to wake up next to her every morning, to say “Goodnight, I love you,” as we go to sleep every night. But marriage is a different matter. It means acting like a man (And I am a man. I lost my ring, not my identity.) and taking on responsibility. You can’t risk chatting up random women on the street any more, and if you decide

to have a fling you run the risk of your wife turning up in the middle of the night – or, as seems to be more common in Taiwan, the middle of the afternoon – with the police (or, even worse, with both of your mothers). And then what do you say?

“We just popped in to use the bathroom.”

“It was so hot, it made more sense to sleep naked.”

“We were just giving each other a therapeutic massage.”

“I had a bit too much wine sauce with my chicken at lunch and had to sleep it off. They must have given me the wrong key and I ended up in her room and ... Her? She’d taken a sleeping tablet, so she didn’t hear me come in.”

All those lies, ridiculous in our own ears even as we utter them, yet somehow the best we can come up with under duress. My buddies and I often spend time putting the world to rights, and the problem we spend most time on is: “How did XXX get such a hot girlfriend?”

And the second most-discussed issue?

“Why get married?”

Is it to make sure you and your partner are legally obliged to live happily ever after, or risk the divorce courts ordering hefty alimony payments? This seems to indicate a lack of trust, like you were neighboring states claiming to maintain friendly relations while keeping missiles primed at the border in case the other party misbehaves.

Anyway, the party considering marriage would rarely give us a straight answer. More often, they would answer with a growled question: “If I know I’ve found what I want, why wouldn’t I?”

Clearly not an answer to our question.

But responding to a question with another question kills the conversation.

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When I realized on my way up the escalator that I’d forgotten the ring, I turned and ran back down to the platform, where I had that tug-of-war with the attendant.

And now, having calmed down, I can respond to that question with an answer perhaps more terrifying than losing an engagement ring.

If my theory that we forget things which are not important to us is correct, does that mean that my subconscious isn’t indifferent to my getting married? Or even wants to avoid it?

Losing a 100,000 NTD ring and gaining my freedom in exchange ... perhaps it wouldn’t be such a bad deal?