

THE COFFEE SHOP DJ

Whatever next in this competitive city? Henry Yeung, 22, had a job all his own: he was a coffee shop DJ. This involved sitting in a cramped sound booth in Tsuen Wan on the third floor of accounts and management from 7 to 7 each day, watching video feeds from five cafes and providing each with music. And it was through the camera of the Pedder Street branch that the lovely woman first caught his young eye.

Henry was good at his job. He wasn't afraid of using everything from the operatic to the aboriginal and avoided much of the pop in the charts. With high-resolution cameras that could be zoomed and panned, he commanded every corner of the cafes. He created mood where none existed or he enhanced it.

The woman was older. In a dark office suit and white blouse, her confident poise caught his attention. As she paid for her cappuccino he zoomed in to capture the name on her credit card and by the time she had seated herself at a Paris table he was already on her Facebook page, browsing furiously. She rode horses at Pokfulam, she scuba-dived, she shopped. Fluent in Mandarin and Cantonese she had worked in Shanghai – and now Hong Kong – in fashion accessories. And she was single. Anita Mui and Aerosmith were music likes, so too were Lil Kim and Bruno Mars. After a brief moment of thought, Henry put on *Just the Way You Are*. The lovely woman stirred her cappuccino then brought the foamy spoon to her crimson lips, in a motion fit for an advertisement. Pleasure lit her face as she registered the Bruno Mars song. Henry smiled back. She looked in the direction of the speaker hidden beside the in-store eye. Henry sat a little back in his chair. Then he drew forward towards her smile, lovely and in which he read a hint of sadness.

Sudden interruption! The door burst open and Winnie from Accounts clapped him on the shoulder – his girlfriend of sorts.

‘CIA molesting ISIS with remote-control drones – it's lunch time, soldier.’

Abandoning the creamy skin and willowy eyebrows of the vision on Pedder Street, Henry fended off Winnie, who wanted to box with him. Without make-up, eyebrows un-tweaked, she was not great to look at. But she was right, it was time to eat, so Henry allowed himself to be escorted from his ‘mind control centre’ – another of Winnie's fanciful ideas.

That was the beginning. The lady on Pedder Street came regularly three times a week and Henry duly fell in love with her. Without analysis he knew she belonged to the life he wanted. A DJ job straight out of college was one thing but it wasn't enough. He was working his way towards an economics diploma. He had the kind of ambition he didn't see around him, in the family flat he shared with his parents and elder brother. His father had long given up on life, content to wear a dirty singlet and to play cards endlessly with his friends. If Henry wasn't studying on his bed he was day-dreaming. When Winny came into his thoughts she didn't quite stir him the right way. But the girl on Pedder Street, so finely turned out, promised the high life he yearned for.

She sat at her favourite Paris table, he played her songs. He watched her, part spy, part god from a secret vault. Her head moved like a flower in a balmy wind. But one day he noticed that she wore a quizzical smile as she stared straight at the camera. This troubled Henry. She mustn't think someone was toying with her. He decided it was time to go and introduce himself.

His pretext for visiting the store was to pick up a batch of filled comment cards. A side task of his was to collate such things before sending the results to management. He made a morning of it. He attended a stand-up staff meeting around the espresso machine. When she arrived he was putting steam in a jug of milk, every bit a barista. In person she was lovelier.

'Everything all right?' Henry had come to hover at her table. He could not deny that he was feeling as tight as a drum.

'Yes, thank you,' she replied coolly. 'But the music is odd today, don't you think? I like it less.'

She was right. Without his personal attention the mix wasn't hitting any of the right buttons. Icy doubts ran down his spine. Wouldn't it be downright weird to admit he was the store DJ who had been fixating on her for weeks? And what kind of line was this to use on somebody who must have her pick of men. 'I'll talk to the DJ,' he said stupidly.

She tilted her head and looked at him carefully. 'Really, do you have the power? You're not the young entrepreneur behind this little coffee chain are you?'

What a good idea. Why hadn't he thought of that? 'Please, not so young,' he said, suavely accepting the part. 'Running a business has aged me.'

‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘Any kind of high-level business is exhausting.’ There was no telling what she really believed.

‘Come out with me this Saturday night,’ he blurted out.

‘All right. Why not? No one else has asked me.’

Henry met his friend Buffy to share a beer tower at the pub they knew on Hart Avenue, which always had sawdust on the floor and a woman in a Heineken sash patrolling the tables. They had three litres of beer to finish between them. Buffy was a delivery driver and they had been to school together. Henry told Buffy all about his date and Buffy said sagely that these older women were man-eaters. Henry’s worry was not that, but his lack of money to fund a suitable supper. Buffy said the Hang Seng Index was sure to go up and he should buy himself some call warrants.

‘I hear the top floor of the King’s Hotel is good,’ said Buffy. ‘There’s a rooftop bar and she can have a game of snooker on the seventh floor.’

‘She is no snooker player,’ said Henry. ‘She’s more likely to expect supper at the Four Seasons. I’m supposed to be successful.’

‘If you know where she lives, choose a restaurant close to her apartment, but not in the same street, that would give the game away.’

‘Thanks for the advice, Buffy, but I don’t think sex is on the menu. She’s got class. I’m not sure she even believes I am who I said I was.’

‘Then take her to the German Beer and Sausage Festival. Everyone ends up standing on the tables. The girls love that.’

‘Buffy, you’re not helping.’

‘All right then, you really can’t be pleased.’ Buffy folded his hands over his chest in mock displeasure.

Winnie walked in. It was damp on the street and buses and taxi droned by beyond the pavement railings.

‘Found you!’ she said. ‘Do I get my own beer then?’ She was in jeans and a top of indeterminate grey-green. ‘So what’s up?’

‘Nothing’s up.’ Henry tapped her out a glass of beer and they watched the beer tower as it bubbled. ‘We’re just talking get-rich-quick schemes.’

‘Shall I tell you why I agreed to date you?’

It was Saturday night and she was speaking. ‘It’s because you are nothing like the other men I know.’

They were in the basement of Jardine House, at Grappa’s. True, it was not Caprice—the Hang Seng warrant had not stretched that far—but the food was largely Italian. They had a banquet table too, ideally placed for the band at nine o’clock. Angela – that was her name – immaculate in a white strapless dress, had sunk two vodka tonics and was noshing with enthusiasm. To her statement, Henry blushed, fidgeted with his napkin and looked at his knees.

‘You want to know something about these men?’ she continued. ‘They are skunks. No, worse than that, they are the arses of skunks—I assume skunks have arses. They whine that their wives don’t understand them. They give you holidays in 5-star hotels. They won’t wear a condom but they will pay for *mistakes*. Then they will buy you presents, move you around the company and forget you. But I mustn’t embarrass you, you’re a nice boy. Tell me a funny story won’t you?’

Henry could think of nothing except the time he, Buffy and Winnie had tried to make some weekend money. They took as much Gold Label Friso milk powder as they could carry to Shenzhen, thereby expecting to make a huge profit. Except they took the wrong train, got lost, were picked up by the scary mainland police and spent an unforgettable night in the holding cell of Futian police station. Inside the bars speed tablets were changing hands and nobody slept, particularly Winnie who was thigh to thigh with a butch Indonesian femme swapping stories.

‘Just what I told you,’ said Angela. ‘Too many men think a woman is interested in golf or the latest wine fridge. An anecdote like yours is far more interesting – so sweet.’

When they danced, Angela was light on her feet. To slow music she wanted to be held in a clinch. Henry shut his eyes and imaged waltzing a priceless Ming vase, then he opened them and watched his own fingers holding her bare warm shoulders. At eleven they walked under the South China tropical night to the mid-levels escalator and then to the door of her building. ‘I’m not letting you go, you’re mine for the night,’ she said, and yanked him inside playfully.

On Monday, back at work in his Tsuen Wan DJ cabin, Henry could not concentrate. She had said she was awfully lonely and offered him a key to her apartment. She was forty-five years old. She would help his career, she said. It was a blissful weekend during which all Winnie’s usual text messages went

unanswered, a fact which made him doubly edgy now. But mainly he was asking himself whether he wanted to be a kept man, and if he wouldn't have a very hard landing in the future, if he fell in, and then fell out, with this lovely, needy woman.

There was the rapping of several hands at once on the door. Henry managed to present the invaders with a cheerful smile. It was a group of girls from Winnie's administration team, wheedling and simpering for him to join them at lunch. They wouldn't take no for an answer so he left the cafes with a long bluesy jazz playlist and obliged.

The sun was on a full tank of gas. A refreshing wind ruffled the big-leafed fig trees on the street. They went to the nearby *cha chaan teng* because of its outside tables. The girls twittered to one another without ever quite forgetting Henry. The girls ordered and a glass of beer arrived for Henry although he never drank at work. They insisted he drink it. Winnie arrived the moment Henry had finished eating, on cue it seemed. It was all a set up. In its little courtyard, half-sequestered from the traffic, the table fell silent. Winnie didn't look bad: she was made up, her eyebrows were willowy, her hair a liquid wave, her dress of a recognisable pastel colour.

'Nice weekend, pal?' she said. '—with that tramp?'

And on it went from there. 'Buffy's told me the whole thing, so don't even think about wriggling. I suppose this bitch is beautiful?'

'Well, you know, she has her problems, like anyone—'

'—on second thoughts don't tell. I'm not interested.'

Henry was glad not to.

'Just think on this before you get too carried away, brother. You've got studies to finish. You're ambitious and want to succeed by your own steam. We want you to succeed too.' Her arm swept over her friends. 'You think we like our jobs here? We've just got each other, as the song says – each other and you. We can't let some trouble-making tramp come and spoil that, can we?'

She hadn't said anything this interesting before. She had more stature than he had realised.

'All right. I might not see her again.'

'Glad of that, pal.'

'To be honest, I don't have time for dating. Not with anyone.'

'Deal.'

Giggling, the girls gathered around Henry. With a certain poise Winnie set herself down beside him. Henry weighed the pleasure he felt now with that of the weekend and called it a draw.