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Wai Yee, the self-contained girl who had impressed me on first meeting her, came to my office first thing each morning. Now that I had some idea of what was going on, and what I was supposed to be doing in the scheme of things, I wanted to install an inventory tracking program on their wondrous computer. She knew all about how that might be implemented.

The more I talked with Wai Yee the more she impressed me. At first, language prevented me from appreciating just how sharp she was. I hadn't got used to the Hong Kong pronunciation of English or their funny way of putting things. But when I did, I found she was instructing me in what to do much more than me, her ostensible boss, was instructing her.

She also impressed in other ways. I studied her covertly as we talked. She had finely etched features, 'aristocratic' was a word that jumped to mind. Everything was in the right place. Her face was shaped like a honey-coloured heart, her narrow nose ending with neat nostrils, not like some Chinese noses. Her eyes were long-lashed and serenely good humoured when she looked at me as we talked, not subservient, not arrogant. She wasn't like Connie at all, yet both had that gentle, fawnlike look in common. I liked her; I liked looking at her. But no, in case you were wondering, my growing admiration did not translate into sexual attraction, and for that I was profoundly glad. Sex and the office *do not mix*.

And she had a quirky sense of humour, which I liked.

At the end of our first meeting in the office, she left and closed the door. Immediately after, she knocked and came back in, smiling like a cheeky little girl playing a joke.

Jousaan, Mr. Harris.'

'Excuse me?'

Jousaan. That mean "Good morning".'

'Oh, er *jousaan*. Was that right?'

'Yes, Mr. Harris. Perfect. You said it just like a Chinese. You should learn Cantonese, you know.'

'Yes, I'd like to.'

Ho ho. That mean "Very good!" Say it, Mr. Harris.'

Ho ho.'

'Okay, I teach you. *Lei ho ma?* That mean "How are you?" Say it, Mr. Harris. *Lei...ho...ma?*'

Hong Kong's walking trails were a huge plus I hadn't counted on. I'd no idea that overcrowded Hong Kong had a hinterland, let alone such a stunningly beautiful one. On my first week-end in Hong Kong, I told Eddie I liked walking and he suggested I walk up to Conduit Road, along to the back of University, and then turn left up the hill. 'You get big surprise, no problem.'

I did get big surprise. No problem at all. In thirty minutes of steep climbing, I was on the Peak itself. Hong Kong, and across the Harbour, Kowloon, lay at my feet. And from there, walking trails spread in all directions, one encircling the Island. Bugger the Blue Gum Forest Trail, this place was a bushwalker's paradise!

I bought a detailed map showing walking trails. I had a good look and decided to spend every fine Sunday exploring them. On my third Sunday in Hong Kong, I took the bus to Wong Ngai Chung Gap, and walked from there to Tai Tam Reservoir. I intended to go on to Quarry Bay, where I could get a bus home. It was a pleasant walk to the Reservoir,

not at all demanding. A trout hatchery was at the near end, where boys were trying to catch the fingerlings that bred in millions. I leant against the stone parapet, watching them, as they dropped their simple, single-hooked lines into the water. The fish seemed to be getting the best of it. They quickly stripped the hooks of their bait, the few fish in the boys' jam jars looking quite lonely. A few yards away a Chinese woman was feeding the fish, like she was fattening them for the kids' benefit. But at their rate of capture, I reckoned she was doing it for the fishes' benefit.

She turned. It was Wai Yee! Her hair was different. Usually in an old-fashioned bun, it was now a long ponytail, flowing more than halfway down her back. She looked so much younger: early twenties, not early thirties now.

Now, here was a problem. I hadn't quite worked this one out yet, but I knew I'd have to sooner or later. How do you interact with local people when you fall against the language barrier and whatever other barriers? Wai Yee's English was adequate for the workplace, but we hadn't spoken outside that context, apart from conventional pleasantries and the minor language lessons. Free-wheeling conversational English would be a struggle for both of us. Would she even want to stumble over small talk with me here now?

It was more than just language though. Back home when interacting with females many guys, me among them, resorted to mild flirting. Not that it meant anything. It was a kind of code, recognizing the obvious fact: *I am male, you are female*. In Hong Kong, this didn't seem to work with females—apart from Connie, but as a hostie of course she'd be more Westernised. Wai Yee's playfulness about the language lessons was definitely not code for flirting. It was more like Eddie's cheerful inanities. I got it all the time here: *I am Chinese, you are gwailo*. I was beginning to

see why expats like Frank formed their own enclaves. I was also beginning to see, despite my idealistic intentions, that I'd be no different. I was a new chum still. I was trying to understand what I didn't understand with what I didn't yet understand.

I'm not normally shy, but seeing Wai Yee here made me feel shy. I even regretted coming across her like that. I decided I wouldn't make myself known, not for the moment. I studied her covertly. She leaned over the wall, scattering crumbs over the water. She pursed her lips at the fish, miming kisses at them, in synchrony with them, as they pursed their lips, not to kiss her back, but to gulp down the fish-food she was speckling on them. Now and then, she'd toss her head and brush her hair back with her hand as it fell forward, her hand lingering behind her ear. How charming! I'd never seen her like that in the office, so natural, so feminine.

Okay, inspection over. I'd speak just as soon as she turned. She did, suddenly.

'Wai Yee? I thought it was you.'

'Wah, Mr. Harris! *Lei ho ma?*' Ah yes, that' was her voice, pleasantly deep.

'*Ho ho. Lei le?*' And that was the limit of our mutual Cantonese: Very well. And you? I noticed her eyes again, finely crinkled when she smiled.

'Very good too thank you. You want to feed fish?' She held out her bag of fish food. 'Why you come here?'

Here we go. Do the Chinese sound so abrupt because of poor English, or do they talk like that anyway? It was confusing. Her words made me feel I shouldn't be there. Her warm smile told me I should be. Even that she wanted me to be.

'I love walking in your country parks. I didn't expect

that in Hong Kong.’ I searched her eyes in return, to offset the poverty of our words.

We finished with the fish and walked on. It was like our eyes had opened our tongues. Immediately we found something in common to talk about: trail-walking, as they called it in Hong Kong. Why had I worried about the conversation? She told me of many places where there was good walking. She liked walking too. Who with, I wondered? I thought she was married, from something she once said, but she appeared to be on her own here. I checked her hand. Yes, she was wearing a wedding ring.

She seemed to know where we were going. I followed her, my plan to walk to Quarry Bay completely forgotten.

A wisp of her hair blew into my face. It smelt dry, hay-like, no-nonsense, yet so feminine. I was instantly erect. I carefully shifted my camera bag to cover my totally amazing enthusiasm. Why did she suddenly affect me so much? She was plainly dressed, she wore no make-up, and she’d given no signals that might have encouraged that response. And she wasn’t a blonde. Yet the electricity was so strong. If I touched a metal object, a shower of sparks would jump off me. My mouth was dry, my heart thudding like a drum. Here was a complication I could do without.

She suddenly started talking about her husband. Had she noticed my excitement? Was this some kind of signal? *Do not get fresh with me, Mr Harris. I am married.*

‘He has a business making books. He go to China often.’

‘Oh, he’s a bookmaker. Aren’t there enough race tracks in Hong Kong for him, then?’

‘Race tracks?’ She looked puzzled. ‘No, books. He print books.’

‘Oh sorry. How stupid of me.’ I laughed, but was sorry

language had tripped our promising conversation so quickly. ‘*Publishes* books. He’s a publisher then?’

‘Yes,’ she smiled, ‘That’s the word. My English not very good.’

I made a disagreeing noise. ‘What sort of books?’

‘Political and romance. He go to China a lot. For the political. Local for the romance.’

Publishes political books, goes to China although the Cultural Revolution was still rampaging. I knew nothing of this before, but I’d quickly discovered that Hong Kong was in a state of high alert following the 1967 and then the 1968 riots. Wai Yee’s husband sounded like someone not nice to know, a Communist sympathiser at least, if not worse. And where did that leave her? Might she even be a Communist spy? And where might that leave her role at McKinnon’s, for God’s sake?

‘And you, are you interested in his political books?’ What a dumb question to ask a possible spy! So I added, ‘Or the romance?’

She stared at me, a faint smile on her lips. She shook her head. ‘I like politics for one reason only. It keep him away from me. I read only romance books.’ She laughed lightly, almost a giggle.

How incredibly personal! Hey, if bringing him up was a signal, which way was it signalling now? ‘Er, how do you mean? If you don’t mind talking about it, of course.’

‘If I would mind, I would not have said,’ she smiled. ‘When he in Hong Kong he has many meetings, at night a lot. So totally I do not see him very much. I am happy with that.’ She shrugged, pouting that little smile that was so her.

She was no spy. My heart went out to this sweet, lovely person, caught in a loveless marriage. Not many married

Chinese women worked, no doubt she did to provide some sort of meaning to her life, maybe to make herself financially self-sufficient, come the day when she did leave. My stomach surged, but no. No way. Not with Wai Yee. Not while she was a colleague, anyway.

Westerners with fucked-up marriages either put up a front or they divorced. She wasn't putting up a front and she wasn't divorced. I asked the obvious.

'Why not leave him?'

She seemed amused at the question. 'I am Chinese.'

Ah yes, of course, how stupid of this *gwailo*. Being Chinese explains everything that seems strange to us. Or was she, perhaps, letting me know that married or not, she was available?

And was I letting her know that I too was available by telling her I was divorced? I didn't go into details like spinning bottles and shagging around. Just that I married the wrong type, you know?

She nodded. Yes, she knew all about that.

'And so I wanted to start a new life, in a new place. My firm had contacts with McKinnon's, so here I am.'

'And are you happy you are here, Mr. Harris?' She looked up, directly into my face. Her soft eyes told me her answer to that question. She was happy that I was here.

'Yes, Wai Yee, very happy.' Something caught in my throat. My voice came out funny. It was almost like a declaration of love. This was crazy! 'But, er, please, call me "Peter". "Mr. Harris" is so formal. And after all, I call you "Wai Yee", Wai Yee.'

She laughed her deep laugh. 'Very well, I call you "Peter", Peter. But not in office. People would get wrong idea if I did, maybe.'

Wrong idea? Wasn't that a bit of a leap into admissible

possibilities? *I am female, you are male*—the old code! Was she flirting with me now we were safely out of the office?

We walked on in silence, each thinking our own thoughts. I don't know what she was thinking, but I was thinking furiously about what had just happened and what might happen. One thing was clear: I had drastically revised my ideas about what females attracted me.

We found ourselves on Tai Tam Road, near a bus stop. A bus was approaching.

'Does this go to the Mid-Levels?' I asked.

'No, you will have to change at Aberdeen. I too need to change. I show you.' She held her arm out, signalling it to stop.

We rode back mostly in silence, a comfortable silence, rich with possibility. I surreptitiously looked at her beside me, admiring her profile, the way her eyes lay in soft repose underneath her long lashes. She suddenly looked up, catching my eyes in the act of trespass. Completely unembarrassed, she stared back at me, but so gently 'stare' was the wrong word. I, the trespasser, was the first to look away.

Then we were at the terminus. She alighted first, looked around, pointed to a red minibus.

'You take that. Ah, wait. I come with you. I tell driver where to stop for you.'

She took me to the waiting bus, nearly full. She jabbered a few words in Cantonese. The driver nodded and said something.

'Okay now. He will stop for you, and then you pay him one dollar, okay? If you want to get off earlier, shout "*yau lok*". Go on, say it. "*Yau lok*".'

'*Yau lok*.'

'Good. But you must say it louder.'

'YAU LOK!

'Wah, you speak good Cantonese already! Bye-bye.' She thrust out her hand for me to shake. Now so formal! I shook her hand, but I longed to wrap my arms tightly around her and kiss her on those full, soft lips. But that would never do.

The driver and the other passengers were openly laughing at me as I climbed on board and found a seat. *We are Chinese, you are gwailo.*

Now I understood their code, I didn't mind their laughing at me at all.