

The Cocktail Party

The cocktail party is an all-purpose rite in darkest Hong Kong. It can be used to celebrate a betrothal, an anniversary or a national day, to gain face or to give face, to launch a business, to seal a contract or to reassure a creditor. It can be employed just as easily to turn a heart, to slight an enemy or to forestall a social death. Chinese Communist cadres adapt to it in no time at all. Sometimes even the underworld flaunts successes in criminal undertakings with such parties.

No one is more familiar with the multifarious uses of the cocktail party than K. B. Woo, that billionaire entrepreneur known to admirers and foes alike simply as "K. B." As the most famous tycoon in a city replete with taipans and captains of industry, he is the darling of the cocktail cult. His name figures in the invitation lists of virtually everybody pretending to the upper crust. It is not unusual, therefore, for him to attend three or four cocktail parties in a single day. He attends them grudgingly, however, as a concession to his shareholders, his financial backers and the legion of photographers, financial journalists and social reporters who keep his name in the public eye. He knows that any unexplained absence would provide grist for the rumour mills .

In truth K. B. finds cocktail parties an interminable bore. He had thought otherwise when he was just the impecunious son of a roadside hawker of fish balls and noodles. Then he had hankered after the untasted glamour of such occasions. But now, as chairman of Trans Universal Enterprises, that famous international conglomerate he had built from scratch, such parties have become an imposition, deflecting him from the serious business of exploiting the greed of others.

Indeed, he wishes nothing better than to be relieved of the rituals of the cocktail cult. He resents their artificiality and their pretences. Mixing with mediocrities is bad enough, but the charade of smiling at dowagers with vanities as outrageous as their over-rouged faces, of humouring commercial parasites wheedling

for crumbs of insider information, or of posing for photographs with treacherous rivals coveting various bits of his empire seems beneath a person who has already paid his way to the top.

Such are K. B.'s thoughts as he prepares to leave for Lulu's cocktail party to launch the high-fashion boutique he has agreed to finance. As he tidies his papers he feels a vague distress and, being in the privacy of his office, he gives rein to his discomfort. He allows his penetrating brown eyes to mist over behind his gold-rimmed glasses and his high, intelligent forehead to knit into a frown. He compresses his mouth into a severe line and in the process his jaw quivers with unfamiliar tension. All of a sudden a certain crudity or want of refinement returns to his features, so that neither his immaculate Savile Row suit nor his expensive accoutrements proved sufficient to disguise his humble origins.

He knows deep down he is going to lose Lulu, no matter what he does. She had told him as much. But he still refuses to reconcile himself to that prospect. She remains the only pleasant thing that has happened to him through a cocktail party. That was more than five years back, when he was forty-five, and nothing quite as pleasant has happened to him since.

The remembered thrill of that meeting still quickens his blood. He had just acquired his first bank and had hosted a small cocktail reception at a leading hotel for the lawyers, accountants, merchant bankers and others involved in the deal. At the end of the function, Lulu had come up to him with a leather folio containing the bill.

Perhaps he had been unduly elated by his acquisition or perhaps he had a few too many to drink, but the sight of Lulu simply stopped him in his tracks. She must have been fresh out of school for she could be no more than twenty. Her face, then as now, had been at once childlike in its innocence and mysterious with oriental complexities. Her eyes had a bright, trusting quality, her nose was dainty and her mouth, pleasingly large against the other features of her face, hinted at unawakened passion. Her long silky hair, black as a raven's sheen, swung sensually against her

crimson Chinese long gown. Although the gown was no more than a uniform for hotel staff, on her it had looked provocative, for it hugged the agreeable contours of her body and revealed two tantalizing slivers of thigh between its tall side slits. She had looked so unspoilt, so vulnerable, so in need of protection, that his bowels had churned and he had felt a surge of libido inappropriate for his years.

"I hope everything has been satisfactory, Sir," Lulu had said in a cheerful voice, as a prelude to presenting the bill. At the same time she had flashed a smile that melted into dimples on her cheeks.

He had peered at the identification tag pinned on her gown, noting that it read: "Lulu. Trainee. Customer Relations." He had never felt so powerful and irresistible as he did then. So, waving aside the proffered folio, he had declared: "Lulu, you're being wasted. Have dinner with me in Paris next Saturday and I'll give you the world."



"Oh, Mr. Woo, you are teasing me! Why would an important man like you want to have dinner with somebody like me? I must seem a mere child to you because I'm no older than some of your children."

"Do you know my children?"

"No, but I've seen them in the hotel restaurants."

"I'll introduce you to them one day. I have a great interest in the young. After all, the future belongs to them. Hence my interest in you. The bit about giving you the world may be a slight exaggeration, though Paris in springtime is close to being the world. And I am dead serious about dinner."

"How am I to get to Paris? I have never even been out of Hong Kong!"

"Why don't you just say 'yes' and see what happens?"

"Do you always extend such extraordinary invitations?"

"No, because you're the very first to deserve one."

"I can't believe that! But it sounds so fantastic that I must find out what happens next. So all right, let's have dinner in Paris."

By noon the following day he had arranged for airline tickets, hotel reservation vouchers and a bouquet of roses to be delivered to Lulu and that was how their relationship began.

After three days of the magic of Paris their separate suites had become superfluous. He had meant to win her in the same way he would acquire a hotel chain or order a new supertanker, but a strange emotion that went beyond the mere joy of possession soon invaded his person. An arrangement had been swiftly arrived at. He would provide for Lulu's financial security and creature comforts in return for her favours. The arrangement could last for as long as both parties wanted it and it would be kept perfectly private and discreet. If it were to end, then it would be in a civilised manner, without recriminations and unreasonable demands.

Since all that had already been foreseen and agreed to, why should he now feel that strange ache inside, that unbearable sense of impending loss?

His thoughts drift between Lulu and his wife. There simply is no comparison. His wife is an old-fashioned woman, barely literate, someone selected for him by his father. She hardly fits into the circles in which he now moves. But she has been a marvellous mother to his children and from the very beginning she had accepted all his transgressions without complaint, as if his status as husband gave him an unqualified right to behave as he chose.

Lulu, on the other hand, is full of life and adventure. She stirs something in his blood. He looks forward to their regular Friday evenings together like a child waiting for a weekend treat. Oftentimes he would make a terrible tangle of his business schedule just to steal an hour or two with her. In his heart of hearts he knows that the relationship has no future and can only result in unhappiness for both. And yet, future pain seems so abstract compared with present pleasure. In another age the solution would be simple; he would take Lulu as his concubine.

But the British had closed off that possibility by outlawing that perfectly sensible institution. Damn their smugness and their missionary zeal! Why do they have to foist their prejudices on others? A man has diverse needs. How can a solitary

woman satisfy all of them? All the ancient cultures used to recognise this. The Hindoos used to think nothing of having one woman to bear children, another to discourse on philosophy and a third to provide the delights of song. The Moslems have long been used to multiple wives and the Chinese their concubines. But everywhere they went the British had to spread their obsession with monogamy like a contagion!

K. B. straightens his tie and makes his way to Lulu's reception. During the short walk from his office he recalls the discussion he had with Lulu a few weeks ago, during one of their assignations.

"You have been so good to me, darling," Lulu had said. "You have been the soul of generosity. How can I ever repay your kindness?"

"By loving me. Or at least by pretending to love me," he had replied with a teasing chuckle.

"I do care for you a lot. You must know that. We've had some wonderful times together. I've seen so much of the world going around with you, posing as your Executive Assistant! But I'm not getting any younger. A time has to come when a girl has to think about her future."

"Your future is quite secure. I've already arranged for money to be set aside for you."

"It's not just about money, K. B. It's about career and making something of myself. It's about my own place in society. I don't want to have to sneak around all the time to avoid being seen together. It's about marriage and raising a family."

"But we agreed at the outset that there would be no question of marriage. It's not that I don't want to marry you but I can't. My wife has been a good wife and mother and she has shared all my ups and downs without a single harsh word. I cannot abandon her."

"I am not asking you to abandon her. But I want something better than just spending every Friday evening with you."

"I have always tried my best to spend more time with you. We go on trips and the rest of the time you're always free to do whatever you want. You can see your own friends, play mah-jong, go shopping or whatever."

"That's part of the trouble. My friends all have regular jobs and are getting married. They are beginning to think there is something wrong with me because I don't work and I don't go out with young men."

"If you want something to occupy your time I can set up a small business for you to run."

"That is very kind of you but I think our time is up, K. B. You've taught me many things. You've taught me that in life, as in business, there is a time for fighting and a time for letting go. You have also taught me that a person should always honour a contract even if it is against his interests to do so, because if he does not, nobody will ever trust him again. Well, we have a contract. We agreed to part in a civilised manner when the time came. So why don't we do so and part as friends?"

"I wish I had not taught you so many damn things. But I'm glad you haven't learnt the wrong things. Most women would become greedy and devious in a situation like this. Talking things over so calmly is to your credit. You're right, of course, about us. You're young and you have your whole life ahead of you. I am just trying to be selfish. What are your plans afterwards?"

"Well, I thought I might start a boutique. I have enough money put aside. You've spoilt me exposing me to Paris fashions."

"Why don't you let me do that for you, as a parting gift. Fit it out and stock it up any way you want and send me the bill. When it is ready for business we can say good-bye."

"You are very sweet and understanding. Thank you, darling."

As K. B. approaches the venue for the party, he feels the taste of ashes in his mouth. The boutique is ready and after the party a relationship that had brought him so much joy will have to end. He nevertheless puts on his best cocktail party expression and walks in briskly.

After he has been formally greeted by Lulu, he surveys the room and his heart sinks. Apart from some popular personages from the entertainment world there is hardly a familiar face to be seen. The whole room seems filled with people only half his age. He circles the room disconsolately with his drink, in the best traditions of the cocktail circuit.

Suddenly he spots Wilson Chang, a real estate magnate of his own generation, standing alone in a corner. He manoeuvres himself in that direction and greets Chang warmly.

"What are you doing here, K. B.?" Chang asks. "This isn't your kind of scene."

"Lulu and my children are close friends," K. B. replies without hesitation. "I'm supposed to meet them here before going off to dinner. What about you? You're not hunting for a Paris gown for some sweet young thing, are you? It has been almost three years since your wife passed away, hasn't it? It's not healthy for a man to live alone, you know."

K. B. winks and gives Chang a gentle dig with his elbow.

Chang laughs good-naturedly. He leans over and lowers his voice. "I'll let you into a secret, K. B. Lulu and I are planning to get married. We've been seeing each other every Wednesday night for the last two years. I know she's young enough to be my daughter but what the hell! You've always held that the only women worth getting involved with are those young enough to be your daughter! So I'm just following your advice. But please keep the news under your hat till it is announced."

K. B. blanches. "Congratulations!" he exclaims, in as enthusiastic a voice as he can muster. As he does so the ache inside him sharpens suddenly into pain. He excuses himself after a few more pleasantries on the pretext that he has seen someone he has to talk to. He escapes the reception through a side door. He fears losing his self-control if he had to bid Lulu a formal farewell.

As he makes his way to his next engagement, he digests the implications of Chang's news with a slow brew of jealousy and outrage. But in spite of his inner

turmoil, he sees also the irony in the situation. Lulu had merely seized the initiative and exercised that entrepreneurial spirit that successful businessmen like himself are forever pontificating about to the young. One can hardly complain when one is taken at one's word, he observes wryly. Well, one lives and learns, and what he has just learned is that there is no limit to the usefulness of cocktail parties.

The Cocktail Party won the first prize in a short story competition organised by the British Council and the University of Hong Kong. It has since appeared in **The Peak** magazine in Hong Kong, and broadcast by **BBC Radio 4** in Britain and **Radio Netherlands** in Holland. It has been featured in the **Literary Companion to Southeast Asia** published by **In Print Publishing** in Britain and anthologised in **City Voices: Contemporary Hong Kong Writing in English** published by the **Hong Kong University Press**.