

A change is yet to come

The wordless, hypnotic beat of the trance music pulsated throughout the stuffy club. The smell of sweat and alcohol mixed with a hint of tobacco from people who went out onto the terrace to smoke hung in the air and onto everybody's clothing. Or topless bodies. Angel was Shanghai's most popular LGBT club night, attracting large crowds of predominantly gay men who wanted a carefree, fun-fuelled weekend.

Alex Chang squeezed his way through the throng of men to get back to his friends in the far corner of the club. Someone grabbed his ass cheek as he wove his way in and out, which gave him heart palpitations for a second as he foolishly had his card holder in his back pocket. He tried to turn round to see who had basically just sexually harassed him but it wasn't obvious or easy to see. He was partial to the attention he often received but not when he didn't invite complete strangers to try and feel him up.

He eventually made it back to the booth where his friends were. There was self-proclaimed fag hag Aisha, a Shanghai native raised in Australia with a penchant for the high life who despite preferring guys was partial to the odd woman sometimes too, Laila the small and sweet-natured tomboyish lesbian from Beijing, and the often shy and unassuming Ben who was originally from a southwestern Chinese town but had lived in the big city for some years now. Then there was tall, dark and slim Hongkonger Ricky, with whom Ben had a mutual spark which had yet to be ignited properly, and Xing Xing - once a teenage escapee from a tiny, apparently very backward central Chinese village but now lived their best life as an extravagant, flamboyant gender fluid person.

Alex was British-born Chinese, who after a few years teaching English to Chinese students in London then moved to Shanghai eight months ago to now teach English to Chinese children. It was a slight change of direction and a big change of scenery, but it was an ever popular occupation for many expats. He also gave private piano lessons,

making use of the many years he spent practically being forced to learn by his strict, aspirational Chinese parents.

“You’re back!” said Ricky. “We thought you’d got lost... or snapped up!” He winked.

“Of course not!” Alex laughed and blushed slightly.

“Drink up, Alex, we’re moving on soon!” Aisha yelled to be heard above the throbbing noise.

They entered Paulaner, the German bar in the affluent shopping, food and entertainment destination Xintiandi. It was worlds apart from the loud and sweaty Angel. Alex immediately spotted Sebastien sat at a large round table with a man and woman. Sebastien turned to look at him and they exchanged big smiles. Alex had goosebumps and butterflies, even though he’d known Sebastien a few months already. He was tall, broad-shouldered and French, so who could blame him or anyone?

“Hey!” Sebastien called cheerily as they approached, barely taking his eyes off Alex and only glancing at his friends as they came over and greeted him too. “You made it! I thought you might have all got carried away at Angel,” he chuckled.

“Hi,” Alex said, locking eyes with Sebastien and still smiling at him. “No, it was getting a bit too busy there, really.”

Sebastien introduced them to his friends, a German couple he’d known for years since they’d all studied law at university, who were travelling through Asia and had stopped by Shanghai on the Chinese leg of their tour to meet him. Sebastien was now a successful lawyer for expats in the city, having lived and worked there for five years.

As the nine of them chatted away, Alex and Sebastien got closer as the alcohol lowered their inhibitions. They weren’t together but, like Ben and Ricky, there was an obvious attraction. Unlike them though, they weren’t as nervous to flirt more often. They

exchanged more small talk between them while Alex's friends listened to the tales of Sebastien's friends' travels so far. Alex felt a little lightheaded with happiness as the bare skin of his arm brushed against Sebastien's and they hardly broke eye contact with each other.

"Oh, guys, come on! Just kiss already!" Aisha hollered, and everyone laughed. Alex and Sebastien's cheeks turned a little pink as they giggled.

"Kiss, kiss, kiss!" Xing Xing teased excitedly.

They leant in towards each other.

"Let's not stare, guys!" Laila said to them, sensing the pressure they were piling on them.

"That woman over there is having a good stare though..." Ben pointed out. They all jerked round to look. Alex froze as he locked eyes with her. It was Lily from school.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Alex breathed.

"What's wrong?" Sebastien asked, gently squeezing and caressing his hand.

Alex looked away and told them to do the same. "Stop looking at her! She's my colleague at work!" Her face was truly a picture. She looked almost horrified, eyes wide, mouth slightly agape. Had she never seen a gay guy before? Alex forced a little smile at her but she stared back stony-faced so his smile vanished immediately. He had never discussed his sexuality or private life with colleagues, even though many – including Lily – were extremely nosy. He was on professionally friendly terms with them but that was it. He found most of them to be boring as fuck, to be quite honest.

"What's her problem?" Ricky hissed.

"Who knows," Alex replied, looking back from the corner of his eye. She was still staring back, but her eyes finally moved away this time. She turned to a guy who Alex assumed was her boyfriend she constantly babbled on about and said something to him.

He looked across as well before they both got up to leave. She shot him another glance as she walked out.

Alex didn't know what to think. He wasn't ashamed but he felt judged and uncomfortable. "I'm guessing you don't want to kiss now then..." Sebastien asked him quietly.

"Sorry," is all Alex could say apologetically, his head bowed and not looking up at him or his friends. The vibe had been killed.

On Monday morning, Alex's fears were realised. As he opened his locker, a piece of paper fell out. He picked it up and his heart immediately started racing and blood began to boil as he read it:

“屁精!” (ass fairy/sissy)

He looked around, even though he knew he was alone. Who wrote it? He didn't recognise the handwriting. Was it Lily? She had definitely given him a knowing, funny - perhaps even dirty - look at Paulaner's. Had she told others and someone else had written it? He had seen her writing before and her characters were smaller and more cursive. These two characters had been written in a very standard and clear way.

Alex gritted his teeth angrily and slammed his locker door shut. He stormed off to Principal Lu's office, his veiny hands from years of piano playing shaking as he clenched them into fists, crumpling the note as he did. As he approached his door, Principal Lu was just coming out. "Ah, Mr Chang! I was just coming to find you," he said. He looked very stern. He opened his door and gestured Alex to go in.

As soon as the door was shut, Alex spun round. "And I was coming to you to talk about this!" He shoved the paper into Principal Lu's hand before he had a chance to talk first.

Principal Lu looked a little flustered, his round face flushing pink as he opened the note, smoothed it out a little and read it. He then looked up, peering over his rimless rectangular glasses at Alex.

"Well? What are you going to do about this?" Alex demanded, trying his best to keep his tone and volume even.

"Please sit, Mr Chang," Principal Lu requested, sitting in his chair. He looked to be thinking hard about to say.

Alex reluctantly obliged.

"Mr Chang, while this note presents a problem, I must tell you of the bigger problem the accusation in the note presents," he started carefully. His expression was grave but his voice was calm.

"YOU WHAT?" Alex seethed.

"Some colleagues have voiced concerns that your, er, lifestyle and preferences could conflict with the children's interests, and we don't want parents to complain as well," he continued. He paused to allow Alex to process it all.

Alex felt like half his world was crashing down around him and that his own feeling of being victimised was completely irrelevant. "Who has spoken to you?" He asked through his teeth.

"I can't disclose that, unfortunately. But in light of the concerns, I think it's best to let you go," he finished. There was no emotion from him at all.

"Is this a joke?" Alex raised his voice even more, his tanned face reddening with fury, confusion and upset.

“Unfortunately not,” Principal said seriously, shaking his head. “We will of course pay you for up until last Friday.”

“This is UNBELIEVABLE!” He was now stood up and shouting. “Because of whatever rubbish some busybody colleagues have told you and because *you* think parents will object to me, and without thinking how HORRIBLE this is and how it makes *me* feel, AND without addressing this DISGUSTING note, you’re firing me?!”

“Mr Chang, please try and calm down,” Principal Lu was still nonchalant about it all but was taken aback at Alex’s rant, as if he never expected him to be angry. “I can understand why this might be upsetting, but the protection of the children is our upmost priority.”

“Protection from what? And what about your employees’ wellbeing? And of course you DON’T understand! How DARE you!”

He ignored that part. “And in regards to the note... unless you know who wrote it, there is nothing I can do, sorry.” He seemed completely disinterested in and unbothered by the note, which only angered Alex further.

“There’s CCTV in this school. You can look back and see who put it in my locker?” He suggested.

“We could, but...” Principal Lu pondered.

“YOU WILL!” Alex said assertively, clenching his jaw and slamming his hand on the desk, making Principal Lu wheel his chair back slightly in surprise and his small eyes widen.

He had absolutely no regrets about the way he spoke to Principal Lu. The idea of respect and reverence towards your elders and those senior to you at work was extremely important in Chinese culture and the majority of people did show obedience and subordination no matter what. But being a Westernised Chinese person Alex was not

afraid to stand up for himself and speak his mind - he just thankfully never had to like this before.

“Mr Chang, if you don’t calm down and leave, I will have to call the police,” Principal Lu threatened, standing up as well and getting more defensive. He eyed Alex’s athletic, five-foot-ten frame up and down, and looked a little apprehensive.

Alex paused. The police getting involved wouldn’t help him at all, but then he thought back to Sebastien. “And I will call my lawyer and will sue this school for unfair, discriminatory dismissal!” He shot back.

“But there is no law against that here in China...” Principal Lu replied matter-of-factly. He almost looked a little smug as he said it.

Alex hesitated again. Then he stared into Principal Lu’s slightly scared eyes. “That won’t stop me trying,” he promised him. He snatched the piece of paper from the table and marched off. He had had a blast living in China for the past eight months and although he was seen a foreigner by some, he had never felt more foreign until now. As he left the school it dawned on him that things needed to change and progress for all LGBT people here. And he was determined to do just that.