

Short Story

Sweetwise

By Ivy Ngeow

"NO NEED TO HURRY," SAID MR Banks, "just fit it in whenever you can!" He laughed good-naturedly as he flopped into Mandy's mouse pad a cake of stapled paper in all sizes, states and colours. Scribbled with cancellations and inserts all over those pieces of paper were Mr Banks' journal jottings, saved from half a year's sabbatical leave in France, where he was doing research for his PhD in, what Mandy thought, had something to do with agriculture or petroleum or whatever.

Mandy was not exactly hired for

frontline smartness in appearance, even though she was at the reception desk answering telephones all day in the glassy office at Holborn.

She was not hired for any kind of smartness in fact. She was not a girl you would have bring coffee and cake into the boardroom for the panel of clients and consultants. She was a girl to be heard and not seen.

The other manager who interviewed her only thought "no". But Mr Banks said that she got the interview over the phone because of her voice. Like warm caramel sauce, he said, to

which his colleague snorted. Mr Banks could not think how a girl with such a pretty voice and pink short nails could not do her job well.

And he was right. People who telephoned immediately enjoyed her company, and asked for her name straightaway. She was charming and girlish, without the pretend huskiness and private education that other telephonists seemed to adopt.

Mandy was flirted with and cajoled, until they actually met her.

She was always a big girl. Or rather, a little big girl. She was so fat

that her mother made all her tent-like garments that were technically dresses, but somehow the term "dresses" does not spring to mind. She appeared to be a carelessly wrapped dumpling, or possibly a tea bag of the pyramidal variant.

Mandy rolled around the office like a plum over a lap. And yet Mr Banks only thought, such little feet in ballet slippers, such small hands, small teeth. Such incredible sweetness in a girl. She was a delight to behold, a living pudding, enjoying life. To Mr Banks, Mandy was tidy and neat, as neatness was only expressed in the extremities of form. Details, if you like. Hands, feet and teeth.

Speech is all in the teeth, Mr Banks convinced his sniggering colleagues whenever they imitated her profoundly clear voice, breathy when clients were bothered, feisty when they were cold. People rang just to speak to her.

Mr Banks was fascinated by good speech. He himself had false teeth. The antithesis of speech was teeth. The very words even sounded the same.

Speech, accents, teeth can change corporate history, can condemn one to a fate of eternal squalor. People with yellowed overlapping teeth never made it. How could they appear in the company brochure smiling? Which is why they always appeared glum.

There is nothing wrong with false teeth if they were worn all the time to look real. And no one knew anyway, he thought. But of course they did, the whole office did. He slid his dentures around when opening filing cabinets. He would detach them, pivot and swing them in and out of his jawline in a sexual action. Everyone noticed, but no one dared comment.

"Eating in again, are we?" Mr Banks said, a statement rather a question. "Such a nice day too." He dragged a moth-coloured coat from the cloaks cupboard.

"Y-yes," Mandy muttered as mayonnaise-drenched lettuce leaves spluttered onto the open pages of *Girl About Town*. "Save a bit of money," she added in apologetic stupor. Mr Banks turned and walked out, nodding sympathetically with pursed lips. He noticed that Mandy never bought lunch or magazines. She only ate the giant sandwiches her mother packed, and read only free magazines given out at the tube station or bits of stationery brochures.

"Would you like to make some extra money?" Another Banks statement rather than a question popped out like a line from a radio programme. "I'll pay ya. Three pounds a page," he quickly added.

Mandy said nothing. She stared at her pert empty hands.



"Jeanne dormant dans un Fauteuil" by Henri Manguin, 1917.

"Would you like that? I mean, no hurry. Type it outside work. Just a 30,000-word research." "Well ... I'm not very fast," Mandy replied in her treacly voice.

"Nonsense!" Mr Banks scoffed, dentures slinking. "I've seen your work! Not a single typo either."

Mandy giggled modestly, only it came out like a hysterical lawn sprinkler. "I can't refuse, can I?" She gurgled.

The offer of extra income gave Mandy a sense of direction. She looked forward to going home every night to type, her mother in the back ironing, her father in front watching telly. Her computer was old. It once belonged to her brother who was an engineer in the city, but at least it had been installed with Win95 and could do a word count.

"Don't stay up too late!" chimed her father waving the remote control around like a magic wand. Four thousand words later, and Mandy had made all of forty-five quid. It hardly seemed like worth the bother, but Mandy was not counting. Mr Banks cooed and blubbered over her work. He'd expected to do the corrections himself but there were none. She was happy to re-type some edited or re-written bits.

Mr Banks had put so much faith in her work, her voice, that a new direction in her life had appeared. No longer was Mandy the self-conscious hippopotamus in ballet slippers. She was even known to be occasionally persuaded to the odd after-office hours drinks session at the local, but only for one tiddle-wink, as she had to push off and type on. The truth was, and she admitted it from the beginning, she wasn't a fast nor consistent typist.

Accurate, perhaps, but not fast.

As she delivered a new batch of razor-edged A4 pages onto the open palms of Banks, he said: "Lovely!" And Mandy went pink as her nails, looking away in girlish modesty, but he quickly added before the girlish moment became too long: "You know, Mandy, I was wondering if you would like to have lunch with me today."

It was his usual way of asking by stating, adding courteous fripperies like: "Oh I know you like eating in, and you've probably brought lunch, but there's a new French creperie and ..." he blathered on.

"A crappery ..." murmured a foggy Mandy, eyes drifting towards the fluorescent tubes in the asbestos ceiling. All she thought was, she couldn't; her mother would get very cross with her for wasting the gigantic sandwiches salted with her mother's perspiration in their dingy basement flat; her father finding out and saying: "Wot? Fwom werk? Who?", but all she said was: "Yes, I'd love to have lunch with you, Mr Banks, thank you. Is there something wrong with the manuscript?" she inquired not innocently.

Banks threw his head back, exposing the wire halter of his dentures which clocked heartily as he laughed.

"Rubbish!" he said. "I just fancied lunch, that's all!"

Opera music, dim lighting and exotic pancakes floated around the bulging eyes of Mandy as she salivated in her tent-dress.

She restrained her fingers from straying past the little round table, which resembled a flattened Mandy, whilst wiping impending pendula of saliva with the linen serviette.

"I think your work is exceptional, Mandy," said Banks, crunching away. "Frankly I don't know how I can reward you."

"Oh it's nothing. I'm happy to do it," said Mandy, tearing the pancakes apart into mean shreds then devouring the shreds in a lupine manner.

"You have -" he began.

"I have -" she stopped.

"Never mind," he stopped, but only to chew.

"What?" said Mandy fearfully, thinking it was a comment on her weight.

"You have beautiful teeth," Mandy dropped her cutlery. No one had said that to her before, and what did it matter if he had false teeth which slithered like bad grammar. So what if he wore yellow sleeveless V-neck jumpers every day of the year and smelt of damp bath mats? He thought she had beautiful teeth! And worked exceptionally well. It was enough, wasn't it? All those pathetic snogs outside Wimpy's with the boys at school. Pah! Amateurs. They knew nothing. They never saw the real Mandy.

Within the advent of the 9,000th word, Mandy prayed and thanked God for helping her meet a fine man. A true gentleman.

A man who knew his restaurants and how to be nice to a girl.

They had gone to the cinema twice and had dinner once, clandestinely. Mandy had to tell her parents it was an office function each time (on all three occasions) and everyone was required to attend. They never found out about lunch as she ended up eating the sandwiches as well as having two-course lunches with Mr Banks, now known as Carlo outside office hours. It's a lovely name, thought Mandy. Carlo Banks.

Soon, when her parents became suspicious of the evening office functions, she had to have dinner twice, one with her Mr Banks and later that evening with her parents. Mandy's life became increasingly complicated and deceptive almost like she was having an affair; only, she just consumed and never consummated it. Like self-raising flour, her multifold increase in size was proof of the pudding of love.

Mr Banks, in turn also ended up with excess luggage from the endless dates with his typist, to be kept a secret from the rest of the office and his wife. While the chocolates that Mandy gave him were consumed in the privacy of his office top drawer, the candied jellies from Banks to Mandy she consumed on the spot to avoid detection at home. Also, she



begrudged sharing them with the other girls in reception.

Soon it became difficult to see each other at lunch. It had become cumbersome and painful for her to heave her weight around. When before she was a beach ball, she was now an Atlas globe resting on little claws. She could no longer turn her head without turning her whole body. The tent-dresses had to have elastic put in. Banks, meanwhile, missed his half-pints with the other office chappies, and so the lunch dates became more infrequent.

And so little presents here and there kept them both going, at least until the 25,000th word mark. Boxes of truffles fuelled Mandy's vision of candied love and packets of clotted cream fudge from Banks kept his manuscript coming in. Only 5,000 words more, he thought, straining uncomfortably in his polyester trousers whose nondescript brown buttons had been surreptitiously moved three times making him not so nondescript.

The girl was obviously besotted, he thought, and he hadn't even mentioned his wife. He pictured the Mrs in their garden moving gnomes as she fancied, and marinating duck meat later.

Oh well, he shrugged. Could Mandy want anything serious from him? For a start, he lived in Reading. The thought of prolonging the bizarre two-courses plus coffee relationship seemed insane. True, she had beautiful teeth, but who's to say they weren't falling out from eating all those lollies? Banks also noticed that she was so hideously fat she often called a cab from the office to the tube station.

Recently at the Creperie where they first lunched, they had coffee and cake, and he observed in the myriads of mirrored surfaces how appalling they both looked, especially Mandy. His face looked like a badly-baked pizza, and there was sweat pouring out of his forehead, nostrils, earlobes. Sweat!

Mandy, on the other hand, had the radiance of sweet and sour pork, a kind of radioactive pink, whilst her eyes had an MSG glaze to them. It was, of course, the glaze of adoration and respect, but by then Banks was feeling a certain cold sweat pang usually associated with food poisoning.

Those sprightly little hands which typed his research had lost their cuteness, looking sallow and cauliflower-like in texture - not that he had seen much cauliflower these calorie-filled days. The ballet slipped feet he sugar-dusted with compliment after compliment, had turned dowdy and misshapen, but then Mandy couldn't see them herself anyway, so what was the point of getting her new clogs.

Three seasons came and left, silently sprinkling with angel dust the plain sponge cake of thesis typing. The last batch of an oven-fresh thousand words were handed over. A relieved and thoroughly pleased Banks said thank you and that will be all.

Doggedly, Mandy waited for more, even begged, but not a look, not a word. The last piece of the pudding had been had, and the payment had swallowed the proof whole. The giant home-made sandwiches seemed to cut it deeply, strangely. ■