

# F I C T I O N

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## SHOE DOGS

*by Marc Foster*

From the back seat of a mud-layered SUV, Dale Moretti spotted a line of trucks parked end-to-end along the access road to Fu Yin Shoe Factory. Bare-chested men in woven sandals crouched next to the vehicles smoking cigarettes, swatting mosquitoes, and chewing red-tinted betel nuts. In the shade of a locust tree, a group played mah jong while two Public Security officers looked on, their machine guns tilted at the ground.

“Any idea what this is about, Shirl?” Dale asked. He leaned forward to unglue his polo shirt from the small of his back. There was no sign of Tucker, the ex-mercenary who handled logistics for them.

“I am not too sure about the meaning,” Shirley Wang said, turning to face her client. Shirley, née Zhiping, worked for Bright Star, the import-export company.

*He'd drunk a lot of maotai wine in a lot of scummy restaurants, but it was going to pay off, because in the end what mattered were relationships, not industry diagrams or any of that other b.s. you learned in books.*

Since Dai Lin, where they had witnessed an old man being run over by a cement truck, Dale had been clutching his Blackberry like a sacred relic. Now he checked his In-box, even though it was too early for his daughter to be sending e-mails from Boston. Sophie had broken a leg in a bike accident less than a week before, and was still on pain-killers. Dale had looked at flights to Boston, but was afraid of going Stateside when his pipeline was in such a shambles. His boss, Laura, needed two million pairs of “Chuck T.” sneakers for the fall. If he missed the Ningbo freighter on July 15 that meant air freight, and air freight meant Laura was going to burn him at the stake. With an alimony check due the first of every month, Dale couldn't just tell her to shove it.

Their driver, Jinsong “Jimmy” Lai, stopped before a pair of bicycle-powered carts. Dale touched down on red earth. He was a compact man who walked with the forward-leaning confidence of an ex-halfback, his hairy forearms cocked ahead as if warding off tackles. Shirley emerged carrying a Bible with Post-Its in pastel shades peaking from the top. Now their way was blocked by a cart loaded with *aiguo cai*, “love-the-country-vegetable,” a cabbage Dale had seen all over China. Shoving past, Dale and Shirley broke through within a few feet of the front gate, which was secured by a lock of Hollywood dimensions. A cardboard placard scrawled in black felt pen hung lopsided by a length of twine.

“What's it say, Shirley?”

“‘Factory closed because of workers meeting.’ I don't know about this.”

Normally Tucker would be waiting for them next to his two-cycle BMW outside whatever factory they had chosen for a meet-up. Now Dale wondered if he'd had an accident, or whether Tucker's web of shadowy associates had caught up with him. After Dale relocated to Hong Kong, he'd begun hiring Tucker regularly – a cross between Che Guevara and Crocodile Dundee. Tucker had spent four years fighting communists in the Philippines. “Malaria, man, that was tough,” Tucker told Dale one night over a few beers. “Two months in a tent in Luzon? Never do that again.”



Tucker reported to Dale, and they both reported to Laura Kandel, daughter of Sherm, the owner. Before Laura, Dale had called the shots, but no longer. Dale's family had once owned their own shoe company, Agawam, but it had been sold to J. Phelps following the death of Dale's father. Given that he had been inside shoe factories since before he could walk, it rankled that he was now working for a novice like Laura. Even so, he retained a keen sense of loyalty to Sherm, who had treated him with fatherly kindness after the acquisition.

A familiar-looking woman approached them on the other side of the fence. Alice something. Chen. Cheng. Dale had shared a beer at one of the Fu Yin banquets, but she had declined a second pour. "Hey, hey, Alice," he said. He stuck a hand through the gate.

"Hello, Mister Dale," Alice said, ignoring the hand. "Hello, Ms. Shirley."

The two women began firing away in Chinese. Alice made chopping motions with one hand. On this side of the gate, Shirley absorbed Alice's points with light taps on her Bible. In response to Alice's attacks she kept up a steady monotone: "eh, eh, eh."

Some of the Mandarin Dale could understand – he had been working with audio recordings on his iPod, and kept a copy of *Modern Chinese* on his night stand in Hong Kong—but most of the words were fool's gold in a torrent. Now 'Tuh-koh' was being sprinkled into the conversation.

"What's she saying about Tucker?" Dale asked.

Shirley explained that Tucker was under a kind of house arrest. He had insulted the Fu Yin Production Chief, and was being detained inside the factory by members of the production team. The entire group refused to work until Tucker apologized. Fu Yin's top managers were also very angry.

Dale, grasping the fence, looked down at his hand-stitched loafers. "Beautiful. That's just beautiful."

Alice broke in, and Shirley translated that Tucker had called the workers and the bosses bad names: lazy, stupid—Alice made a sharp chopping motion again. Shirley added, "oh, I see, worse than that."

Behind Alice, the factory building warped and oozed in the heat. Dale's shoes were up there in half-completed baskets next to the sewing machines. The brocade stitching, he imagined, was done; the vamps were in piles waiting for the next step in the process. He could practically smell the fumes, like burnt sugar, from the vulcanizing ovens. He only needed to get them out of here and on that freighter, and his pipeline would be back on track. Everything would be on track.

"I told him to go easy. I did tell him that," Dale said.

"Of course," Shirley said.

No Soldier of Fortune BS, Dale had told Tucker over ramen noodles one evening. Were they clear on this? Not clear enough, evidently.

Now Dale kicked the fence so hard his loafer got stuck in between two of the steel bars. When he had yanked the shoe free, the workers were all staring at him.

"Where is Bai?" Dale asked Shirley.

Milton Bai was General Manager of Fu Yin. They'd had their disagreements, he and Bai, but at a personal level they were rock solid. In August, Bai's daughter Lingmei was going to turn fifteen, the same age as Sophie. Dale and his daughter had picked up a lilac cashmere sweater in Boston—Sophie wanted to present it in person, but Dale hadn't been ready. During a lull at tonight's banquet, Dale would give the sweater to Bai.

Shirley translated that Mr. Bai was not expected to return from a trip to Jiangsu Province until after ten. Mr. Qin, the Assistant Manager, was also not in Fu Yin. Hearing that Bai was not returning until late, Dale put an “X” on the banquet and asked about the production manager, what was his name? Han. Lan. All they needed was to sit down and talk through the issues with Lan, and everything would be fine. Behind him a crowd of truckers and pedicart drivers had gathered, some pointing fingers, some laughing. Well, they could laugh. Dale wasn’t giving up so easily.

“Wait a minute.” Shirley turned back to Dale. “She says the answer is no.”

“What do you mean ‘no’?” Dale asked.

“They need to continue some internal discussions, and after that maybe they can hold a meeting.”

“Tell her I want to go inside the plant and talk to Tucker. Geneva Convention. Whatever. Make something up.”

Shirley said she didn’t think Alice would agree to this.

“Will you please do it anyway? Just do it?”

The two women resumed their exchange. Dale tore his shirt out of his trousers, wiped his face, and thought of his girlfriend Margot Lai sitting in her office at the English-language magazine *New Century* in Kowloon. An hour from now she would take the Tube home. If he was there he and Margot would play tennis, see a movie, and end up at her place for a bottle of wine. Now everything was getting screwed up. It would be a miracle if he got back to Hong Kong by the end of the month.

“O.K., this is very surprising,” Shirley said, matter-of-factly. Evidently Alice was going to allow Dale to speak to Tucker for one hour only. That was her best offer. “I think you should accept.”

“That’s fantastic,” Dale said. He smiled at Alice through the fence. “That’s just great. Thanks a million.”

Following Alice across a courtyard and up an exterior cement staircase, he paused to catch his breath on the third floor. Down at the front gate disappointed workers were breaking up into threes and fours. A security guard yelled through a megaphone—distorted Chinese ricocheted against the hard surfaces of the factory complex. Suddenly Dale felt isolated from the Land Cruiser, with its bottled water, mixed nuts, and Sophie’s MP3 recordings. From this angle everything seemed less significant, the Land Cruiser especially, mud streaked on fenders, yellow-brown arcs on the windshield. He imagined himself being observed from a satellite, one among thousands of foreigners buying beach buckets, Elmo dolls, air mattresses, wind-up plastic spiders, disposable wristwatches, intergalactic battle cruisers, Christmas lights, menorahs, give-away cellular phones, Mickey Mouse phones, and yes, shoes.

“Mr. Dale,” Alice said, frowning.

“Yes? Sorry, coming.”

They passed through double doors into a vast room where two hundred idle sewing machines stood in a dozen rows. Cutting across one row, he searched for his Chuck T.’s., but found only Missy Runners. Two rows up it was Cut-Backs, the kind of canvas-topped model without a heel worn on a lazy trip to the Dairy Queen. Where were his Chuck T.’s? Four days ago Lan, the Production Manager, had told him they were work-in-process. Maybe there was a problem up the line. Maybe they hadn’t even started working on his



shoes. Who knew?

In the hallway Alice jingled her keys in front of a black metal door with the number “17” on it. She allowed Dale to enter a twenty-by-twenty room with bare walls, a 60-watt bulb, a ceiling fan, and a ventilation window not much bigger than a shoe box. Tucker sat behind a table, reading a Chinese-language newspaper and chewing on his mustache.

The lock clanked behind Dale.

“How come you’re late?” Tucker asked. His bush hat slouched on the table next to a pink Thermos with a floral pattern.

“Don’t hassle me about being late.

“You came through Lu Sheng. Then what? You cut north?”

“Jimmy was navigating. Whatever. I know we went through Lu Sheng.”

“I told him to cut north at Bao Xin.”

“He probably did.”

“No, he didn’t. He’s from Anhui. Entire province is full of fucking retards. I tell him stuff, poof, it goes in one ear and out the other.”

Dale took a handkerchief from his back pocket, wiped his face in swaths, and grabbed an empty chair.

“How’s the family, by the way. Everybody O.K.?” Tucker asked.

“My daughter wiped out on her bike and broke her leg. I should be there, not here. What else can I tell you?”

Tucker massaged his chin. “Yeah, well, I bet you want to know how I got us into this.”

“I was getting around to that.”

Lifting the lid off his teacup and taking a sip, a fringe of Tucker’s mustache drooped over the edge. He set the vessel down and slid it two inches to his left, leaving a wet streak. His dark eyes remained impassive, his jaw muscles relaxed. “Here it is. They insulted me. They insulted me and they insulted you. They called us “middle-tier.” I wasn’t going to take that.”

“I don’t care if they call us “bottom tier,” I just want the shoes.”

“Yeah, well, that’s not going to happen. Carl Levin from Wal-Mart wants five million pairs of Missy Runners at a dollar eighty, and Bai said yes.”

“No way,” Dale said, jiggling his knee.

“I shit you not. This happened on Sunday.”

Five million pairs were going to take two months to clear work-in-process. That meant end of July for his million, which meant air freight. “We’re paying him two ten. I don’t get it,” Dale said.

Tucker related how he had told Bai that Wal-Mart was going to chew him up and spit him out, but the old man wouldn’t listen. When Tucker said he wanted to keep talking, that he had room to negotiate, Bai said he needed to go to Jiangsu, and then had started in with the “middle tier” business. “It pissed me off. What can I say?”

“What did you tell him?”

“I said his family was full of ‘bad eggs.’”

“That’s some kind of major insult, right?” Dale asked. He jammed a piece of chewing gum accordion-style into his mouth and handed a stick to Tucker.

“Guy wants to be an asshole, I can be an asshole right back.”

“Look, Bai promised me in front of his entire company he would get my stuff done. It’s a ‘face’ thing.”

"You're becoming quite the China hand, but like I said, no way. You want to fire me, go ahead. Laura can screw herself."

Dale smacked the table with his right hand and pushed back his chair. "So what does this mean? You're going to sit here and starve to death?"

"I can last a long time on Oolong tea."

"That really helps me."

"You have your code, I have mine."

Heels to the wall, Dale took deep breaths. After he had retaken his seat, he leaned forward and began rubbing his eyes. "You're going to love this one. O.K.? So I called Laura Sunday night and told her about sandals. I'd just had a major breakthrough with Madame Mao - she had two new injection molders, she could give me two million pairs of the forty-fours by end of month. Big party after the meeting. Rong is there, Suzie Lao is there. Rong's dancing the Macarena. So you know what Laura says? You know what she says to me?"

"She doesn't need the sandals," Tucker said, fingering his mustache.

"Bingo. 'Forget the sandals,' she says."

"She wants cotton uppers."

"Cotton uppers, absolutely. Chuck T.'s, Missy Runners. All the chain-smoking, frizzy-haired women in pink sweatshirts are buying Missy Runners so they can have something to wear to the Laundromat. But hey, no problem, I'm supposed to see Bai anyway. Milton Bai is going to get me out of pipeline hell by shipping my Chuck T.'s on time. So Shirley and I drive for nine hours to get here, and they tell us you've gone mental. Now I'm asking straight-out. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Except for the sounds of the ceiling fan clank-clanking, and the intermittent blasts of truck horns, the room was silent. Tucker took another sip of tea. A floating leaf adhered to his front tooth. Checking his watch, Dale saw that it was approaching six o'clock. In a little under an hour Sophie would be awake, and he could call to see how she was doing. He'd cheer her up with an account of his recent misadventure at a one-wok cafeteria, where the proprietor's goat, Long Neck, had tried to devour his briefcase

Tucker popped a mini-bubble in his gum. "One thing I don't understand, is why you don't tell Laura to take a hike. Why don't you just up and quit?"

"Sherm needs me."

"He needs you so much, why is Laura calling the shots?"

"You have to make an apology, Tucker."

"No can do."

"Let me say it again. I need you to make an apology."

"Like I said, no way."

"Tuck. Help me, O.K.? I need these shoes."

He strode back through the sewing room speed-dialing Shirley, thinking that what he really needed was to stall for time. He needed to stall, because if he stepped one foot outside the factory gate, he was not getting back in, that was for certain. First things first, though, he needed to take a piss—badly. "*Cesuo!*" he said to Alice's back. "*Yong cesuo!*" he repeated. Alice directed him to a white door with the character for "male" stenciled in red, the box with the cross inside, curvy legs, making Dale think of a boy with an oversized boxy head running away from the bullies, Square-Head Boy, they called him in Chinese Character-Land. He ducked inside the men's room and began to relieve himself amidst the



overpowering smell of deodorizer and cigarette smoke, trickle of leaking urinals, cracked mirrors on the wall.

Cradling his Blackberry, he listened to the long beeps, reminding him of the first time he had visited Italy, age twelve, with his father. They had gone together to meet a shoe designer. That was the first night he drank espresso and stayed up all night, wide-eyed, from the caffeine, wondering whether he would ever sleep again. Those were always the best times, traveling with his father on business, folding open his *Herald Tribune* on the train a half page at a time, having a glass of wine with dinner, laughing his head off when his dad told a corny joke. He had shared these reminiscences with Sherm after his father was in the ground, the Agawam acquisition was finalized, and Dale became the clear choice for Number Two at J. Phelps. Sherm had nodded his understanding. No words. It was like that between the two of them, like being in the same family, even though Sherm was Jewish and Dale was Italian. “Matzoh-Pizza,” Sherm called it.

“Hi, Shirley, it’s Dale,” he said now, when the call went through. How were things progressing, Shirley wanted to know. He told her what had happened: Tucker’s refusal to apologize, Bai’s apparent double-dealing. “I see,” Shirley said, soberly. “What is this term, ‘double-dealing?’” Dale, zipping himself, tried to think of a good way to explain it. Double-dealing, he said, running his hands under cold water, is when someone promises the same thing to two people at the same time. “O.K., I understand now,” Shirley said. He imagined that she had been immersed in Matthew 1:4—the undying love of Christ for his father—while he was in talking to Tucker. She had told him about her conversion the year before, how she had seen a white light, how everything was much better now, after years spent dealing with an abusive, controlling father.

Dale wondered how long Alice would let him stay in the bathroom before she began knocking on the door, or sent in a posse of security guards. He told Shirley he wanted her to talk her way into the factory. Whatever she had to do, she needed to get inside, then they could sit down with Alice and have a nice chat. “You with me on this, Shirley? O.K.?”

Pushing out of the bathroom, he recognized that they were now on the row of offices that included Bai’s. This was where the Fu Yin sales and manufacturing people lived, everyone except Bai himself four to a room, sometimes eight. Dale let Alice get ahead of him before he opened the first door he came to and ducked inside. A young man of indeterminate age, in his late twenties probably, with an almond-shaped, pimply face, was talking on the phone, a lit cigarette perched artfully at the corner of his mouth. When Dale waved at him the man waved back languidly. Dale sat down in a black vinyl swivel and rested his forearms on the glass table top. It was approaching six p.m. A shade early to call Boston, but just right for Margot. That would have to wait. At any moment, the shit was going to hit the fan.

When Alice burst through the door she sent a trash can clattering. “Mr. Dale! Mr. Dale, we must go now!”

“I’m not leaving.”

“You must go, Mr. Dale.”

“Go get Shirley, and we’ll talk about it.”

“I cannot understand,” Alice said, reddening visibly.

Dale reached for a pen from a glass jar, jotted a note—“GET SHIRLEY”—on the back of a business card, and handed it to Alice. Her lips moved silently. “Sorry. You must

leave, Mr. Dale.”

He crossed one leg over the other and began fiddling with his Blackberry.

“You must go now, Mr. Dale.”

Dale glanced up at Alice matter-of-factly. “I’m not leaving.”

“We have agreement, Mr. Dale.”

“No agreement. Not any more. Sorry.”

Alice shouted something incomprehensible at top volume in Chinese, and the pimply-faced youth sharing the office hung up, stubbed out his cigarette, and exited. Alice glared hard at Dale again before slamming the door behind her. Dale was alone then, with the Chinese calendars, the lingering cigarette smoke, no Chuck T.’s to ship, and a renegade ex-Special Forces nutcase holed up on the other side of the factory.

Six in the evening here, that meant 7:00 a.m. in Boston; Laura Kandel was settling into her kitchen for breakfast; she was taking the *Boston Globe* out of its plastic wrapper, placing it on the kitchen table, pouring herself a cup of coffee. In a half hour she would step into her Lexus in the triple garage of her house in Cohasset, and she would drive to J. Phelps, where she would stow her purse in the oversized antique oak filing cabinet that had once belonged to his own father, the one she had claimed as hers after Dale relocated to Hong Kong. “Company property,” she had reminded him, when, dumbstruck, he entered her office on his first trip Stateside and gazed at the filing cabinet, and the antique desk next to it full of wood and pewter shoe lasts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It infuriated him that Laura had swiped his family property like that. He had taken the issue down the hall to Sherm, who had agreed not to sell the articles, and had pledged to return them to Dale’s family—eventually. Dale left J. Phelps that afternoon convinced that Laura was plotting his demise.

Now, with sweaty palms, Dale punched numbers. He heard the long pause, the white noise, the dim bleeps of his call setting up across ten thousand miles. His throat was getting dry. He hung up.

He knew exactly what Laura was going to say. Exactly. “Tucker Sanchez is a psycho. You should have fired him two years ago, when you were starting out in Asia. Now you need a mature staff who can think big-picture, not shoe dogs like Tucker. Your go-along, get-along management style is becoming a concern. No wonder your pipeline is a mess, when you can’t manage your own people. Time to get strategic, Dale Moretti. Time to think big-picture.”

Yeah, right, he wanted to tell her. Try focusing less on the business school crap and more on the real issues, such as how to motivate your employees, and maybe you wouldn’t be in such terrible shape with your own father, who after all owns this company, and who was doing pretty well before you showed up with your thousand-dollar briefcase and your fancy-ass laptop computer.

He hated being jealous, but there it was. He and Sherm had a good thing going before Laura arrived, and now she was Executive Vice President in Boston while he was a shoe dog in China, and it didn’t take higher math to know who was going to take the fall when the third quarter numbers came out. Then there was the money issue. He wasn’t going to dwell on money. And anyway, things were going to turn around here in China once his relationship-building started to bear fruit, which he could feel was right around the corner. He’d drunk a lot of maotai wine in a lot of scummy restaurants, but it was going to pay off, because in the end what mattered were relationships, not industry diagrams or



any of that other b.s. you learned in books.

Dale heard footsteps. The door opened. Alice entered the room, with Shirley following close behind.

“Hey, you made it!” Dale said. He stood to shake hands.

“Greetings,” Shirley said, blank-faced.

“You’re about to tell me Alice is seriously bent out of shape. Am I right?”

Shirley sat down in the swivel chair across from his and placed her Bible on the desk. “Actually this is turning into some kind of crisis. Alice says she will ask Public Security for help unless you agree to leave the factory at once.”

Dale imagined an AK-47 being pointed at his head, a damp prison cell, two bowls of cold rice a day. “I’m the customer here. Does she understand that or not?”

Shirley said she thought the answer was yes. But Alice’s instructions were to keep visitors from entering the factory building until this problem with Tucker was cleared up. He could not blame her for trying to do her job.

Leaning back, Dale tapped his thumbs on his thighs. “Here’s a new idea, O.K.? This one just came to me. ‘Double or nothing.’ I issue a formal apology to the production team on behalf of J. Phelps. If they don’t accept it, fine, we’re out of here. If they *do* accept it, then we’re off the hook with this Tucker business, and we can sit down later with Bai and have a real conversation about the shoes. What do you think?”

Shirley was confused about what “double or nothing” meant. Dale tried to explain it using God’s test of Abraham and Isaac on the Mount. Well, O.K., not a perfect analogy, but close enough. Shirley said she doubted Alice would agree to this latest gambit, but she would give it a try. In the ensuing conversation, Dale watched as Alice’s temper flared, subsided, and flared again, like flows of gas and lava from an erratic volcano. She stood throughout, fists clenched, arms rigid.

Shirley moved a bang out of her eyes. “She is resisting your concept. Actually, I am understating this.”

That was to be expected, Dale said. Alice needed to understand, though, that he wasn’t leaving, and it wasn’t going to look good if she arrested a foreign customer and sent him packing off to jail. He was offering her a way out here—she needed to give it some consideration.

The two women resumed their conversation. After a brief interval Alice slapped the glass table top, exited the room, and took up a position outside in the hallway, where Dale could see her through the glass pane.

“That was quick,” Dale said. He craned to get a better look. “What’s she up to?”

“I am not too sure,” Shirley said.

A knot of gesticulating Fu Yin people encircled Alice. One of the men he recognized as Lan, the Production Manager. So Alice had been bluffing all along. Good to know.

From her purse Shirley retrieved two packets of mixed nuts and gave one to Dale. They sat nibbling.

“It’s moving toward dinner time. How you holding up?” Dale asked.

Shirley righted the overturned trash can and threw her empty *Planters* bag inside it. “Perhaps when we get back to Jade Garden Hotel, we can find supper.”

“Too bad Jerrold isn’t here.”

Shirley blushed. Jerrold was the accountant boyfriend she had met at a Bright Star



party a few months back. "I'm positive he will have something good to eat," she said. "While I was waiting outside, he called to say he was being invited to a client banquet."

"You're a couple of hard-chargers—a match made in heaven."

Shirley smiled wistfully. "I would like to take a kind of deliberate pace with him. You can understand this, I think, because of your marriage situation."

Glancing through the glass pane, Dale noted that Alice and Lan were no longer arguing in the hallway. "Look, I'm going to make a couple phone calls. Do you mind?"

"I don't mind," Shirley said. "I will do a little reading to relieve my tension."

Dale dialed Margot's number in Hong Kong, and got her on the fourth ring, amidst a burst of background chatter. She wanted to talk, but was with a client, she said. Could they reconnect later? "Sure, that would be great," Dale said. "Everything O.K.?" she asked. He paused. Of course he wanted to tell her about the Tucker fiasco, how it felt being at Fu Yin when he would rather be at home with her. "Things are a little nutty with the shipments, that's all," he said. "I'll tell you about it later." They agreed that she would leave a message if she couldn't reach him directly.

Sophie was probably pouring a bowl of Raisin Bran by now. Not wanting to talk to his ex-wife Denise, Dale speed-dialed his daughter's cell phone first, but it went straight to voice-mail. He tried the home number next, and was certain after two rings that Denise would answer, that he would have to explain himself in that half pissed-off, half guilty way she made him feel whenever they talked these days, but no one answered there either. Dale felt a stab of regret then, for everything: for not being there, for the divorce, for them not being able to have a second child, for the hardship it had caused Sophie. Such a wonderful kid—his angel.

A sharp outburst issued from the hall. He turned and saw Alice and Lan gesturing violently at each other again, the two of them talking in high-speed Mandarin. Then the tone moderated. Alice crossed her arms while Lan continued making points with two fingers slapping against his opposite wrist.

Dale felt his pulse elevating. There were calls he needed to make if he wanted to lock down two million pairs of Chuck T's. He began scrolling through his contact list: nope, nope, wrong guy, nope, retired, wrong time zone, nope, nope. Terrence Shawn. Yes, that was worth a try. Terrence was a buyer who had worked for Dale Stateside and had relocated to Hong Kong less than a year before. They'd gone out for drinks a couple times. "Come on, Terrence," Dale said, rhythmically tapping the phone. The call went through; Terrence was in a restaurant, presumably, given the horrendous noise level. "Hey, Terrence, it's Dale Moretti." Dale promised to be brief. He was looking for cotton uppers. Any leads? "I was about to call you to ask the same question," Terrence replied, with a smoker's laugh. Love to help but can't. They needed to meet when Dale was back in town. "Definitely," Dale said. He ended the call. Definitely.

Then Dale saw a name two entries down from Terrence Shawn's. Lula Sheng, Empire Footwear. Lula was trying to put together a new company to do high-end fashion shoes for the U.S. and European markets. She wanted someone creative who could also source product; end-to-end merchandising, in other words. It had seemed like a dream job for him, and on top of that Lula was a friend of Margot's. Dale hadn't been sure, though. Whether it was time to make the change was still a question. It would send certain signals: to Margot, who would expect an engagement ring, and to Sophie, who might think he



was abandoning her. He had thought about bringing Sophie over for a visit, to get a feel for the place, and to meet Margot. In the interim, until he could arrange that with his ex-wife, Denise, he would continue stalling Lula.

He punched his voice-mail at home in Boston. In Hong Kong he hadn't bothered to get a land line, preferring to use his mobile instead. Margot kidded him about it. Virtual Man, she called him. The first message was from his ex-wife. Denise had two things to say. There were always two things Denise had to say, at least two things, every day for as long as they'd been together, which had been fourteen years. Point one was that Sophie's last day in school was June 20th. If he wanted to spend time with her the following week, the week of the 23<sup>rd</sup>, that would be ideal. Sophie was going to dance camp starting in July. Point two was that his nephew Stephen—this was *her* sister's kid, not *his* sister's, but Stephen had come out of it with a level head anyway—was having his first communion on June 29. So in case he needed an excuse to be in Boston, which he probably didn't, given his obvious concern for Sophie's upbringing, then that week sounded pretty good, didn't it?

Dale considered getting angry for five seconds, with one hand on the cell phone, the other clicking his ballpoint. He wanted to dial Denise's number and say something hurtful, but he knew there was no return in it. There would be time to deal with Denise's voice-mail in his head when the lights were out and he could think about the proper way to respond.

Dale made an entry in his organizer on June 23<sup>rd</sup>: *Sophie*.

"Dale."

"Yes?"

"Alice has returned. She has an answer for you now." Now Shirley smoothed her skirt over her knees. "She has a special message from Mr. Bai. She would like you to come down the hall so she can deliver this message."

Dale let a blast of air escape. "Right. How dumb do I look?"

"Let me try to clarify this," Shirley said.

Dale began composing a speech in his head to the worker's committee at Fu Yin—he would start by addressing the supervisors who knew him, before acknowledging the crew—apologizing on behalf of J. Phelps, asking them to forgive Tucker for his bad manners, explaining the importance of mutual understanding in business as a platform for world peace.

"She is continuing to insist that this special communication from Mr. Bai must not be delivered here—that we need to move offices."

Dale tapped his ballpoint on the glass top. "I'm afraid she's going to have her Public Security goons handcuff me, then it's 'poof,' game over. Know what I mean?"

Shirley nodded. "I understand your thinking. However, what if Miss Cheng is telling the truth?"

"Those sound like roulette odds to me, not blackjack."

"Sorry, I don't understand this."

"Just tell her I appreciate the invitation, but I'm more comfortable sitting here, right where I am."

Shirley's translation caused Alice to redden, and bolt out the door again. After Dale and Shirley had traded glances, he returned mentally to composing his speech to the workers' committee. The more he thought about the idea, the more he liked it. He would drag a packing crate into the center of the main assembly room and stand on it, like Lenin,

like Norma Rae, his sleeves rolled. He'd make eye contact with one worker, then another. His words would move them. They would applaud.

"Dale," Shirley said.

"Huh?" Dale asked, checking his Blackberry.

"A visitor has arrived."

"Oh, yeah. One minute." When he had scrolled through his messages he looked up and saw Milton Bai frowning at him from the doorway.

"Holy shit! The Chairman, in the flesh!" Dale said. He pushed himself upright.

"Mr. Bai, he suggests we meet in his office," Shirley said, matter-of-factly.

"Sure. Absolutely," Dale said. He crossed over to shake hands. Bai's thinning hair, as usual, was combed back on his head, emphasizing his pockmarked face.

They walked down the hall single file. Turning through the open doorway, Dale could see Bai's unopened briefcase on the desk, a stainless steel model that looked like it had been beaten up in a lot of airports. Bai had configured four low-slung black leather chairs around a coffee table made of smoked glass. On the wall behind was a Chinese watercolor scroll of a crane. Next to the scroll was a calendar from a German conveyor belt manufacturer that featured two bikini-clad women standing on either side of a colossal, phallic surfboard. They sat. Bai, lighting a cigarette, moved the ashtray closer to Dale.

"He remembers your last visit to Fu Yin with fondness," Shirley said.

After Alice sullenly poured tea, Dale picked up his glass and cupped it. "Tell him I appreciate that. But also tell him I want Tucker back, and I want my two million pairs of Chuck T.'s to ship."

"That sounds quite direct to me," Shirley said.

"Say it however you want," Dale said. He scrutinized Bai's owlish face while Shirley translated. A grimace formed and faded.

"Mr. Bai, he says there is nothing he can do at this moment about Tucker," Shirley said. "He says the workers' committee needs to decide amongst themselves about this. Regarding your shipment, he says there has been a slight change regarding the schedule. He says he doubts it will create a delay."

"That's absolute bullshit," Dale said.

"I don't think that is a good response," Shirley said.

"Word it how you want to, O.K.?" Dale said, looking at Bai. "I come out here from Fuzhou expecting to see my shoes boxed and ready for shipment, and the next thing I hear he's been selling me out to Wal-Mart. How am I supposed to feel?"

Bai arched his eyebrows and reached, deliberately, for another cigarette. When he began to talk Shirley translated.

"He says he needs to adjust his own cost environment or he can not afford to deal with customers like J. Phelps. He says three months ago, after his last meeting with you, he went to Suzhou to seek some advice from Mr. Ling."

"Simon Ling," Dale said. He was supposed to visit Simon the following Tuesday about a shipment of suede cutbacks Laura wanted for the fall season.

"Correct. He went there because he heard Mr. Ling was making a very attractive Missy Road-Runner model for J. Phelps, especially with the pink floral stitching around the collar. During that meeting, he learned that Mr. Ling was also planning to shift production away from J. Phelps and give it to Wal-Mart. That is when Mr. Bai made a plan

to contact Mr. Levin.”

Dale reached for a cigarette of his own, and lit it with Bai’s *Dragonair* lighter. It had been years. Inhaling the toxins into his lungs gave him a momentary feeling of calmness, a sense that his disagreement with Bai could be solved if he kept his wits about him. He exhaled a smoke ring and pierced it. “Look. I need to know what it will take to get my Chuck T.’s. He wants me to eat part of my margin, I’ll do it. I just want the shoes.”

Bai, nodding at Shirley’s translation, set his own cigarette on the edge of the ash tray, extracted a pair of reading glasses from his shirt pocket, and began leafing through a pocket calendar. He punched numbers into a calculator with his bony forefinger and made a series of grunting, humming noises.

“Mr. Bai says he can deliver in the first week of June. This is a firm commitment, based on his outstanding relationship with you. Because your shoes are already work-in-process, this is simply a matter of scheduling.”

“Then he needs to pick up the air freight.”

Shirley said she thought Mr. Bai would probably not agree to this.

“You’re on my side here, not his, right? Let’s get this done. Translate!”

It had started to rain in cataracts against Bai’s half-opened window. The sight of Shirley’s red Bible tassel made Dale think of his nephew Stephen’s communion, and by extension, his own communion. His father had taken Dale to the Agawam factory in Pawtucket, where one of the old Italian workers, a guy named Gino who had been on the same boat as Grandpa Gaetano, volunteered to make Dale a pair of communion shoes. His father and Gino joked in English and Italian, then Gino turned to Dale and said “on your feet,” as he took Dale’s measurements. When the shoes were polished, Gino handed them to Dale. They went on like gloves.

“He says he will pay a 30% portion of air freight.”

“Tell him 80%.”

After Grandpa had his stroke, his father sourced his first shipment of loafers from Brazil. His father flew down there, and came back with bags of coffee for Dale’s mother and soccer balls for Dale and his brother. His father said now all the low-end stuff was going to be done in Brazil and China and places like that. His father and his grandfather were in the kitchen, both of them in their T-shirts, Grandpa saying you could get quality from two places, Italy and the U.S. and that was it, and his father saying forget quality, what people wanted was value. Dale had sat on the stairs thinking Grandpa was going to blow another fuse. “Forget quality,” the old man had said, “what the hell do you mean ‘forget quality?’” His face was red like an apple.

“Now Mr. Bai has agreed to pay 40%.”

“Tell him he can push the ship date by ten days if he pays 50%.”

A pause ensued, and then a sharp exchange of words took place between Shirley and Bai. Now she spoke to Bai again, more directly than Dale had ever heard before.

Bai removed his glasses, placed them in his shirt pocket, and leaned back in his high-backed leather chair.

“O.K. He has agreed to this,” Shirley said.

Outside rain clanged on the gutter. Curls of smoke rose from Bai’s cigarette. Dale began massaging his forehead with his fingers. This job was going to kill him, he could see that now. The Wal-Marts, translators, water buffaloes, old men being run over by cement

trucks. It was all going to kill him. He wished he could seek advice from his father, but of course that was no longer possible.

Now Dale drained the remnants of his beer and set down the glass. He pulled the lilac cashmere sweater out of his briefcase and set it on the table. It took a few moments to compose the sentences he wanted to recite in Mandarin. “For your daughter, from my daughter,” he said, haltingly. “I’m bringing her to China soon for a look around. Maybe we can arrange for her and Lingmei to meet.”

Bai, patting the sweater with his palm, hacked out a laugh. “O.K.!” he said.

“You coming?” Dale asked Shirley. “I’m going to talk to the workers—see if we can get Tucker out of here.”

“Are you sure this will be an effective strategy?”

“I’m not sure,” Dale said. Moving toward the door, he caught a whiff from outside, and it made him want to step into the night. The air would be damp and cool. “Actually I have no idea.” He wanted to breathe clean air heavy with wet vegetation. With the windows open all the way back to Fuzhou he would savor the June air and think of Sophie, imagining the places they would visit when her leg healed and she could join him on this far-away continent he was beginning to think of as home.

## DUSTIN JUNKERT

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### ANSWER ME

Four chickadees weighed  
down a tiny branch

A worm squirmed  
noisily in the dirt

The evening sun slanted  
recklessly our direction

Five leaves fell  
anchored with orange

*Why are you all here?*  
I yelled at everything

Such silence  
was never heard