FICTION

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Silver

We were bloated. Here in Hong Kong we had nine floors full of staff. I had been sent from New York to run two of these floors, our regional marketing and sales departments. We had seventy employees in Hong Kong, and dozens more spread through the region. We were like a big, slow-moving housefly that had lived past the summer; we were too heavy to stay aloft for long, and as soon as we landed, swat, we'd be dead.

But how long would it take? The conglomerate had hundreds of divisions, thousands of projects, tens of thousands of employees. It could take them years to figure out why we were even out here, in this remote outpost. Back in New York they were busy digesting a massive merger, what the press had called a "transformative transaction" that would, within just a few months, become known as the worst corporate marriage in history. In Hong Kong you could see the fat, the extraneous employees and duplicated departments: five payroll divisions, six HRs, and a dozen IT help desks. And in this distant tail of the lumbering beast, far from the nerve centers, we had kept on hiring

long after the string of good quarters had ended. The orders to freeze hadn't made it down the chains of command, so plans conceived during the boom were still in effect: new marketing teams; sales offices in Seoul, Bangalore, and KL; a VP in Japan. We filled every position.

I had the best job of all—the expat boss sent from overseas, generously accommodated with a housing allowance, club memberships, a Teutonic sedan, and a cost-of-living stipend. I was thirty-two, unmarried, and I suddenly found myself living a life of affluence. I had enough money to walk into any of the fancy boutiques in Pacific Place and choose whichever suit or pair of shoes I desired. If I'd had more time, I would have taken up an expensive hobby like sailing or collecting modern Chinese art but instead—at first—I was too busy hiring.

Our local staff greeted me warily. I've noticed that the first impression I give is often of arrogance or disdain, when actually I am diffident. This misperception has served me well in the corporate environment. It worked in New York when I joined the company straight out of business school. I completed my tasks proficiently, managed a few insignificant projects, and was lumped in with a group of colleagues who were given credit for a successful, albeit minor, acquisition. I caught the eye of our leader, the man who would later orchestrate the disastrous merger, and rumors spread that I enjoyed a close friendship with him. Those rumors were unfounded, but their existence was enough to ensure that I was handled with great delicacy by my management team.

So it was a surprise and relief for my immediate superiors in New York when I took the position in Hong Kong. It was not seen as a wise move. Those who wanted to get ahead would stay in New York, as close to our Sixth Avenue headquarters as possible. Once you left, my colleagues worried, you couldn't control what people were saying about you.

They were right, but I didn't care. I had gone through college and my twenties without making many friends. I didn't know that by the time you hit thirty you had all the friends you were going to get. I'd miscalculated. I thought maybe in Hong Kong I could catch up.

I left a girlfriend behind in New York. Courtney was a blond with short hair and a pleasing gap in her lower front teeth that you saw when she smiled. She was pretty and smart, from a good family with property in Connecticut and Cape Cod. She coproduced television commercials with a partner, a slightly older gay man. When I told her I had accepted a job in Hong Kong, she was

shocked. I had never even mentioned the position to her before and now I was telling her that I was moving to China.

I had assumed we would have one of those long-distance relationships. Phone sex, dirty e-mails, twice-annual rendezvous in exotic places like Bali or Kauai.

"That's not a relationship," she pointed out.

I e-mailed her several times after I arrived in Hong Kong and she never replied. When I called to ask if she was breaking up with me she explained that we had already broken up, before I left. Somehow I'd missed that.

When I first saw the sign about the soccer team, posted just above the coffee machine in the cafeteria, I wrote down the contact information. When I returned to my office, I immediately sent a note saying I would like to play. I didn't think much about it until two days later, when a skinny man in a black suit and white shirt showed up outside my office and spoke to my assistant. She stood up, straightened her bulky sweater—our offices were air conditioned to almost arctic temperatures—and came into my office.

"This is Silver," she said. "He wants to talk to you about playing soccer. Did you ask about playing soccer?"

I nodded. "Hey, great, send him in."

If I sometimes disguised my shyness as stolidity to intimidate my colleagues, then Silver's method was the opposite. He stuttered and acted nervous, though I had the sense he was actually sizing me up. He was local-born Chinese, about five-eight, gaunt-featured, narrow-eyed, and flat-nosed, with a protuberant chin—his profile was like a *J*. His black hair had a natural racing stripe of gray running front to back, like a skunk.

He said he had received my message about playing on the soccer team and he wanted to come by in person to talk to me about it. Then he stood there for an uncomfortably long time—opening his mouth and closing it, pursing his lips, looking up and to the left as if searching for words. I've already mentioned my own taciturn approach to first meetings. We were at an impasse.

I cleared my throat. "Well, yes, I would like to play. How does it work?"

Silver nodded and shifted his weight. I came around my desk and we took seats by the window. Some days, the city was so hazy with industrial smog from up the delta in China that I couldn't even see the neighboring buildings. But when it was clear, as it was today, I had a stunning view from my thirty-seventh-

floor office. Victoria Harbour spread out beneath us, and across the water was the old Kai Tak airport that would eventually be converted to housing estates. Beyond that were the ramshackle housing developments where many of the local Chinese lived. Tiny flats, I'd been told, no bigger than airplane restrooms.

We gazed out the window.

"Of course," Silver said, "you are welcome to join."

I nodded.

He took a deep breath, leaned forward, then back again. "Um."

I kept quiet.

"Yes." Then he hit his own forehead, as if trying manually to jog his memory. "So, yes, you are the most senior staff member to play ever."

I shrugged. Was he trying to tell me that I wasn't welcome?

He seemed to be waiting for a response. From me? Good luck.

"So. We will be honored if you will join our football club."

We stood up and shook hands.

On his way out, Silver had a lengthy exchange in Chinese with my assistant after which she came in and explained that I would be the most senior employee ever to join the football club.

We met at an artificial grass field in a park next to Harbour Road. I arrived carrying my expensive blue leather sports bag. I was already wearing my shorts, socks, and pads and took a seat on a bench to change into my cleats. Silver hadn't yet arrived, and I didn't recognize most of the other members of the team. They were all Chinese, save for two Hong Kong–born South Asians who spoke Cantonese. These were the boys who brought the mail around, replaced flickering monitors with new ones, or ripped up sections of floor when there were electrical problems. I had never spoken to them before, and now, as they dressed, they barely acknowledged me. I pretended to be busy lacing and relacing my shoes and strapping and unstrapping the Velcro on my shin guards. The sun was out and had heated up the field; through the soles of my cleats I could feel the baked concrete beneath the phony grass.

When Silver showed up, he quickly introduced me to the rest of the team. Then we divided into two sides and scrimmaged. Slowly, I began to distinguish the players. Lim—a tall, handsome, perpetually tan boy with long hair—was probably the most athletically gifted player there, but he was

limited by a disinclination to pass the ball. George and Simon were solid midfielders. Silver was a stout and reliable sweeper and may have been the steadiest performer. I think the rest of the players would have accepted me more readily had I been either the best or the worst on the team. The boss being the best player would make a certain kind of sense in hierarchical Hong Kong, and the *gweilo* boss being the worst would also have a sort of ironic logic. As it was, I fell somewhere in the middle, perhaps lower middle, but certainly not the lousiest. I didn't detect this at the time, but my presence made a few of the players uncomfortable, distorted their sense of when to pass the ball and when to hold it, and at least one of the players on the other side intentionally didn't slide tackle me when he had a clear shot at the ball.

Silver later told me that the team had actually called a meeting to figure out what to do with me. Lim, the best player, suggested that they simply not tell me the game and practice schedule, but Silver quickly pointed out that I could see the field from my office window. They couldn't really stop me from playing and while I noted a slight degree of discomfort, I chose to ignore it. I certainly wasn't going to bring it up.

The meeting they called seems even more ridiculous if you consider that our team, which played in a league with law firms, advertising agencies, and a few other media conglomerates, was awful—a perfect, soccer-playing microcosm of our corporate culture. We seldom passed, rarely converted easy opportunities, and seemed perpetually fraught by internal dissent and disagreement. Squabbles in hissing Cantonese factionalized the team and would sometimes lead to one or more players storming off in the middle of a game. One of our opponents commented that, for a communications company, we really didn't do a very good job of communicating. We lost our first three games of the season.

I had played in high school and then again on my business school team, without any great distinction. One of my many weaknesses as a competitive athlete is that I never really cared if my team won or lost so long as I had a good game. I would rather play brilliantly and score a goal in a losing effort than be a steady and unspectacular contributor to a victory. This outlook, strangely enough, served me very well in our corporation but was less satisfactory on the field, where great individual skill would rarely lead to goals if it was not conducive to the fine play of one's teammates. In this sense I began to think of the gifted, long-haired Lim as a typical employee of our conglomerate—he

was masterful, his skinny legs flicking and pushing the ball as efficiently as a lion licking its mouth. But, as the cliché goes, one man can never beat eleven, and Lim's great runs and carries would eventually fail against determined and smart defenses. We were a company of Lims.

I HAD TAKEN a flat on Barker Road, a colonial-era building with a sweeping view of the city and a hexagonal pool where I swam laps in the morning if the sun was out. After my swim, I'd towel off and check my e-mails from New York, messages that expressed the stresses, tension, and panic that were now beginning to engulf the corporation. There were demands for head counts and T&E reviews, and suggestions for revising, freezing, and resetting budgets. I often got the same message from two or three different departments, each asking for goals and targets, figures that could be plugged into spreadsheets and massaged to add up to the desired totals. At first, I diligently answered these requests, having my assistant call finance and HR and gather the data. But then I noticed these requests were repeated, even after I had sent back the information. So I stopped replying. As a result, no one in New York could get a handle on exactly what was going on out here.

When I had first started the job, one of the many issues to be resolved was the division of territories, not just geographical—who runs our China operations?—but also internal. The company had recently created something they called a Global Strategy division, which could intercede and talk directly to our clients whenever they wanted. Yet the Global Strategy people had a very short attention span. They would initiate complicated conversations with clients that would put on hold their spending—our revenue—and then lose interest and move on to other aspects of global strategy, the globe being very large and requiring much strategy. My own senior staffers were constantly complaining that they felt they were competing as much with other divisions of our own company as they were with other firms. While I agreed with them, and sometimes even said I would raise their concerns with New York, I decided that there was no way to tangle with Global Strategy. Their inattentiveness and hyperactivity made them formidable and dangerous, like a physically precocious ADD-afflicted child. It was much easier to ignore them.

I couldn't actually tell my employees to do as little as possible, but that's what I hinted. If we requested too much or complained too much—the cor-

porate equivalent of jumping up and down and waving our arms—then we were visible and therefore vulnerable. But if we were only a budget item, a number on a spreadsheet somewhere, it would take some sort of forensic accountant to figure out who or what we were. In a conglomerate like ours, the assumption was that someone else always knew what this budget item referred to, and I had learned in business school that an international budget item, with its foreign tax issues and currency conversions, can be the easiest of all to ignore. Remember, I am more interested in my own performance than the team's.

I HADN'T BEEN very effective at making new friends in Hong Kong. There were a few fellow business school alums whom I had met up with for drinks at one of the private clubs, but these relationships were built on what we could offer each other—connections, deals, and jobs. And I was always getting advice that sounded condescending. I should join a hedge fund, they would inform me. But since I couldn't do that, they would sadly remind me, because of my inexperience, I could try to join a private-equity partnership. Every one of their good ideas only made me feel bad, like somehow in my current incarnation I was disappointing.

So I had a lot of free time in Hong Kong. I was able to attend every practice, game, and even post-game drink at a pub. Silver and I were the two most regular participants on our team, and when we stood next to each other at the pub, holding our pints of lager, we were an awkward combination of Silver's nervous tics and my silence. But after a couple of drinks, we would begin to exchange information. By the time we were ordering dinner—usually at a *dai pai dong* serving chopped duck or pork over rice—we would have started a conversation.

The details of Silver's life seemed pedestrian. He had attended a technical college, taken a job at a local firm when he was twenty-five, and married a year later. For Silver, joining a multinational company like ours had been a career milestone, one that allowed him to make a down payment on a bigger flat in a housing complex called Knightingale Gardens and hire a Filipino amah for his son and daughter. His wife, Cherilyn, also from Hong Kong, worked as the office manager at an accounting firm. He raved about her. I had met her once at a game, a slender woman with unremarkable but soothingly symmetrical features. He had a bright daughter, but his younger son, Alvin, was developmentally disabled. Silver explained to me that, to the Chinese, Alvin's tragically

low IQ was considered cosmic retribution for some misdeed perpetrated by Silver and his wife. Yet this didn't seem to bother him.

I realized that I liked being around Silver because he seemed happy. I wasn't envious, because I didn't want a wife or a family, but I was puzzled by his uncomplicated joy. If I broke his life down to balance-sheet terms—net worth, debt, prospects, savings for retirement, retarded offspring—it didn't seem like it should add up to such a solid sense of well-being. I'm not saying that my only values were those that could be quantified, I was just interested in observing that by working hard and persevering you could achieve this sort of simple pleasure.

Silver had polished off a plate of smoked pigeon and was pulling toilet paper from a roll—that's what passed for napkins in these places. "Why do you always ask about other people?" he asked me. "Aren't you happy? You're the boss. Big salary, fancy office. Everyone wants to be like you."

"Really?"

"Not really," said Silver. "Not really you, exactly. But like you: a boss. Powerful. Big salary."

"It's not that great," I said. "How about you, how do you keep merrily going along?"

Silver looked at me curiously, pursed his lips and smiled. "Maybe it's my wife, maybe it's Cheryl. She keeps me happy. The secret is, don't think about it."

Soccer was like that too, of course. All those sports-as-Zen metaphors, about how when you are playing your best you are completely and totally in the moment—that was what we were constantly failing to achieve as a team. The on-the-field squabbling was a clear symptom of our team's spiritual shortcomings. The problem, Silver and I agreed, was Lim. He was talented but totally destructive to team chemistry, in part because he was very good-looking and had some sort of hold over many of the players. He looked like a character from Japanese anime—round-eyed, long-haired, with well-defined muscles. But he was killing us on the field.

Is this weird? Sometimes I would go to the freezer in the little office kitchen and scoop up a mug of ice cubes. Then I'd head to the bathroom, where I would dump them in the urinal and piss on them. I've always liked peeing on ice—there used to be a Mexican restaurant near my apartment in New York where I could always pee on ice—and there weren't any places in Hong Kong that poured ice into their urinals. Nobody ever caught me doing

it and I was never sure I would even be embarrassed if I were caught.

As for the rest of my job, it was starting to depress me. The conglomerate had finally discovered the existence of fireable employees here in Hong Kong—scores of us, salaries and budgets and benefit packages that could be eliminated—and was now demanding some sacrifices. It was easy to decide on the first round. I requested a head count from Lim's supervisor in the supplies department, and then sent back a list of those names that should be terminated.

We immediately improved without Lim. We didn't actually win any games. But we were definitely playing better, even earning a draw against the local offices of an international law firm that fielded a squad of tough English barristers. My decision to fire Lim was, I believe, my most effective use of corporate power to that point. I had made an executive decision based on orders from New York and it immediately benefited our soccer team.

During practices and games I began to study the roster carefully and look for other possible reductions that would improve the team. Over drinks after practice with Silver, I raised the possibility of eliminating a few of the less desirable team members.

Silver looked surprised. "Can you do that?"

"It's easier than asking them to quit the team," I pointed out.

Silver agreed. No one wanted that kind of confrontation.

It would have been nice to hire a good player or two as well, but hiring was out of the question. The company was firing, that was what we did best.

I suggested that we hold more practices, which surprised Silver. He said that the company had previously been reluctant to allow for the additional hours away from the office. I, of course, could authorize as many hours as we needed. So we met on the field three afternoons a week in addition to our weekly and occasionally twice-weekly matches. To replace our eliminated players, we recruited a few more employees from inside the company to fill out our roster, including a lanky Chinese janitor who proved a catlike goalkeeper, leaping to the corners of the woodwork to swat away shots. We were going to win a game, I was sure of it. We just had to do it before the company ordered me to fire the rest of my teammates.

As our team improved, Silver's spirits continued to improve as well. He explained that his daughter had won a place in a fancy private school and his son, well, his son would just need his mommy and daddy, probably forever, but that was OK, Silver said, that was OK.

"But why?" I had to ask him. "Why is that OK?"

He stood up and began jumping up and down to test the give of the tape on his ankles. "I'm not some kind of fortune cookie guru. How should I know?"

We went out and were actually leading BBO&C, an international advertising agency—until the last two minutes, when we conceded a pair of stupid goals to lose our tenth in eleven matches.

I HADN'T SEEN the sun in weeks. The days were a gray procession, like a line of undecorated, buttonless confederate soldiers. Borne aloft with the persistent mist was a gritty smog that tasted faintly of metal. Up the Pearl River Delta in China they were making everything, literally, filling a hundred thousand containers a day with stuff. And the by-product was the toxic emissions we were breathing every day. Most mornings, the Hong Kong Environmental Protection Department would issue an advisory that "human beings stay indoors." We played no matter the air quality or climate. We had been training almost daily, and we put together a 4-3-3 formation that best utilized our talents, with Silver anchoring the defense and me playing a defensive midfield.

Our penultimate game was against a local telephone company that was the subsidiary of a rival global conglomerate controlled by a notorious self-made mogul. The local branch of the empire was controlled by one of his sons and that boy was here today, suited up in shiny red gear. They had won more games than they'd lost. Yet from the kickoff we were in control of the game, keeping possession and finding space in the middle of the field. And we were really playing as a team, making smart runs to open space and easy passes through surprising angles to get the ball to that space.

Finally, a goal, scored by one of the boys from the mail room.

Then, just before half, another one. We were up 2-0.

As we sat on the wooden bench on the eastern side of the field, we all seemed aware that we had made a breakthrough—we were ahead not by luck or because of the other team's mistakes but through our own ability. We were the better team, and we were sure we'd finally get a win.

Silver sat smiling, "Very nice, very nice."

"This feels good, doesn't it?" I said.

He laughed. "So good."

Then he became serious. "OK, just one more half. Let's keep our shape, fellas."

Silver was a leader, I thought. I would follow him anywhere.

As for my own leadership? I tried not to think about it.

Play continued for a few moments after Silver kneeled down just outside the penalty box. He wasn't anywhere near the ball, and the way he dropped to both knees seemed intentional, as if he were genuflecting before a sudden divine manifestation. He plopped down and then his hands hit the turf knuckles first and he seemed to stay like that for a few seconds, suspended.

Then he fell forward. The impact with the turf actually bounced his head up and sideways, so that he was lying on his cheek.

"Stop the ball," someone finally shouted.

We gathered around Silver. His mouth had fallen slack and his lips drooped. For a moment, I marveled at how his face had lost all its musculature—then I noticed his eyes, or the whites of them. The eyelids hung open in the shape of cartoon water drops.

I was about to ask what happened to his eyes when Simon, one of our midfielders, began shouting in Chinese and another fellow ran to the sidelines to get a mobile phone. The team seemed divided between the need to give him air and the urgency to pick him up and carry him somewhere, anywhere.

I looked at Simon. "We have to breathe air into him," he said.

We rolled Silver onto his back. I pulled open his mouth. It was surprisingly warm and soft. I gazed down at his tongue, which already looked a little dry, and then, tentatively, I pushed it aside. I had never touched another man's tongue. I put my right hand over his nose, took his cheeks in my left to hold open his mouth and bent over and began to blow.

There was surprisingly little resistance, and for a moment I felt a great wave of hope as the air exiting my lungs went somewhere inside of Silver. I stopped blowing and pumped his chest a few times like I had seen on television, but it became immediately apparent that Silver wasn't blowing back, and after a few more breaths, I found I had to push harder to force the air into him. He seemed fully inflated. But still totally dead.

With my lips I could feel the inside of his lips and his front teeth. There was a faint smell of sweat about him and also the sour odor of dried saliva. A trail of snot trickled from his nose, surprisingly large, and it gathered around the bottom of his nostrils. I wondered how long I had to keep doing this. At what point is it acceptable to admit that a person has died and stop administering CPR? Two minutes, three minutes? Because I have to tell you, three minutes of mouth-to-mouth seems like an eternity, especially when you aren't getting any response. Still, it was awkward just to admit that Silver was dead. As long as I kept blowing and pumping and going through the

motions, he somehow still had a connection to life. But as soon as I stopped, that would be it.

By now, of course, both squads were gathered around, and I heard a member of the opposite team, it may even have been the mogul's son, saying, "Fucking hell."

I began to feel a cramp in my legs. "Someone take this over," I said, and walked away.

The game was canceled. Before our last game, our keeper blew a whistle and we observed two minutes of silence before the kickoff. Then we lost.

At the Quarry Bay mortuary, I checked the black sign boards with the grooved lettering for Silver's services. Like many Hong Kong Chinese, Silver had a different name in his native language. But I didn't how to read it, so I waited around for a few other guys from the team and followed them upstairs to an arched hall where there were about twenty mounted bouquets—the carnations bunched together so tightly above the calligraphy dedications that they looked like pink and red cauliflower heads. We sat for a while and talked to each other about the office and then went into the viewing chamber to see Silver laid out behind the glass partition.

They had done awful work. He looked waxen, like glaze on a donut.

After we respectfully paused an obligatory moment in the chamber, we shuffled back out and handed red envelopes to Cherilyn, who wore a lace veil. Beneath the black filigree fringe was a pair of carefully made-up lips. Her black hair was coiled into a tight bun and tucked beneath a pillbox hat, and I was reminded of the headdress the client would wear in a 1930s detective movie. She took our envelopes and held them with both hands, thumbs on top, in her lap. Next to her sat her two children. I had trouble even looking at the boy, Alvin.

A few days after the funeral, I drove out to Knightingale Gardens to visit Cherilyn in their sixth-floor flat. I gave her another red envelope, this one containing a gift certificate to Lane Crawford. I told her to buy something for herself. Her daughter was at school, but Alvin was there, sitting on a sofa in the living room, watching a Japanese cartoon on the television and eating rice with peanut oil from a bowl. He glanced at me when I came in, but quickly turned away.

I had worn a suit and tie and felt overdressed in the small apartment. But I wanted to impress Cherilyn, I realized. I wanted her to like me.

She told me to call her Cheryl and offered me oolong tea. She had a round face with oval eyes and thick lashes. Her nose was small but delicately shaped and when her mouth was closed it turned into a slight bow. She wasn't beautiful and probably never had been, but after an appropriate time had passed I would ask her out to dinner. I wanted Silver's happiness. I didn't think it would take long. The following week, when the company offered me a job in New York to save me from the continuing cutbacks, I turned it down.