

Charles Lowe

Your Flower Boy

Every day you take a bike ride to interview a manager and maybe a worker or two. You are given freedom with a few conditions. Your article should include something positive on the factory boss and must of course answer the 5 W's: who, what, when, where and why of the state-run enterprise. The other limit is that the article should all in all be no more than the size of a thumb.

Most of the factories you visit are on the city outskirts, so for the two or three hours on the way to your appointment, you get in the habit of conversing with a reader who understands what it means to live on a bicycle and not at home with a settled family. You start to make rare connections: for instance, between the bicyclists crowded together on Pu-Yin Avenue and the snapshots thrown together in a photo album. But when it rains, you aren't sure what hit you. The rain clutters up your eyes, and you don't even bother wiping away the droplets. A skilled driver does not need to wipe away the raindrops. The key is to protect your pleated skirt and pressed white blouse so that when a manager meets you, you appear important enough to drive to the factory in a private vehicle.

The manager smiles at you. Managers sense whether you are important by the way you carry yourself. Can you bike an hour and a half in a storm, over trolley car tracks that threaten to swallow up your thin tires before you hop off at the factory's front gate, lock the bicycle in front of the guardhouse and enter through the glass doors, depositing the raincoat while appearing as if you have not exercised, as if your legs are not stiffening while you study an assistant who is straining the tea twice in front of you to let you know that your story is meaningful?

If you can pull that stunt off, you are happy. You are better than happy. You can open all doors. You are one of them. Best to be one of them—better than having money, better than having friends. And if you are one of them, the manager reaches out his hand and returns your smile with the same courteous smile.

Then you know that you've made it. Every door opens. Every manager gives you the ingredients for a good story, confident that you can parse out the appropriate dish. Of course, that talent is not unusual. You are a reporter two years out of college but are already well versed in what they want. Their needs are simple. They want you to note that productivity is rising at a miraculous rate, that the managers are understanding and humane. The workplace is safe. The workers are contented.

So you tell each manager what he wants to hear. The managers in these places are men, and you find that it is best to tell men what they want to hear. So you tell this manager that you are astounded at the conditions of the factory and even more amazed at his industrious character. You are indeed most happy to have the opportunity to pedal three hours through a rain clattering up your eyes in order to see such a stunning factory. And you know that the manager is contented with the introduction and might even make the effort to call your editor to put in a good report.

Then you take out a plastic envelope and from that envelope remove your Japanese Instamatic and shoot several photos of the manager—smiling, holding the hand of a worker though this worker's hands have a soft untouched feel and might not be the hands of a worker. Then you offhandedly jot down a provisional headline, pending approval by the editor and the

police censor: *Teamwork at the No. 2 Elevator Factory*. Then you get the payback, the one that you are most certain of.

The manager takes you out to a fancy lunch at a nearby restaurant. This is your favorite part, going out to a nearby restaurant with a senior manager who is given free access to an unlimited expense account.

You are lucky that day. They have your favorite, river bass, a bluish fish sliced open from the gills, bones so thin as to vanish in your throat. The manager does not talk. His lead supervisor does not talk. They have all anticipated your story so that it is almost not necessary to write the byline; now comes the serious part, the trays full of steaming dumplings with translucent skin and tightly wound lips, string beans green with seeds and bluish green bok choy circling the edges of a plate, followed by a watermelon sliced finely, seeds big enough to gag your throat.

When the banquet is served up, you do not return right away to the offices of the *Tianjin Daily*. A few hours ride is not good for the digestion. Even in a downpour, you assemble your gear and tour the factory grounds, pretending to take useful pictures, none of which will make the newspaper, so you show your not-so-serious side, taking a photo of a bluish-green liquid, a photo that reminds you of water from a pressed vegetable. That vegetable excess leaks into a stream. Then you stop in front of a woman without a mask holding a blow torch that randomly sends off sparks that threaten to blind her or you, and because your photos will never see the light of day, you tell yourself that you have shot these photos for your husband who believes that you are an artist.

Of course, that is a joke. You will spread your photos on the kitchen table after dinner. But your husband will ignore the photos, and you will be left alone to smile at the shadow bouncing off the worker's blurred feet, which makes his toes appear awkward next to a jagged nail. Your husband will give the photos a brief scan before he plunges into an uninterrupted sleep.

You study him—your husband has thin arms that dissolve beneath the blankets. You remove one of those blankets. The apartment holds onto the humidity, and you think this fellow sweating must be your husband, and your real job is not to be a reporter. That is for show. Your real job is to take care of him, this stranger who sweats too much.

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