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Maximilian Martini

Doing Business in American

We Wheelers were way out there on business vacation in China, not even regular China. The first thing Lucy wanted to do after we landed was get her nails done. I said are you joking. After all the vomiting you did. We're on the other side of the world, the people are beautiful, the culture is beautiful, we just got here. After an in-flight loss of unquantifiably many bodily fluids, the first thing you want to do is get your nails done. You have to be joking.

Before we could even get to the hotel, Lucy was actually yelling, "Stop the cab!" like we were in New York City and then she ran into the first salon she saw. She was in such a hurry that she left the cab door wide open and almost knocked over some poor old lady pushing a cart of potatoes.

It was not a good start to our little business vacation for two reasons. First of all, Lucy requested what are supposed to be these big blue waves painted onto her fingernails. The closest ocean is actually I don't know one million miles away from where we were. She said the craftsmanship in this part of the world was through the roof. She said the words craftsman and

roof. Honestly I'm not even sure where the roof is in regards to blue waves on a lady's nails but what do I know.

The truth is that she got the waves as a way of needling me with her passive aggression. It's really her expertise. She claims that she had told me she wanted to go somewhere with beaches and ocean waves and warm air for vacation. She says she had specifically told me she did not want to go to landlocked, cold-ass northwest China for vacation. This was after I floated the idea of a real adventure business vacation very, very far from home. She claims we talked about it more than once but I have to admit that I'm skeptical that these conversations ever happened.

In any case, I don't actually remember if these conversations ever happened but it hardly matters. I'm the one that bought the tickets. I just knew there was more action to be had off the beaten trail in terms of potential business and marital growth. And once we got there it wasn't even that cold.

But the other thing about the badness of this vacation start is that Lucy was just so quick to completely bail on me. She actually ran from the cab. I was hurt.

Since she seemed to be well on her way to real bliss without her me, though, I just said whatever. I left the bags with Lucy and walked my big ass straight to the market situation that was across the street. It looked pretty juicy and I was ready to do some damage commercially. After all that flying and Lucy's endless spewing and then the trail of dust she left getting away from me, I really felt it was time to get to adventuring. The sun was shining and it felt good on the skin, even though there was snow on the mountains outside of town.

When I finally froggered my way to the entrance of the market, I noticed that the gate said something by way of welcome. Fitting, I thought to myself. I also thought to myself that the letters per word ratio of this ridiculous language was way off.

But it did the trick. I felt very warmly welcomed indeed. I had on my good Dr. Scholl's with the arch support and my button-down shirt ventilating nicely out the back. Sunlight was bright on the sweaty foreheads of local brats and the trash they kicked around the concrete. A radio somewhere was playing some very Communist dance music, which I didn't mind. The whole area was completely overgrown with merchandise and rubbish and lousy children and I couldn't distinguish anything from anything else.

It was incredible. I could tell there was real action inside this bazaar situation if I could just find it. Plus, my wife was actively prettying herself and probably becoming less angry at me in the process. I really felt that the start was about to look up for us Wheelers, vacation wise as well as marriage wise and business wise, too.

Once I got past the welcome gate, though, it was difficult to hold on to the same focus. The Asian bazaar is something that every American should experience, of course, but it is not easy. My eyes were full of wonder in this place and also disgust. It was unquantifiably claustrophobic and I am not joking when I say that the entire place smelled like burning hair. Maybe five city blocks worth of body odor and UNESCO-commercial-level nasty kids running

loose. It was all set up like some kind of open-air Walmart situation with a different shop every couple feet made of cargo boxes. And just like Walmart they had everything: extension cables, track suits, tea sets, fedoras, instruments, disgusting food, you name it: a barber shop, chicken wire, high heels, watermelon, outdoor shitters, whatever. There were people everywhere but they were all very quiet. They are very ingenuitive in China, even if they don't understand money or communication all that well.

I was getting a little whelmed but I held my head high. I am what they call a whale in commercial situations. I am a businessman and I am not afraid to spend money in order to make money. Additionally, I was already attracting the attention of men and women both, some of them children. I could tell that these wacky locals could tell I was a whale straight off. I had my shopping shoes on. They knew it and I knew it. Let's do this, I thought to myself.

I began to peruse the bazaar hard. I started in what I like to refer to as the hardware department. That's a little joke. I don't know what they're trying for but what I saw was anything but a Home Depot. Every stall was full to overflowing with leaf blowers and rusty nails.

I did not purchase any of their scraps but some guys did stop me and I think tried to sell me a dishwasher. They put their faces very close to my face and they had quite a smell about them. I said where did you jerkoffs get this dishwasher. It was still dripping the tap water of whatever lovely family they had almost definitely stolen it from. They went silent after I said my piece and eventually they walked away, but I could tell they were understanding me. Stealing is absolutely abhorrent in my book and some things transcend the barriers of language and culture. At least their silence in response to my accusations was pretty damning. There was much laughter, too, but only after they walked away. I think it was unrelated. I think the laughing is some kind of a cultural thing out there.

Honestly, I don't know what all the laughter was about. There was so much laughing everywhere we went during this entire business vacation. It's strange because they were otherwise a very quiet people. I still have nightmares with the laughing. But it's a beautiful culture.

Anyway, I quickly moved on and tried to find the next department. This is when I began to notice that I had a posse and it was steadily increasing in size. It was mostly kids at this point but remarkably many adults were joining the show as well. I said to the crowd, don't you weirdos have jobs, but no one filled me in.

Next, they followed me through what I like to call the technology department. That's another little joke. Really it was just a mess, chock full of broken computer monitors and go stolen DVD players.

I did a quick glance through these wares but kept moving. I just had a feeling that there was something worthwhile at the heart of this nasty operation. I felt this compulsion that if I kept going I would find something. As in really something. So I continued my aggressive perusing. At this point, I was still feeling very good. I was impressed by the thought that probably no one had ever been to this bazaar. It occurred to me that I was so far out in northwest China and so far into

this bazaar that I might have been the first one to be here. And if anyone had been here before me, they certainly would not have gone to the very heart of the situation like I was doing. As I continued walking around and trying not to knock over emaciated local people, it was a real motivator of a thought. It put me in mind of explorers and crusaders. I was feeling very much an American whale of a businessman in Northwest China.

When I came to what looked like the men's clothing department, though, things started to get a little hairy. Naturally, the sun was still shining upon the Wheeler business vacation generally as well as my current location specifically. In fact, a nice breeze kept the smell from getting too bad even this deep into the bazaar. However, there is something about being an aggressively perusing American whale that attracts almost too much attention in northwest China. I was stopped by unquantifiably many men between the stalls of the men's department. Every local man just had to get a piece of me. They physically grabbed me at every turn. Some of these fellows had enormous hands that actually were never properly washed. They put their faces very close to my face and I'm guessing they were all drinking out of the same gallon of vodka because they all had the same smell as the dishwasher guys. I was encouraged at every turn to touch and wear these Chinese clothes that I didn't actually have any interest in and it was impossible to get a word in edgewise. It was not a pleasant consumer experience. My whelmed was getting dangerously close to overwhelmed.

I tried to move on as quickly as possible but it turned out that moving on was not actually very possible at all on account of all the grabbing the local men were doing. Plus these damn kids were just everywhere. They came from every corner like cockroaches. I was practically tripping over them and sometimes I was actually tripping over them. If there wasn't some adult man smiling too much and forcing a purchasable belt around my waist, it was a snot-nosed kid trying to untie my Dr. Scholl's with his snot-nosed hands.

The thing is they had really taken to the fact that I didn't understand their stupid language. Money talks, so their loss. The problem though is the brats really started talking, too. One little boy followed me from stall to stall yelling Lady Gaga in my face and trying to touch my hair. I don't mean he was singing Ms. Gaga's hits, which I wouldn't recognize anyway. I mean that he was actually yelling the words "Lady Gaga" at me until I actually had no choice but to actually tie him up in a red track suit still on the rack. It worked well enough and I felt relieved. However, I was forced to buy the track suit as a result and I was so upset I didn't even check on the availability of a return policy.

And that was only one of the unquantifiably many boys that were following me around at this stage of my vacation. There are not enough track suits in the world. At this point, the Lady Gaga thing was starting to catch on with the adults too and no one seemed to know anything about controlling children or personal space, either. They all seemed so drunk and none of them could communicate whatsoever. On top of this, I had gotten so far in that I was no longer sure how to get out from where I was in the bazaar. Every turn seemed to take me further into an endless throng of smiling men and screaming children all covered in vodka and dirt. I may or

may not have been running at this point. The sweating was out of control. I had officially reached overwhelmed.

I recognized in the din and the panic of my sprint through the men's department that I was approaching a low point in my business vacation. Throwing my big ass past these touchy locals was getting to be worse than all the vomiting Lucy did in flight. I was for the second time already in the uncomfortable position of doubting the success of my business vacation plans. In coming out here, I had wanted to do something not only for Lucy but for myself, for my own life, which is also Lucy's life. The business needed a shot in the arm and instead all I was getting was tiny track suits and vodka face.

So I ran. I pushed past unquantifiably many lunatics, young and old. This cultural laughing absolutely filled the air around me, blotting out the sun. I had gone completely blind to the deals available. I ran and ran like I hadn't run in many years. I think the ventilation in my button up was the only thing that kept me on my feet, well supported though they may have been.

The shopping was not a good feeling anymore. I was completely lost.

But you know what they say. That is, they have always said a thing about moments such as these, the real game changers. I can't exactly remember what they say but it is something and it applies to this real game changer of a moment in my life.

After unquantifiably many lefts and rights through dark and horrifying departments of this Asian bazaar, inscrutable laughter in my ears all the while, I finally reached something I recognized. I stopped running. I'd found myself in an atmosphere that was, dare I say, jovial. I panted and wheezed it in as well I could. Suddenly, I could feel the sunshine again on my skin and in fact I caught its glow off every purchasable surface. Even the sweaty foreheads of the Gaga crew, which had not had much trouble in keeping up with my jaunt down the aisles, were starting to shine again. I could tell the universe had finally started smiling at me and it was much better than the smiles of the toothless locos I'd been fielding throughout the men's department.

In other words, I'd come upon a real El Dorado at the heart of this damn bazaar. I knew immediately that I had hit the jackpot.

In other words, I was lost. Then I was found.

In other words, I'd found the souvenirs.

The value of a good souvenir is not lost on me as I am one that recognizes a salable treasure when he sees it. I've been selling Christmas decorations for many years back in Mt. Vernon. The one in Illinois. What I do is I rent Christmas out to retail places who need a little sparkle for their bottom lines. It's not a bad business as I furnish most of the state with their holiday cheer.

But actually things have not been going well in recent years. Naturally, November and December are my only good months as a seller of Christmas themed goods. Sometimes I can push a July thing on an inexperienced moron who is newly managing a Macy's or whatever. But that only gets me so far. It's been bad enough, in fact, that it's put real stress on my otherwise

Edenic marriage with Lucy. I sometimes find myself awake in the middle of the night wondering if people even want Christmas decorations at all these days. Even in America. I shudder to think. Things are not the way they used to be for us Wheelers.

Which is why we were on vacation to begin with. My plan had been to come to northwest China for a new lease on life. Lucy is like my partner in the business as well as in marriage, though she only seems to add real value to our team's total bitching output. Unqualifiably much bitching from her on a daily basis. I would be lying if I said I didn't hear her voice in the back of my head somewhere demeaning my work ethic every damn day. She blames me for the trouble our business has had and is always saying that I should be working harder to make sales vis-a-vis Christmas. But I will say right now that my work ethic is full-bore American, top to bottom. Her words are hurtful to me.

In any case, I know a good chachki when I see one and this was the motherload. The souvenir department at this bazaar really felt like my warehouse back in Mt. Vernon. That's because in northwest China, what they specialize in is handicrafts. It's their whole thing. Everybody loves them. Little mountains and little goats and that kind of shit all made of felt. And that's what they call them, too: they say handicrafts in English. They do have trouble with that third syllable but really they're unquantifiably beautiful. You can get a nativity set made of felt and I don't think they've ever even heard of Christmas.

I fell in love with the entire situation. I even got one of their ridiculous hats, also felt. Would not be caught dead! But, honestly, for once in my damn life it felt like I'd hit the big time. I really thought that this was the new stock that would uplift my business and save the marriage. I immediately recruited the little Gaga monsters and just started buying everything I could buy. We filled many a trash bag with felt souvenirs and we were all laughing just so much. It was such a good kind of laughing! I think I bought the whole bazaar all out. It turned out that Lady Gaga was my muse in Northwest China. It was some kind of American instinct had me by the balls.

So of course, I was very excited to show Lucy what I had done. I felt that I'd reached a real watermark for myself in terms of personal and spiritual solvency, not to mention marital. We've just landed, I thought to myself, she's prettying herself up, and I'm making huge progress for the business. Really going to turn things around for us Wheelers. I didn't think she was going to hate me for my investment.

Even in that moment, however, I knew that I was not home free, revitalization-of-marriage and small-business-ownership wise. That's because the entire time I was shoveling these handicrafts into trash bags, commanding the hordes to do my bidding and laughing with myself for once, my wife's incredibly loud nagging still managed to ring in my ears and almost ruin the whole experience. That's partly because I had not failed to remember that I hadn't run any part of this scheme by Lucy. I am talking real blockbuster deals in stall after stall, I made a damn killing on these handicrafts, but I also did not exactly ask permission. And I had spent a lot of money.

That's what I was feeling as I went to pick her up from the salon. Here we go, I thought. Let's do this. It felt like a big moment.

But I wasn't really given an opportunity to explain myself. Before I could even get her in the cab, she was already doing her damndest to tell me every detail of her experience at the salon. And actually, from what I could gather, it was a doozy in that salon. Long story short, there was some kind of altercation. When the quote craftsmen were almost done, I guess Lucy had wanted to show her appreciation. With her free hand, she had started to reach for some cash, a little tip, just a little something to say thank you. The problem over there is that the cash is like Monopoly money. I'm not joking that you can tell the denomination from across the street and there's no telling as to why. Lucy pulls all her cash out and was very likely just flapping it around in this tiny closet of a beauty salon like a damn geisha fanning herself. Not that they have geishas over there, or maybe they do, I have no idea.

It was a little bit hard to follow Lucy's talking, as per usual, but I guess she had tried to show her appreciation and these people just freaked out. God knows why. Lucy was practically shrieking telling me all this. Not to mention bleeding not a little bit.

I tried to listen and I tried to understand. I am pretty sure it was not my wife that caused things to get so physical inside that salon. That's not really like her. Not usually, anyway. I mean this woman is not very big by American standards. There's just no way she broke all that glass on her own. There must have been some infighting, local and beautiful as they are.

After many minutes she finally got it somewhat out of her system and that's when we eventually came around to the topic of how I had spent my alone time. I was very renewed in my excitement. But also fearful.

Lucy was still bleeding and kind of freaking out and repeating details of her altercation story when she finally noticed that our business-vacation rental vehicle was full ass to tits with these handicrafts. "What the hell have you done, Bruce!?" she says to me. More like screams at me, but I'm not splitting hairs.

I said, "Babe, aren't they beautiful!? Aren't you always telling me I don't have any ambition?!"

She spat back at me, "I cannot even fit into this minivan! How much did you spend on this trash?"

I can admit there may have been a miscalculation in my presentation. Because she was right to sense that something was possibly awry vis-a-vis my spending. We had allocated a very quantifiable amount of money for our vacation. It's not like we have mounds of cash just sitting around. However, my American instinct had gotten me so much by the balls back at that bazaar that I may or may not have spent all the business-vacation money on these handicrafts. And actually it may have been more than just the business-vacation money. It's so hard to tell.

By the time we got back to the hotel, Lucy was looking pretty pale. Oh no, here comes more vomiting, I thought and thankfully kept that comment to myself. What I did say to her was,

it's not like we weren't out here to do business. We are the doers, I reminded her. That's our role in the world order as Americans of business. That's our part to play.

Well it turns out Lucy did not realize we were out there as doers doing business. Maybe I neglected to specify. She told me at this time that she thought our trip to northwest China was a quote "vacation vacation" and not a "business vacation." She thought it was a quote second honeymoon. I swear on my wedding ring I do not know where she even learned that phrase.

Whatever we were calling it, we still had many days of this vacation left. We didn't really talk for the remainder. Not for lack of trying on my end. Even at dinner that very night, I said, "Lucy, listen," I said, "things are looking unquantifiably up for us. Forget about the salon. It's like you tipped those people, just let it go." She was still fuming and the bruising under her eyes was not getting any less noticeable.

She wouldn't say it but I knew she was holding on to this thing with not being allowed to tip. That's just how she is and it's why I love her so damn much despite all the bitching and demeaning. She simply does not like to come off as ungrateful. She can really harp on this kind of thing and she does not always go down easy. I can definitely say that I did not marry her because she was nice to me. So I said, "Listen, it is as if you tipped. And here's why: you paid what I guess is good money for ten blue triangles and you more or less walked yourself out of there with only eight blue triangles. Due to the physicality of the altercation. That's tipping in my book. That's business."

She did not respond, though she did eat her meal, which was a good sign. Honestly, I'm not sure she was exactly listening to me but I still say the whole thing was a win win.

Lucy has more recently informed me that she doesn't so much agree on it being a win win at all. She's had some time to think and has come to the unsubtle conclusion that this trip and my behavior vis-a-vis money in particular were some kind of last straw. She says I'm ruining everything: the business, the marriage, Christmas. She actually told me I was permanently ruining Christmas for her, so that's pretty bad.

We ended up deciding to cut a couple days off our business vacation, which was not an inexpensive thing to do. Honestly, I was just too excited to get to work selling these bastards to the world, or at least to the box stores of enormous Illinois. Plus, after a day or two of silence and some unpredictable crying from one of us Wheelers, it just seemed like it was time for us to opt for an early flight.

And though I said I wouldn't be caught dead, the thing is I did get caught dead. On the way to the airport for the flight back, I opted to wear one of those ridiculous damn felt hats. It was a great success. There was unquantifiably much laughing on the way to the airport because I was wearing the hat from the cab driver and people on the street and even the security guys got in on the fun while aggressively patting me down. This time I knew it was a good kind of laughing, though. I finally had the culture on my side. Everybody loved the hat.

Actually, everybody but Lucy loved the hat. She specifically said that she hated the hat. It was the first time she'd spoken to me since she saw the handicrafts in the cab.

She said, “You are a damn fool.”

I said, “What, you don’t like the new look?” I was trying to make light.

She said, “I want a divorce.”

I think she was joking.

I can admit a mistake. And obviously things are some quality other than peachy. But I just can’t help but think we are about to turn this Wheeler ship around with these souvenirs. We are on the cusp of real money making back stateside. Lucy has been staying with her sister but I am not worried. I am not worried about our business or our marriage and that’s thanks to these handicrafts.

Because the thing is, and it’s beautiful, really, is that these handicrafts are going to save everything. They make such great ornaments on the Christmas tree or just around the house or whatever. The market is unquantifiably limitless for these souvenirs. This is what Lucy does not understand.

My house is chock full of handicrafts ready to sell. They are stacked up in every room. Honestly, that’s because we’ve recently lost the warehouse to a misunderstanding vis-a-vis my bank loan. But I’m not worried.

Lucy loved the damn things up until she moved out. She used them as knickknacks, paperweights, dish rags, whatever. In fact, I was thankful every time she chose a beautiful and cultural but importantly also felt and lightweight handicraft as a tool in our relationship talks. Maybe she was trying to make a point by throwing the things at me, I don’t know.

That’s a joke. Obviously she’s not throwing anything at me now.

In all reality, now’s the time to make a move with these handicrafts. Now’s the time to strike and make some major cash in America. I mean I personally have to strike because I may or may not have really put all the Wheeler family savings into this without Lucy’s knowledge. At the time.

But no matter. Everything I do I do for her. I believe she will start talking to me again. We only have to sell the story of these handicrafts in order to move stock all over the Midwest. And that’s the point, really, the brass tacks of this thing. It’s because they are so poor in northwest China. People love this kind of story. The poor women, they work all day. Kids, food, cleaning, cows or crops or whatever. It’s a real picture. They’re darker up there than you might guess, too, and that doesn’t hurt our market position.

So we just have to get across the pictures of these people and the wretched damn way they live as well as the beauty of the handicrafts they love to make. Then everyone in America will want to fill their homes with Chinese handicrafts just like me and Lucy. That’s the plan. I really mean it when I say the market is limitless! Things will be back on track. Money in the bank. For them too.

Because the Chinese are not doing so hot, either. As a culture, they are losing hearts and minds. And there’s some bad blood, sure. Barriers and history and whatever. I won’t deny it. But

there's good blood, too. The good blood of competition. Risk and reward, danger and bounty, adventure and drama and mystery, etc.

That's just what it's like over there. It is actually the other side of the world from gigantic Illinois, but they're just like us in so many ways. The problem is that they just do not understand that the invisible hand guides everything. The invisible hand is the whole shebang. We Americans know and understand this by instinct. It pumps the good blood with the bad. This is what I always say. The money flows through the veins of the invisible hand. The invisible hand, turgid with money and blood, points the way to greener pastures and harder cash where blood is good and guided by the invisible hand through the free, open markets.

They don't understand this kind of thing, the Chinese. They don't understand that the money flows in the hand through a free market with profit for all! For god's sake, I don't think they even tip!

My point is that going to China got me out of my box and I'm excited to share the bounty. It was good for myself, good for my business, and of course good for my marriage. Me and Lucy will make it work. Really beautiful people. We are really not any different.

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