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WHO MOVED MY UNDERWEAR?
by Michael LaRocca
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To Jan, again, because without her I'd probably still be stuck in
Watha, North Carolina, population 98, yee haw!

Part One

China

Chapter One

How We Lost Picasso

We were scheduled to move from Hangzhou to Shaoxing on January 30, 2004. The school would send a van to Hangzhou to take us to our new place. Then we would teach at the Business and Management College. After two years in Hangzhou, it was time to move on.

Two days prior to the official move date, I received a phone call from Shaoxing. Someone had wrecked the van a week or two earlier, and it was still in police impound. So, instead, they could send two cars. One for Jan (my lovely Australian wife), Picasso (our lovely Calico cat from Hong Kong) and Michael (crazy American redneck). The other for our stuff. I said that would be enough.

Y'all should throw me some props for this. I did not laugh until after I hung up the phone. You have to admire the honesty, don't you? Not the usual "There has been a slight problem" or "There may be a delay." Just a quick "We trashed the van."

Later, I looked at our stuff. Then we packed some more. Then I looked again. Would it all fit in one car, plus the trunk of the second car? Jan said it was obviously impossible, but I've done some pretty amazing packing in my day, so for me it hovered at a big fat maybe.

Dean Li called Wednesday night to say they'd arrive Friday at 10 or 11 a.m. When Mary (our Foreign Affairs Officer, or FAO) called two minutes later to tell us about the wrecked van, she changed the time to a definite 10:00. "You'll be unpacked in time for lunch."

9:00 Friday morning, Dean Li called. They would arrive in 20 minutes. We were doing the slow, leisurely pack. Time to kick it up into speed-packing mode.

Twenty minutes later, the phone rang. The gang was at Estate Five instead of Estate Four. We needed that delay. Five minutes later, another phone call. "Which building?" 31. "We are outside your door." I looked, and they were. They caught me bagging old cat litter so we could transport the empty box.

Dean Li and assistant Lou (pronounced Low) looked at the pile of stuff. "Two cars," Dean Li stated. Not a whole lot of

emotion in his face, and not much in his voice either, but enough. I knew he thought there was no way it'd all fit into two cars.

Seemingly resigned to their unpleasant fates, they grabbed some bags and started moving us down the four flights of stairs. Dean Li was also working behind the scenes with the neighbors and/or his cell phone. I missed this part because I was trying to capture and box up Picasso. Capturing Picasso and being oblivious are usual when I move.

By the time Picasso was safely packed for transport, and the bags were downstairs, Dean Li had procured a flatbed pickup truck. Downstairs, the pile of bags sat on the ground. The truck was beside them. Before we could load the bags, we had to move the boxes downstairs. Oh, joy.

Folks, you haven't picked up my boxes. They were full of books. Books are, in case you'd forgotten, heavy. But guess what? We're teachers. We have books.

One brief vignette. I picked up a box to carry it. The driver took it from me. I picked up another. Young stud Lou took it from me. Having figured out the routine, I picked up a light box. Dean Li grabbed that. Seeing no more Chinese people around, I grabbed the heaviest monster for myself and began my descent.

At the third flight landing, Lou and I passed Dean Li. He was resting his box against a wall and panting for breath. At the second flight landing, I passed Lou. He was resting his box against a wall and panting for breath. Li joined him.

At the truck, I handed my box to a worker. I turned around in time to see Lou, running and falling forward. I rushed up to him and caught his box. I gave it to the man on the truck. Then I turned again in time to see Lou catching the driver and his box, and I rushed past them to catch Dean Li and his box.

Yeah, I might be old, but I'm a farmer. We're stronger than the average businessman.

From the time they arrived to the time we left, 30 minutes. Dean Li led the convoy, and promptly took a wrong turn trying to navigate the maze of Cui Yuan Si Qi. Our driver exclaimed something in Chinese and stopped. Behind him, the truck honked its horn.

I think our driver decided the truck (Lou in the passenger seat) would retrieve Dean Li, and we were on our way. Driver in the seat of the Buick LeSabre. Jan, Michael and Picasso in the back.

Thirty minutes to get out of Hangzhou. Thirty minutes to get to the Shaoxing toll booth. Thirty minutes to get to our new home. Since it was a 90-minute ride, of course Picasso meowed for 90 minutes. But she was, for the most part, a happy cat. New sights! New smells!

Our temporary accommodations were better than I expected. We were to live there for three weeks. Our place was on the second floor. Box storage on the third. Shaoxing University had a team of ancient he-man workers on hand to move everything to the third. Since they're stronger than this old farmer, I let them.

My primary role was traffic cop. I'd see what was in a worker's hands and direct him to the second or third floor. Meanwhile I made a trek or two up to the third to bring something down, such as a litter box.

I had just finished filling up the aforementioned and ever vital litter box, and was about to assemble a scratching post or two, when door guard Jan rocked our world. She informed us that Picasso was missing.

Please, read that sentence again.

"She informed us that Picasso was missing."

There were four of us in the flat. Jan, Dean Li, Lou, and me. The flat is really too small to hold so many bodies. We looked under the bed, in cupboards and wardrobes, under the washing machine. I knew to look up to the high places, and I'm sure Jan did too. It was frantic and chaotic, and there was no Picasso.

I learned my search technique from the police, by the way. I've never been a cop, but my brother was. I was only a rent-a-cop who used to watch too many TV shows. Start at one end of the flat, make absolutely positively sure the suspect isn't behind you before moving forward. One sweep, you're done. I made three sweeps. No sign of Picasso. I looked absolutely everywhere. There was no Picasso.

After that, a total mess ensued. Dean Li called someone on his cell phone to cancel our scheduled lunch.

For my part, I'd walked around outside calling Picasso's name and meowing, and I'd gotten a response. A high wall separated me from the responding cat. I could find no way over it.

I walked along the wall, discovered that it ended at the street, did some frantic walking along the street, and finally found an entrance. I walked through a gate which was guarded by two sleeping dogs. The more active of the two showed the diligence to open his eyes, then close them again.

Inside I found a school which appeared to be abandoned. A large pile of desks and chairs on the ground outside. Doors closed or ajar at random. Almost nothing locked. This school was between me and the wall from which I'd heard the meowing.

I walked into a classroom. I could look out the windows opposite the door and see an area overgrown with weeds, between the classrooms and the wall. That's where Picasso was. But all the windows had bars on them. I checked classroom after classroom trying to find a way into that weedy area.

Meanwhile, each classroom had a different motto on the wall. As I tried to get past the walls and the bars separating me from Picasso, here's what I read:

- Hope for the best and prepare for the worst (meow?)
- It is the first step that is difficult
- As you sow so you reap
- One is never too old to learn
- No pains no gains
- Thought is free
- We must learn to walk before we run
- Time and tide wait for no man
- Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today
- The proof of the pudding is in the eating
- The eyes are the window of the mind
- Good seed makes a good crop
- Practice makes perfect
- You can't tell a book by its cover
- Where there is a will there is a way (meow?)

After enough exploration, I found a shower room. I had to duck, because this was an elementary school. On the other side, I found myself in those overgrown woods. Before me, the wall. To my left, another wall. To the right, an expanse of woods that passed by the barred windows of those classrooms. I turned right and got moving.

No sign of a cat. No idea where I was in relation to where I'd been when I heard the cat from the other side of the wall. No humans over there to guide me when I called out.

Finally, I tromped through the woods. Thin treelike weeds as tall as my head, which I simply tramped down because they were dry and brittle. (Much later I found twigs in my pockets.) The ground was muddy, though. I walked and called. Walked and called. Walked and called.

Finally, movement! I rushed and called. At the point where I could walk no further -- wall in the way again -- there was a fallen concrete post. It leaned against the wall, and it had bent rather than breaking due to several rods of rebar inside. And if I walked up it without killing myself, I'd be atop the wall.

Once I was there, I stared into the face of a Calico cat. She was watching me from the top of the wall, tree leaves hanging over her ginger and black face, familiar golden eyes looking a bit confused and frightened.

I called out to Picasso the way I always had, with my hand in the familiar Chinese gesture for "come here" and some chirping noises that Fang back in Hangzhou taught me a year ago.

After a moment, she bolted.

Shit!

To my right was the way I'd come up the wall. Ahead of me were more walls, not to mention a balancing act. To my left, I saw, it wasn't so far to drop to the ground. I dropped and ran to try to get ahead of Picasso.

At the other end of the wall, a cat! But it was a huge, very pale orange who seemed a bit startled and perhaps offended at my presence.

Now wait a minute. I know dang well I saw Picasso. When did they switch cats on me? Where did Picasso go when she saw this guy? I was more confused than ever now.

I ran back along the wall, on the side I didn't want to be on, and meowed to her again. She had responded the first time I'd meowed to her from over there, which is why I had gotten so close in the first place. But this time, no response.

No doubt it went through Jan's mind somewhere along this time that, back in Melbourne, her father's funeral was occurring. We were a wreck, I'll tell ya.

Eventually, we wound up at the flat. Jan, Li, Lou, and me. Li and Lou had their bicycles. Our own Gang of Four. We had a little strategy session. Then, armed with some tins of cat food, I returned to the school. Jan waited at home in case Picasso returned. Li and Lou also did some scouting, following up different leads than the one I was working.

Jan's attempts to get them to go eat failed. Folks, they'd had a hard day. Up early, on the road, lifting more than they're used to, another drive, more moving, and now a frantic cat search. And eating is sacred in China. They wouldn't eat, but at least we had a refrigerator full of oranges. (The University gave us the oranges.) They could eat while we hunted.

I explored the elementary school in much more detail. Ran into the big pale orange cat twice. I was drawn to the sound of running water because I knew Picasso would be drawn to it as well. It was a second-story toilet, above the girls' showers. The ballcock hadn't dropped properly. I have no idea why the place even had running water, any more than I know why the school bells were still ringing on schedule, but I left the water running.

The school was an interesting place to explore. The mottoes on the walls, low ceilings, small desks, dirty chalkboards covered in English, chalk and chalk dust, the soft feel of the open courtyard which must have been a playground, pictures of Communist Party leaders outside the classrooms. The schedules on the doors were for classes that began 9/30/03. The school looked like it'd been abandoned much longer than that.

What could we do next? Keep hunting like this and striking out? Leave the windows open and hope Picasso found her way home?

Life without Picasso. Wondering if we could cope, wondering why we were so attached to a cat in the first place. Having absolutely no desire to go get another cat. Wondering

how long we'd keep her stuff around pining for her return. Would we move it to the new flat in three weeks? Wouldn't it be embarrassing to throw it out after making these guys haul it?

Finally, back into the woods. Through the shower, through the bushes, gently calling her name. Wondering what pale orange was making of this mess.

Something blasted by me, at my feet, and damn near gave me a heart attack. My first thought was that it was a big white rat. I could feel my heart racing as I watched the animal pass. Not writer's hyperbole here, but the actual feeling of my heart thumping away in there.

The animal was, in fact, a white kitten with a spot of gray on the back of its head. My heart grew silent enough for me to hear myself panting.

So, just how many cats were out here?

Some time later, I encountered another cat. I saw her Calico back as she fled along the wall and vanished again. So yes, there was a Calico out there! I had been right the first time. But what could I do if Picasso ran away every time I saw her?

It occurred to me that, if Picasso was out here, me tromping around in the woods was so noisy that she'd never realize it was me. Plus, she'd shown that she had too much sense to be in any immediate danger out alone in the world for the first time.

I set out some tins of cat food, a trail leading to our new home, then returned to the running water. I wandered around a bit, out of the woods, just kinda hoping I'd see Picasso eating from a tin.

Finding a less-than-full tin later would prove nothing since she was not alone in these woods. Every time I checked, though, all the tins were still full. I encountered pale orange another time or two. Not eating the bait, though. That fat cat looked like it could suck down all three tins and still want more.

I looked out the window of the second story toilet and saw the old security guard running in the direction of my flat. I couldn't picture him running unless he had news. That's right, this was a major cat hunt going on. Everyone was in on it.

I rushed to a classroom on the second story. From there, I could see into the balcony of our flat. I had checked from time

to time for an informational fix, but had only gotten a happy wave from Dean Li. This time, nothing.

I returned to the wall. Through the woods and up the cement pole. Jan was on the other side of the wall. I dropped down. There had been another Calico sighting along the wall.

Next, we got a report from a woman on a bicycle that the Calico had left that area to go in a different direction. A hand-drawn map of the apartments with the Calico's new location. Also, possible reports that we were after the wrong cat. And, in fact, more confusion.

The problem with these reports was that they were in Chinese. Jan has enough vocabulary to interpret them perhaps 30 minutes later or perhaps in hindsight. But she was trying to repeat them to me hot off the press, so mistakes happened. But at least she could kinda sorta receive them. I have no such ability.

Jan had also encountered a Calico face-to-face at some point, but my memory of the sequence of events is totally shot. She had thought it didn't look like Picasso anymore, because her face was so frightened and stressed and puffed up and stuff.

I did some more patrolling in the other direction, and saw a bit of pavement. Then the old campus, full of green. If Picasso was in there, I knew, it would take forever to find her. And if she was moving in the wrong direction, and covering so much ground so quickly, I knew I was screwed.

But on the other hand -- let me play the racist card here -- every time someone saw Picasso I knew she hadn't been eaten.

Dispirited, I returned to the flat for a rest and regroup. Our gang of four decided perhaps she would return at night, and that we'd leave the windows open and hope. This just wasn't working.

The cat hunt began at 12:30. It was 4:00 now. I was ready to rest. Unpack? I couldn't even think of it. Just rest.

One minute after we closed the door behind Li and Lou, Picasso walked out of the bathroom. Quite nonchalant. A bit of a stretch, a bit of a yawn. She'd never been outside at all.

WE LOOKED IN THERE! I'M NOT KIDDING! The only place to hide is under the washing machine, and everybody looked at least five times.

Aware that it might be possible to climb up inside, Jan had looked up that way too, and I'd reached up in there from underneath and felt no fur.

How in the heck did she do this? We don't know. But, in all that hunting, the doors and windows were open numerous times. She didn't leave. Had no desire to leave. Might have been asleep. We're baffled.

So, we'd wasted almost four hours chasing the wrong Calico. Amazingly, we almost caught her several times. I believe pale orange was also attracted to me. Calico definitely paused to stare at me prior to her first flight along the top of the wall, and Jan got a good look at her face as well.

What was Lou's first reaction when he heard that Picasso was here? "Close the doors! Shut the windows!"

We have also learned that many people in our neighborhood have cats living with them. We've learned that many people, such as the woman on the bicycle, can see a cat and know where it lives. That's what she'd been trying to tell us before, we realize only in hindsight. And, it's good to know that they know that we have a Calico, even if they've never seen her. She hides when people visit.

Come to think of, it's a good thing Li and Lou saw Picasso in Hangzhou, and in the carrier before we entered our new apartment. They haven't seen her since then, and might be tempted to wonder if we have an imaginary friend. Maybe they wonder anyway. I mean, we can't prove she's really here *now*, can we?

By the way, how many bosses have you had who would spend four hours looking for your cat? How many employees have you had whose cat you'd spend four hours looking for?

And hey, we do know how to make our presence known the moment we move into a new neighborhood.

Chapter Two

The Pied Piper of Pussycats

Evening. The day began in Hangzhou. Now we lived in Shaoxing. In between, the Picasso adventure that gave me a few more gray hairs. Maybe two hours after we "found" Picasso, Lou returned because it was time to buy me a bicycle.

You know how bicycles have those little racks on the back? In China, people ride on them. This evening was the first time that I ever did that. I also hope it's the last.

Riding back there is a bit rough on an old man's back, especially since I was in a bit of pain from the move and the exploration. It was probably worse on Lou's legs, though, peddling with me on his bike. He was wearing a suit and tie, same as every time I've seen him before or after.

The first shop we went to was closed. We rode toward the second shop, but I had to get off before we passed the police station or else we'd get a ticket. We walked the rest of the way. The second shop was also closed, since it was still the Lunar New Year holiday.

Lou locked up his bike and we caught a cab to the big Western supermarket. I chose the ugliest bike I've ever seen in my life. Banana yellow. The brand name is Red Pepper. Made in Hangzhou. Also the cheapest bike in the store, since people keep stealing them from me. Nice ride, though. A few days later I armed it with a second bell because a single bell is only background noise here, easily ignored.

I'd forgotten what working brakes are like. I never told you about wrecking into a car in Hangzhou and destroying its side view mirror, but it wouldn't have happened if my bike had had halfway decent brakes. The car was parked.

After we bought the new bike, Lou decided that he'd ride my bike to his bike while I rode in the back of a rented three-wheeled bike. Drivers wanted 6 yuan (US 75 cents) but Lou would only pay 3. The fourth driver in the long queue was willing to haggle. I love watching a master haggler. Finally, 3.8 and we were on our way.

I'm teaching at a Business college now, by the way. So what do we know about Li and Lou? Problem solvers and master hagglers. Yep, that's business.

Also, it takes a special skill for a Chinese person to haggle when the vendor *knows* he's being bankrolled by a rich *lao wei*. Even if the *lao wei* is not rich and is not paying the bill. His white face is enough. *No discount for you!*

When we reached Lou's old bike, I followed him to his office to check my email, then returned home. My body was in some pain. Jan was worse, since she aggravated her back before we moved. I recovered first, but neither of us did it overnight.

Picasso, however, was in fine fettle. She slept a lot, as it'd been a busy day of moving and exploring. She didn't explore the woods, though. Only we did that. Finally she descended from the high cupboards that night to give me many long cuddles with loud purrs.

"Daddy, ask me why you got so attached to a cat."

Jan, who'd worked just as hard as I had, received no such treatment. She'd have to wait days for a cuddle. Typical Picasso behavior. Remember, she slept through all the excitement. And by the way, whenever Jan gets a great idea about how to improve something for Picasso, I always get the credit.

Also, Picasso was quite dirty. Crawling under washing machines and into the innards, to boldly go where no one has gone before, can do that. She needed to scrub herself for several days to get clean again.

The next morning, Picasso followed me around the flat, just like always, watching everything I did. Daddy's making coffee. Daddy's washing dishes. Daddy's using the toilet. Daddy's starting up the washing machine. Sounds good. I'm glad I'm not hiding in there.

Two days after that, Picasso watched me watch the greatest Super Bowl of all time. That was cool. Monday morning, February 2, in my time zone. The NFL website said CCTV-9. Our TV didn't get it, but Lou took care of that Sunday evening. Monday morning rolled around, and I learned the NFL website was wrong. CCTV-5, the sports channel, not CCTV-9, the English channel.

I watched the game with the sound off since it was in Chinese. I only turned the sound on during that halftime mascot feature to listen to Madden, Fisher, Cowher, etc. with

Chinese subtitles. I spent the rest of the halftime break making coffee, using the bathroom, microwaving some food, etc.

That's right, young adolescent males, I missed Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction. Possibly they didn't show it here, since I read somewhere there was a one-hour tape delay I didn't know about. You have Daylight Savings Time and we don't, so sometimes we're 12 hours ahead of EST and sometimes we're 13 hours ahead, and I get confused.

Some *jiaozi*, eaten with chopsticks and dipped in a little soy sauce, is a perfect Super Bowl snack. How many other rednecks have ever told you that?

Also, my Super Bowl experience was like being at the game, since we had no commercials. Crowd shots and sideline planning shots. But, unlike being at the actual game, we had no obnoxious fans, no queues at the toilets, no godawful stank, and much better camera angles.

When the Panthers scored their first touchdown, Picasso leaped down from the cupboard, perched on my shoulder, and meowed and purred enthusiastically for a couple of minutes. She stayed awake to enjoy the rest of the game. Jan woke up for the Picasso display, then drifted in and out of sleep after that.

I followed every play just fine without the talking heads in the booth, and predicted every penalty before reading the ref's lips. I also read Delhomme's lips. After he threw the record setting bomb to Muhammad, he said, "Moose, you know you're my motherfucker." Seems I wasn't the only one watching JERRY McGUIRE between the NFC Championship and the Super Bowl.

Incidentally, it was Super Bowl 38, not Super Bowl XXXVIII. I don't like Roman numerals because, when in America, do as the Americans do. Even when they're wrong.

Also, let's consider that the Super Bowl and the Picasso hunt each lasted four hours. Amazing the Super Bowl could move me so much that soon after the Picasso hunt. But then again, both had cats and losses.

After the game, Lou and I went to the police station to report that two new foreigners had arrived in Shaoxing. This involved watching an old guy fill out a lot of paperwork by hand.

At the desk opposite his, a cop had a lot of envelopes full of money to check in with a secretary that he seemed inordinately fond of. These, I presume, represented income from traffic tickets.

The good part came when the envelopes of money ran out. The secretary opened the next one, and a heavy watch plunked onto the desk. They laughed, so I laughed. She wrote it down on the sheet. Next envelope, five jade bracelets. Next up, two watches that didn't weigh so much. Cheaper watches or more expensive traffic ticket, I don't know which.

I noticed that, just out the window and down the road, was a night market. I guess they go hock this stuff out there, then someone buys it, then that someone gets a ticket, and the cycle continues.

So, if you're ever visiting China and you get a ticket, don't pay it. Just give the cops your personal belongings until they go away.

On the way back from the police station, I saw my third Calico in Shaoxing. Lou missed that one, and he probably never saw the one on the wall, and I think he has his doubts about Picasso. But once again, we live in Calico country.

For several days after the Picasso episode, Jan and I couldn't walk past the security guards without them meowing at us. Old Chinese peasants are the best.

The day after the game and the police station, when I returned home from shopping, a cat meowed at me from the other side of the wall. At the very spot where I'd ended the bait trail. Same meow as before, really not sounding like Picasso at all. I told ya, we were stressed that day.

I meowed back, he/she meowed, I meowed, he/she meowed, etc. I left the cat and went into the apartment, and heard it outside the sunroom window. Picasso was asleep at the time.

A few hours later, the meowing resumed. Picasso heard it. She sat on the top of her scratching post, looking out the window of her sunroom, wondering what the heck to make of that. She didn't respond, even though it lasted quite a while.

More cats? Please, not more cats. Don't make me out to be like a pied piper, attracting them wherever I go. Picasso doesn't want any more cats.

We moved to our new apartment on February 11, a full ten days ahead of schedule, and it's absolutely fantastic. Picasso can't stop thanking me for her new home. Hopefully the cats won't find us here.

Chapter Three Chinese Physical

Wednesday, February 18, 7 a.m. Jan and I squeezed into the back seat of a car with Lou and we were off to Hangzhou. In the front seat were the driver, and Laura from Singapore.

The plan was for the three of us to get the physicals that are required in order for foreigners to teach in China. Then the driver would take the three of us back to Shaoxing while Lou waited in Hangzhou to get our test results in the afternoon.

This is the law. If you live in China for a year, you must get a physical. I moved to Hong Kong in 1999 and Hangzhou in 2002, but I'd never had a physical. A few in my Boy Scout days, and one when I was considering joining the Army in my younger days, but none in China.

I noticed the driver early in this unpleasant voyage. What was he doing? Well, he was using the mirrors. Rearview, both side views. And his eyes were scanning. Just like they teach you in Drivers Ed, or Defensive Driving. The guy was a real pro. Something I'd never seen in China before. I guess that's how it caught my half-awake brain. Just so rare. I'd forgotten all that driver training stuff. Our guy was *the* guy. Film him and use it in school.

So there I was. Squeezed into a back seat, bladder full of coffee. One hour later, we reached the edge of Hangzhou. That's when we learned that nobody knew where we were going. Lou was working with two cell phones, one with GPS. The driver was stopping beside people. Then he and Lou would roll down the windows and yell at the same time. Finally, we got accurate directions and found the place, which was hidden well. Very well. China's like that. So many side streets and back roads that were built long before cars arrived.

Lou went to the front desk to do a bunch of paperwork, but I didn't watch him. I watched the driver, because I know that drivers have an unerring homing device in their brains that allows them to find strange toilets in record time. The coffee, remember.

I'd been told in advance that they worked fast here, that we'd be home in time for lunch. So I was expecting a blood test, just to ensure no Westerners were bringing AIDS into the

country. And sure enough, that's how it began. I have yet to meet a Chinese blood-taker who caused me any pain.

However, we had not been adequately warned. This was to be a full physical, a dehumanizing experience in controlled chaos using mass-production techniques that would make Henry Ford proud, and one of the few times I've seen Chinese people move fast.

Some folks were friendly. Some didn't talk, because of the language barrier. But we also met grunTERS, one really tough drill sergeant of a woman, one who called me a liar, and the brutal EKG woman who likes to twist people's body parts around and rip off women's bras.

The experience is a blur, and that's quite probably a good thing. The goal here was to process as many people as fast as possible, and they certainly succeeded in that. For the most part, I was laughing (inside!) at the general silliness. But it could just as easily have been the Inquisition all over again if I'd been in the wrong mood.

Ultrasound is where I got the accusing "Did you eat breakfast?" We were told not to, so I didn't. Heck, I never do anyway. Just a glass of orange juice and a few gallons of coffee. Furthermore, when I squatted in the rather nasty hospital toilet to empty my bowels, my coffee bladder turned it into a very long experience. So, it's not my fault the ultrasound was calling me a lying sack of... well, you fill in that word.

A later check in the car back to Shaoxing confirmed that she didn't just randomly ask everyone this question. Laura was likewise accused of eating breakfast, but Jan was not.

EKG woman was evil. The only one I'm gonna say that about. This was a no-shoe room. No problem. I'd quit tying the things. On, off, on, off, on, off. Also, I'd quit buttoning my shirt. On, off, on, off, on, off. But popping off my shoes wasn't enough. No, she made me wear the teddy bear slippers. I couldn't just do sock feet with her. Evil!

She pointed at the bed. Well, I'd figured out that meant lie down and open the shirt again, so I did. But she started grabbing body parts and clamping metal shackles on them. Grab an ankle, shove a sock, strap it in. Shove my arms into position so quickly and unexpectedly that she may have dislocated a shoulder or two in her illustrious career. If she'd slowed down for just one second, I could've unbuttoned my

shirt sleeves and made my wrists more accessible. Nah, better to use brute force and clamp that nasty foreigner's wrists. Then, yank up the T-shirt, goop the chest, slap on the paddles. I was expecting her to throw the switch and fry me like a Texas inmate, but instead she just took my EKG reading.

This was also the one who ripped Jan's bra off. Good thing it didn't actually rip, though, as good bras are hard to find.

The guy in X-ray may have flipped his switch once too often and irradiated a few of his own brain cells, but otherwise he seemed nice enough. He's located a good distance from the rest of the disassembly line, and he has no neighbors.

Trek through the rain, follow the signs, wonder if you're in the right place. There's absolutely no way for an incoming patient to know if the room is the right place without opening the door. It might even be in use at the time. Fortunately there was no one behind me except Jan, and I guarded the door to make sure no one walked in on her X-ray.

The room was dark, so the clothing policy was inconsistent. If it looked like a jacket, it was off, even if it was only my shirt. No problem, though. It was always unbuttoned, and my shoes were still untied. He also liked grabbing arms and twisting them into funny positions, but it wasn't painful, and it'd be hard for him to describe the positions even if we spoke the same language.

I'm not describing these tests in order, by the way. X-ray was the end of the line. But I've been saving the best for last. Ms Drill Sergeant, Matron Saint of the Eye Chart. No hospital should be without one.

Don't sit there! Move your bag! That woman needs to sit where your bag is! Move it! And hey you, I said don't sit there! Move! Move! Move!

Ms Drill Sergeant did not discriminate. Chinese patients cowered as quickly as Westerners. In hindsight, I know what she wanted. But at the time, especially given how she was trying to reduce the time, it was tough.

Person 1 sit on the far left. 2 on the right, 3 to his right, etc. When 1 is done, get the flock out. Everybody move! Test the next, get out, everybody move! Repeat until the damn room is empty.

Jan was destined to be in the hot seat at some point, right? And here's Ms Drill Sergeant. Cover your left eye, look at where I'm pointing. What is it?

"M"

No!! Up, down, left, right! Point!!

The chart was covered with "E" letters. Some pointed up, some down, some left, some right. And this is interesting. The chart couldn't contain Chinese characters, because some of us can't read Chinese. Nor English letters, as many can't read English.

When I was doing the Boy Scout physical bit, long ago, the chart had letters. This was long before my uber-eyesight faded into squinting. I'd be four boys behind the one taking the test, reading the chart, reciting it to the half-blind dudes behind me so they could memorize and cheat.

But I remember when, in the U.S., we went to all Es with them pointing in different directions. I guess they missed that bit in Melbourne.

Jan never did point, by the way. She went with up, down, left, right. Jan was doing this through a mirror while Ms Drill Sergeant was facing the chart straight on. Thus, Jan's left was Ms Drill Sergeant's right, and vice versa. Plus, a language barrier. I suppose Ms Drill Sergeant trusted Jan's confidence. I did notice that, at the bottom of the chart, all the answers were up and down. No inversion there. Ms Drill Sergeant ain't no fool.

Next up, me. Having observed Jan's eye test, I was a good boy and pointed. Even though I was wearing glasses and Jan was not, and even though I followed instructions, I did worse. Yep, I most definitely inherited Mom's half-blind eyes.

Oh, and I can't forget the test for color blindness, which I passed. I remember it for my wicked thoughts. I could have answered "liu ling," or even "seis nada," because I'm that fast with numbers. But I resisted the urge and stuck to English ("six zero") lest I offend Ms Drill Sergeant.

By the way, I think she's wonderful.

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