

Last Flight of the Albatross

Li Win, middle-aged, childless, and recently separated, was not a happy man.

He had been very happy, as recently as four weeks earlier, when his supervisor had informed him that he was being transferred from the Department of Agriculture Animal Health office in Hong Kong to Weining, a small city in south-west China, to be responsible for monitoring the area for signs of avian flu. The job came with the promise of a promotion, a house, an office, and government-supplied transportation.

On his arrival at Weining he soon discovered that all of the promises had been grossly exaggerated. He stood in his shabby office, looking out through the soot-stained window at his 'government-supplied transport' - a beaten-up old bicycle, which he depended on to travel back and forth to work and to the shops. It was a Flying Pigeon, one of the most common bicycles in China. It had a heavy frame, a sturdy carrier over the rear wheel and a basket in front. It had only one gear, and the brakes were operated by rods; the chain was covered by a very practical metal guard which kept his trousers from being stained with oil, or, more likely, with rust. The leather seat, scuffed, scratched and faded, was supported by three large rusty springs. The original paint, black, like all of the Flying Pigeons, was scratched, faded and chipped; the rims of the wheels were rusting, a few spokes were broken and the tires were bald.

Breakdowns of one sort or another were common, as he'd already found out, and he carried a small repair kit of basic tools, spare chain links, tire repair patches and rubber glue, all wrapped in an oily rag and tied to the inside of the front carrier basket. A leaky tire pump was suspended in brackets on the frame.

Remembering the story of the Ancient Mariner, learned in an English class years before, he decided to call the bike 'Albatross,' as he felt a sense of shame when riding it.

As he prepared to leave for home that day he saw that the rear tire was flat. He spent several frustrating minutes trying to pump it up with his defective

pump and stopped as soon as there was enough air to take his weight and cause just the occasional thump as the rim hit the road.

Passing through the intersection near the central market area, he heard someone shout and saw a man on the opposite side of the road beckoning him over. He realized it was the bike repairman, who worked at this corner every day. The man looked to be in his 'seventies, short, with a wispy beard on a face darkened and lined by a lifetime spent working outdoors. He was poorly dressed; his shirt torn at the elbows and shorts stained with grease and oil; his sandals had broken straps, held together with strips of leather. He stood by his mobile repair shop, an ingenious affair with a bicycle frame in the front and, in place of a rear wheel, a welded bar connected to a two-wheel cart. This had a built-on box with side panels opened to display tools and spare parts. A pile of tires and inner tubes lay on the ground next to a pail of water, used to detect inner tube leaks. Annoyed, Li Win asked: "What do you want?"

The man grinned and pointed at the now-flat rear tire on the Albatross. "I fix, now!" Before Li Win could object, the man flipped the bike over and rested it by the handlebars and seat on the pavement. He took two levers, quickly lifted the rear tire from the rim, and slipped the inner tube out. After two vigorous thrusts with his very efficient foot-held vertical pump, he slipped the tube through the bucket of water and found the leak. Drying the spot with a dirty rag taken from his pocket, he spread on some rubber glue, cut a piece of patching rubber, stuck it on the glue, and held it between his fingers for a minute. Then he put the tube under the tire and pushed the tire back onto the wheel rim: a few pushes of the pump handle and the tire was fixed. Li Win was impressed: it had taken the man less than five minutes to do a job that usually took him at least half an hour and left him with bloodied and scratched knuckles, and a foul mood.

"Need new tires," the man said, pointing at the threadbare condition of both tires. "Need spokes, too," this time pointing at the broken spokes on both wheels. "And new pedals. And new chain. And new seat," now indicating the rusting springs and torn leather, patched by pieces of tape.

Realizing that the man must have grown up in one of the remote villages and had never learned to speak Mandarin very well, Li Win simply replied: "Tomorrow."

“Yes, yes! I come your office tomorrow and fix all. I know your office, you bird flu man!” Le Win was impressed that the man recognized him and said: “Okay, you come tomorrow morning.” He mounted the Albatross and continued home.

When he arrived at the office in the morning the repairman was already there, his tool box open and his tools laid out on the pavement: “You relax, you work, I fix everything!” Li Win smiled back and went into the building. After about thirty minutes he got up from his desk and walked to the window. To his amazement, he saw that the bike had already been completely taken apart and the frame had a new coat of shiny black enamel paint.

At the end of the day the repairman was waiting for him, a big smile on his face. “You like?” he asked. Li Win couldn’t believe he was looking at the same bicycle. The frame and chain-guard gleamed under a new coat of paint. New tires graced both re-spoked, shiny wheels. The bike was held upright by a new kick-stand, with the English letters ‘FP’ -Flying Pigeon - in the center; a chrome-plated headlight was wired to a generator mounted on the front right fork, and a brand-new red leather seat sat on gleaming steel springs.

“Look!” The man pointed at the centre of the rear wheel. ”Hub brake and Sturmey-Archer four-speed gear – very rare! My son find in flea market in Hong Kong and send to me!”

Le Win looked closer: indeed there was a hub brake – no more slipping brake pads in wet weather! And a thick wheel hub concealed four-speed gears – now he noticed the wires leading to the brake handle and gear controls mounted on the handle bars. The man’s son must have found them on a bike that had been brought from England during the years of the Crown Colony. “How much?” Li Win asked. The man quoted an exorbitant price, but Li Win thought it a bargain and paid, adding a big tip.

It was getting dark when he grasped the handle bars of the Albatross, swung his right leg over the crossbar and reached down to flick the generator on. He adjusted the headlight, then, in a burst of uncharacteristic affection, patted the frame and thought: ‘Good old girl, you’re always there when I need you. You always get me where I want to go: even if you do have the

occasional flat tire, I can't complain about you. You're my one true friend.' He started to pedal home.

Fifteen minutes later he was approaching the railway crossing near his house. The crossing lights were flashing, signaling an approaching train, and the gates were swinging down to block traffic. Normally, Li Win would ride slowly around the gates and get across the rail line before the train got too close. Tonight, he looked down the track: it was a fairly short freight train, which wouldn't have stopped at the Weining station, so it was going at a good speed.

Still feeling the joy of being able to change gears for the first time in his life, he suddenly pushed down hard on the pedals and accelerated towards the crossing. He looked ahead at the gates and calculated the turns he would need to get around the gate ends and, looking straight ahead, pedaled hard.

Approaching the crossing, the train's engineer glanced up and saw only a lone cyclist coming towards the gates. He sounded the whistle, then looked down at his gauges. He never felt the slight bump that Li Win's body and bicycle made.

When the police and ambulance staff arrived they saw a strange tableau: Li Win's body was in a sitting position, his head atop a broken neck and turned almost completely around; on his face, a slight smile and open eyes bizarrely displayed a happy expression. The twisted frame and broken wheels of the Albatross about his neck was hung.