

OUR LITTLE BROWN BROTHER

A short story by Matthew Harrison
matthew@matthewharrison.hk

Our story begins with a momentary lapse by A-Kei the tea boy. Normally so meticulous, A-Kei was flustered on that particular afternoon, and omitted a vital step. His lapse had grave consequences for our story's hero. And it set in train events that shook a certain government department, which we shall call the R-. Office, to its very foundations.

A-Kei was in the departmental pantry, having a short nap by way of preparation for the afternoon. He was a small man, middle-aged but sturdy, and held in high esteem by his administrative colleagues for his ability to hit a fly on the wall with a biscuit at five paces – although he rarely did this in working hours. He wore smart black shoes, which again were admired, and which at this moment were propped up on the pantry table. But A-Kei had not slept very long when he was woken by the ringing of the wall phone. Swinging his legs down from the table he unhooked the phone, and was startled to hear a hoarse whisper.

“Could I have some tea?” the voice croaked.

Ai-yah! It was the Director of the R-. Office himself. “Yes of course, at once, yes!” A-Kei replied, before putting the receiver back. Then he picked it up again to add, “Yes, yes!” just to show how alert he was. And he rushed about gathering cups and plates and biscuits – taking care to put the chocolate and the cheese biscuits on different plates since the Director was most particular about that. But why had the Director himself called? A-Kei could not make it out. He was still puzzling as he lifted up the tray, and in his haste he forgot to put the lids back on the biscuit tins. Because of this, a chocolate aroma quickly permeated the surrounding air and attracted attention from an unexpected quarter.

Before introducing our hero, who happened to be passing in the corridor, I should tell you more about the R-. Office. The R-. Office *existed* – I can't think of a better word – on the twenty-first floor of a certain building overlooking Hong Kong harbour. It was an institution like many others in our town – an institution which had been created to meet a particular need at a particular time and had been pursuing its role faithfully ever since. No matter that in the intervening decades society had changed; no matter that there were now a dozen other public bodies to address any residual needs that remained; no, the R-. Office was integral to the grand machinery of our government, and its procedures continued to proceed as solemnly as when they were set in motion more than thirty years before.

And the Director, if we forgive his momentary lapse from protocol over the tea, had been well-chosen. Small though he was, his face distinguished only by a grey moustache like a worn toothbrush, the Director was resolute in defence of tradition. Under his eyes nothing was done unless it had been done before; new methods were treated with contemptuous twist of the moustache; all enquiries were met with

reference to the enabling legislation, a dog-eared copy of which he always had with him and would read aloud to weary visitors.

It was not that the R-. Office never changed. No, it responded to the times. To entertain legislators and other high-ranking officials, the Director arranged for himself to have a larger office. (Indeed, he took such pains about it, that on its completion people said that it could be a back-up hanger for the airport, although of course this was an exaggeration.) And when in more recent times the call came to cut headcount, the Director was the first to step forward and volunteer his own staff – he was *that* public-spirited. Perhaps it was this move (which he rather regretted afterwards) that led to the portentous phone call. He had just finished a meeting with his Senior Officer, found himself thirsty, and then had no one at hand to ring for tea.

But I digress. The protagonist of our story – whom I have not yet had time to introduce – was making his way slowly down the corridor when his attention was caught by an irresistible aroma. I say he walked slowly, but before you surmise that he was just a lazy public servant (an aspersion on the service, by the way, that is quite unwarranted) let me add that in proportion to his size he was the most active member of the R-. Office. It is just that our protagonist was smaller than A-Kei, smaller even than the Director. But size is no indicator of contribution.

On entering the pantry, our hero made straight for the biscuit tins. He was engaged there, clearly visible from the rear, when the Senior Officer herself entered. She too was thirsty after her meeting with the Director. The Senior Officer – let us call her Deirdre; and I should add that she was not an unattractive lady, although of slight build and rather severe – Deirdre caught sight of our hero. But she did not greet him cheerfully, or with the affected cordiality that is often found among our public servants; she did not even snub him as they sometimes do.

Rather, she screamed. And not just a single shriek, but a long series of cries something like this – “OH! OH! Oh! *Oh!*...” – which gradually got fainter. At the same time the poor lady clutched her skirt, and crouched in the corner. Eventually, still whimpering at intervals, she released the skirt, which was now safely clamped between her knees, and covered her ears with her hands.

Now, our hero not actually eaten his chocolate biscuit. In fact, he had barely brushed it with his whiskers. – No, they were not exactly whiskers, more a single protruberance from either side of his face rather like a Mandarin’s moustachios – which, I suppose, made our hero well-qualified for public office. At any rate, even someone who was very passionate about chocolate biscuits, which Deirdre was, would not have suffered greatly by the loss. But before you think Deirdre’s reaction extreme – and here I should mention that she was well thought of and had excellent relations with some members of the R-. Board (and *that* is another tale, but I really do not have space) – I must tell you more about our hero.

It was not that he had a threatening manner, or said anything offensive. In fact, he said nothing at all, and on being discovered merely made off as fast as he could. From this, you will see that he was the retiring sort, quite suited, as I have said, to work in a public institution. Why, then, did he inspire such alarm in the breast of our Senior Officer? I think it was not so much his making off – for who

would not want to distance himself from such embarrassment? – but his *manner* of doing it. For I am sorry to say, our hero did not stride out of the room in a manly way, or even slink out with, as it were, his tail between his legs. No, he *scuttled* and *skittered*, making a faint scratching sound on the work top. It was this sound, as well as our hero's appearance and his sheer speed of motion, that were the principal causes of Deirdre's alarm.

Before we go any further, I must tell you what our hero looked like. He was brown – not, I hasten to add, from over-exposure to our tropical sun, which is a sure sign of vulgarity in a Chinese, but by nature. He was brown all over, although of course his nether parts were not normally to be seen. And his body glistened, as if it had been dipped in oil. He was in fact a muscular individual, with a powerful trunk and long limbs: a positive Adonis. From what I saw, he was never short of female company, and – not to conceal it from you – he fathered quite a number of offspring in various liaisons.

But our brown friend had virtues enough. He – and he had a name too, being known as “CR”. I believe these initials stood for his Chinese name. I am not sure if he had an English one; no doubt in these politically-correct times he preferred to be known even in English by his Chinese appellation – like those Chinese civil servants who in colonial times gloried in a “Sir This” or “Lady That”, but now prefer a sober “GBM”¹. CR's initials were similar to those of a *very* important personage, and I am not sure that he wasn't just a little superior about that. Nonetheless, CR was a true Hong Kong believer. He was born and bred in the territory – or *region*, as we now call it – unlike the very important personage. And although he said little, I have no doubt that his Cantonese – again unlike that of the personage – was impeccable.

I hope that I have established that CR was a remarkable individual. Let us now return to Deirdre, whom we have rather neglected. Deirdre was beginning to recover the resolve that had so distinguished her in the R-. Office. She was no longer whimpering, and had straightened up and was reaching into her bag for a tissue. It was at that moment that a tall gentleman colleague entered the kitchen, having heard the noise. Deirdre pointed at the coffee jar, behind which our hero was hiding, and whispered, “*Gat jat! Gat jat!*”

Deirdre did not have to say this many times before her alert colleague responded. So far in this story we have not seen our public servants at their best, but this angular gentleman – whom we shall call Stevie – now performed gallantly. “Good Heavens, so it is!” he said. And not content even with this forceful utterance, he seized a paper towel with one hand, lifted the coffee jar with the other, and slapped the surface where CR was. Or rather, where CR had been. For our hero ran nimbly across the work top out of the way. CR almost reached the safety of a crack by the cabinet – and in the pantry wall there were cracks enough. But Stevie lunged one last time with a long arm, so that CR was forced to run down the cabinet and onto the floor.

No doubt CR's reappearance would have caused Deirdre more alarm. But now she had her protector. And Stevie renewed the attack. Stepping forward, he stamped the floor with his big brown shoe. Fortunately for our hero – and perhaps also for

¹ Grand Bauhinia Medal

the kitchen carpet – he missed. CR dodged once more and disappeared behind the skirting board.

The danger past, Deirdre was herself again. “Oh, you were wonderful, wonderful!” she exclaimed, “Thank you so much! – But what have you done to your hand?”

For Stevie’s greatness of heart was not matched by robustness of frame. “Oh, you poor dear!” the Senior Officer said consolingly, taking his injured member in her own. This made our warrior wince. So Deirdre opened the first aid box on the wall – with difficulty, for it was many years since the R-. Office had seen so serious an injury – and got out the mentholated oil. This she rubbed gently into her colleague’s hand, saying such soothing and appreciative words as come naturally to the female of the species at such times, and bring a glow to the heart of the male. There we might leave them, two Officers brought together by adversity, were it not for the far-reaching consequences of their meeting which I must now relate.

I mentioned that CR had been discovered with a *chocolate* biscuit. Now it so happened – and you may call it fate – that within the R-. Office Stevie belonged to the *cheese* biscuit camp. On being told by Deirdre that her beloved biscuits had been violated, this gentleman, displaying again the resolve that distinguishes the Hong Kong civil servant from the ordinary citizen, marched to the cupboard, seized the offending chocolate biscuit tin, and threw it into the bin.

Boldness is surely the way to a lady’s heart. The sight of Stevie standing so tall and manly over the rubbish bin overwhelmed Deirdre’s other feelings, and she accepted the loss of her beloved biscuits without a murmur. From that day on she never ate another. And since she had been so influential in the chocolate camp, and since she told her colleagues the story of CR in such compelling language, no one else ever brought another tin into the pantry. So that was the end of the biscuit wars that had so ravaged the R-. Office.

Although no one knew it – and this I really would call an act of fate – had CR been discovered a minute earlier, matters might have taken quite a different course. For it was made clear to me afterwards that CR had first nibbled one of the *cheese* biscuits. And he had not only eaten, but – and here I apologise but I can do no more than relate to you the strict facts – he had also relieved himself while in the tin, so that the crumbs of cheese were mingled with matter altogether less savoury. And since the pantry is never very well cleaned – the tea lady headcount having been cut (for which we should blame the meanness of our taxpayers), and the tea *boy* A-Kei being much above that sort of work – biscuits graced with *sesame seed* are served in the R-. Office to the present day.

But I digress again. What happened to our hero after his escape from the brown shoe of officialdom? A true Hong Konger, CR was a pragmatic individual, and once inside the skirting board the danger quickly slipped from his mind. He rested, found diversions of one sort or another, and no doubt received whatever comforts the females of his species are capable of bestowing. When hungry, he made his way out into the main office area where there were always plenty of scraps. You must understand that R-. officials work so diligently that they do not have time to go out for lunch, and each day their rice boxes are piled up for collection. On finishing his

meal Stevie, who in his way was as meticulous as A-Kei, would carefully pour the remaining juices into his *neighbour's* bin before putting his box onto the pile. But despite these precautions the scraps and smells built up.

From the perspective of CR and his friends the main office was a delightful place. The files heaped on every side formed corridors and arches and tunnels through which one could scuttle, and in which there accumulated dust mingled with fragments of the most ripe-smelling food. These files were not disturbed very often, for our officers were not of that shrinking sort that worries itself with facts. And the files made the floor impossible to clean – if there had been any cleaning ladies, which of course there weren't, courtesy again of our stingy taxpayers. So CR and his companions would browse undisturbed for days through these rich-smelling avenues and alleyways of paper.

After a few days relaxing in the general office area, CR came in the course of his wanderings to the boardroom. A meeting of the R-. Board was in progress. But our hero made his way in without disturbing anybody. Nobody, that is, except perhaps A-Kei who was standing by the wall, but he was too discreet to move an eyelid.

CR made his way over the floor, up one table leg and along the underside of the table until he paused just above the Director's knee. There, if he had been so inclined, he would have been able to see how the parties around the table twitched and fidgeted, tugged at their trousers or their skirts, and wiggled their toes. If he had been of a voyeuristic disposition he would have been able to see up the skirts of the lady members and mark what colour knickers they were wearing, or, indeed, whether they were wearing knickers at all (since as everyone knows *some* ladies occasionally don't, just to tease their male colleagues). But if he saw anything of that sort, I am sure CR would have kept it to himself. He was a thorough gentleman.

The Board was deliberating a policy paper, which as usual provoked high emotion. Deirdre, who was really in attendance in order to speak on another matter, so forgot herself at one point that she clapped her hands. "*If you please,*" said the Director sharply. Having called the meeting to order, the Director then launched into a tirade of his own. The tirade turned into a homily, and then into a series of random reflections on the state of the R-. Office, during which Board members laughed at the appropriate places, the policy paper quite forgotten.

As he went on, the Director began to feel hoarse. This made him aware of how long he had been speaking and by way of relief, he declared the need for new rules in a number of areas quite unrelated to the preceding discussion. The members, glad at the more positive tone, noted the points down, and the more eager ones even began to discuss the practical implications among themselves. The Director concluded his monologue with a satisfied thump on the table. He was ready for his tea.

At that point several things happened. One was that CR, who had been motionless for some time – and quite possibly asleep – started, and ran along the underside of the table and down one of the legs. A-Kei, who *had* been asleep, jumped up too. And Stevie who was the acting Clerk of the Board, positively sprang up, like a grasshopper on his long legs, to usher in the supplicants who had been waiting all this time in the corridor. For it was now time for the Hearings of the Board to begin.

With the impulsiveness of one newly awakened, A-Kei started for the door, just as Stevie also lurched towards it. To avoid bumping against this quite senior personage, who was also rather bony, A-Kei stopped, bending his head in deference. And it was in this posture, with his head inclined to the carpet, that he saw our hero making his way rapidly over the stains and scuff marks there.

Now, a teaboy in the R-. Office needs to be as resourceful as he is discreet. These qualities A-Kei had in abundance. He did not scream or show by any movement that he had seen CR, but quietly followed Stevie out through the door. There he found himself in the midst of the supplicants, who at Stevie's appearance clustered respectfully round. A-Kei had to wait while the group bobbed and bowed and exchanged name cards; nonetheless he kept an eye on CR and noted the direction he took. Then he went back to the kitchen where our story began.

The supplicant company was in fact the owner of the building and landlord of the R-. Office. But let me hasten to say that there can be no question of improper influence on the decisions of the R-. Office, since big companies – especially *property* companies – are so law-abiding. Nonetheless, the behaviour of this particular company, most exceptionally, had been so outrageous and had been in the press for so long that someone rather important (not the *very* important personage, but someone close to him and in his way almost more influential) had had a Word with the Director. The Director then conferred with his colleagues, and a statement was agreed for the R-. Board that would satisfy all parties.

The mood of the supplicants as they filed into the meeting room was optimistic. But then things started to go wrong. The Board members were by now tired and irritable. Deirdre, who was assisting the supplicants, had been so distracted by recent events that she had forgotten to prepare the statement. And the Director, having spoken almost without interruption for the past hour, was getting thirstier and thirstier. Where was his tea? Absently, he picked up a cheese biscuit from the plate – why were there no chocolate ones? –but this made his throat still drier. And there were funny seed things on the biscuits too.

Here we must return to the tea boy whom we left in the kitchen. A-Kei had opened the cheese biscuit tin – now the only tin on the shelf – had piled the cups and plates neatly on the tray, and was waiting for the water to boil. But the diligence in his breast was surpassed only by a fierce loyalty to the institution that had nurtured him. As he stood there in the kitchen, the audacity of intruder came again to his mind, and he could not bear it. With sudden resolve, he switched off the boiler and went out again into the corridor.

He strode swiftly to where he had last seen CR scuttling along the wall. Crouching, with patience and skill born of long experience, A-Kei made his way along the skirting board, and eventually found our hero by the pantry door. Perhaps attracted by the cheesy aroma, and at the same time wary of the place from which he had so narrowly escaped, CR was standing motionless in the doorway.

Such indecision was his undoing. The tea boy carefully raised a black-soled shoe, and stamped once. A-Kei was no Officer, and had been trained in a rougher school. He did not miss. And that was the end of our hero. It may seem a sad end to a life that had really brought no harm to anyone, and had indirectly done much good

in the R-. Office. But if CR had known that he had to go, he would surely have preferred A-Kei's polished black leather to Stevie's scuffed brown. He was nothing if not proud. A-Kei had to wipe his shoe several times on the carpet afterwards, for CR had been a big specimen and the tea boy, as we have seen, was most meticulous.

There is little left of our story to relate. The Hearing did not go at all well for the supplicant. The tea did not come. The Board fidgeted; one member put his hand on Deirdre's knee, I am sure more in consolation than assertion of conjugal rights, but she snapped at him, which did not improve the general mood. Deirdre's face only softened when she caught the eye of Stevie, and they exchanged a smile. The Hearing wound to its close. Summing up, the Director was struck, perhaps for the first time in his career, by sympathy for the supplicant's victims. In this enlightened state, moustache trembling, he croaked out the determination. The supplicant's conduct was reprehensible. A fine would be issued at once.

The supplicant's lawyers rose in dismay, but further proceedings were cut short by a discreet knock at the door. It was A-Kei, who by now had wiped clean his shoe and finished making the tea. The Director heaved a sigh of relief and declared the meeting adjourned. The notice of the fine was issued to the press that very day; and it caused a stir. To some, it looked as though the twenty-first floor was becoming dangerously effective. The Hong Kong community reacted as rapidly as only it can. Anxious words were exchanged; hurried meetings were held. At the end of the week, another important personage (not the one that had had the Word but another, if anything still more important) had dinner with the Director. I do not know what was said, but days later the fine was withdrawn and the supplicant was back to its old ways. The Hong Kong community resumed its busy, contented existence.

And that is almost everything that there is to say. CR's lady friends may have missed him for a while, but they quickly found other partners and I am sure consoled themselves as ladies do in these situations. Perhaps the last word should rest with A-Kei. He was not normally a sensitive man, but as he pulled back the curtains of the now-empty boardroom, he was struck by the vista outside – towers piled upon towers in crushing ranks up the side of the Peak. It seemed suddenly hideous, like a gigantic termite's nest. Constant movement animated the gaps and crevices and crenellations of this edifice. As he peered in horror through the glass he saw that the concrete was crawling with tiny black figures between slow moving vehicles that looked from this height like eggs pushed along by worker ants. A-Kei shuddered, and quickly drew the curtains.

Yet the tea boy's natural resilience soon returned. He tidied the plates and set the room to rights. Then he picked up a cheese biscuit – many were left over, since the Board members were mostly from the chocolate camp – sniffed at it, and spat. I recall the Director saying to me once, "Cheese is not good for your health." But if A-Kei had any thoughts like this he gave no sign as he smeared the spittle into the carpet with his shoe and walked back to the pantry.