

THE BRIEFCASE

A short story by Matthew Harrison
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One morning on his way to work Sebastian Leung had to choose between his briefcase and his wife. He was travelling on the Hong Kong subway, just approaching Mong Kok station, and was in rather a good mood. In one hand he clasped the hand of his wife who, although thin, was smartly dressed, with a brand-name handbag tucked under her arm. From time to time he received a squeeze of marital affection. In his other hand nestled the handle of his briefcase, a gleaming oblong of chestnut leather that hung against his thigh. Fortunately, the passengers were so tightly packed that Sebastian had no need to hold onto the rail, otherwise - since he was equipped with only two hands - the choice might have been forced upon him sooner than it was.

Sebastian was still holding these symbols of marital and professional success when the train stopped. The passengers around him began to stir, and as the doors slid open they surged out onto the platform in a struggling mass. And an answering wave of bodies fought their way in. Caught in the middle, Sebastian felt himself pulled in opposing directions. And it was then that his dilemma arose.

Now at this point I should mention that Sebastian was an Audit Manager. It did not occur to him to appeal to his wife, or even to voice a "Hey!" or an "*Ai-yah!*" No, he merely raised an eyebrow - which his wife in any case could not see because of a passenger's intervening elbow. And his wife, being female (as wives generally are) and also being called Mabel, was so shocked at this - as she thought - abandonment by her husband that she would not speak to him either. So when Sebastian finally pushed his way out at his station, he had parted both physically and spiritually from his wife. Yet the scrawny manager was not entirely alone, for in his hand he still held his chestnut companion.

But I have not properly introduced the briefcase. It was a thirty-second birthday present from Mabel, and perhaps the care she lavished on it was what fixed the idea of its importance in her husband's mind. At any rate, the maid was instructed to polish it every day.

When Sebastian reached the office of Ping, Wong & Co he could barely push his way in, for it was Monday morning, the busiest time in the audit week. All the staff were gathered there before dispersing to their various clients, and the juniors were struggling at the stationery shelves. An audit cannot be conducted, any more than a battle can be fought, without supplies, and the juniors were trying to gather pads of paper, bank confirmation requests, debtor circularisations, directors emoluments forms, pencils, rubbers, diskettes - all the materials they would need in the week to come. And when the receptionist was not looking, the more nimble-fingered would snatch a sweet from the bowl Mr Ping had thoughtfully placed on the counter.

The Monday morning struggle was complicated by the fact that not all of the stationery was in one place. Ah-Gau the mail boy kept the bank confirmations in the mailroom, and junior trainees would search the stationery shelves in vain before being redirected by their more experienced colleagues. Even Ah-Tong, the manager in charge of administration, dared do nothing about it - fat though he was - for Ah-Gau was a great bear of a man.

Sebastian at last reached his room, a small one at an angle of the corridor, and carefully set the briefcase on his desk. But soon the phone rang. It was the senior on his biggest job. "Mr Ping's coming this afternoon," said the senior, "and he'll want to see the bank confirmations. Could you bring some with you?" The Audit Manager kindly agreed to help. Then he recalled where the bank confirmations were.

Sebastian stood up, briefcase already in his hand. When he reached the mailroom door, he found the entrance blocked by Ah-Gau. But today Sebastian was unperturbed.

"I think," he said, "that it is time to sort out the stationery."

Ah-Gau blinked. Then he drew himself up until he towered over Sebastian, and lurched forward. But this unblocked the mailroom door. The Audit Manager slipped nimbly past, strode up to the shelf on which the bank confirmations lay and swept them into his briefcase. He was out of the room before Ah-Gau had thought to block his exit. "Mr Ping's instructions," called Sebastian over his shoulder. And he was gone.

The other mail boys were looking at Ah-Gau open-mouthed. But he just growled at them, "Well, don't stand there. Didn't you hear? Mr Ping's instructions."

It did not take long for the story to circulate around the office. As Sebastian strode out later that morning, colleagues gazed at him with renewed respect. The receptionist, normally rude to almost everyone, actually smiled at him. She might even have offered him a sweet if there had been any left.

Sebastian's client was a listed company, the pride of Mr Ping. The Senior Partner did not often visit clients, on account of his size, but the premises here were spacious enough to accommodate him. When he entered the boardroom where the audit team was stationed, Sebastian's case was the first thing that caught his eye. Compared with the other cases, huddled along the wall like so many obsequious courtiers, Sebastian's stood out like an emperor. Mr Ping suddenly became self-conscious. He looked down at his own case which, now old and worn, he had first carried when a junior trainee many years ago.

But the Senior Partner was as generous as he was fat. "You must be going places, young man!" he said ponderously.

The principal purpose of Mr Ping's visit was lunch. But after this he found time to chat to Sebastian. His casual enquiries were answered crisply, and to his discomfort he found questions being fired back at him. The fixed assets were not material; would it be all right not to inspect them? Mr Ping mumbled. The client had

requested the audit team to prepare accounts schedules - would it be all right to raise an extra bill? Mr Ping hesitated. "And client is not happy with his current tax advisers," his Audit Manager said finally, fixing a surprisingly penetrating eye on his superior: "Could we propose for the work?"

The Senior Partner began to get alarmed. The delicate balance of survival on the periphery of the profession depended on firms not competing with one another. If he authorised the proposal, who knew what might happen? But such was the determination in Sebastian's eye that Mr Ping began to nod assent. Then he asked to think about it, and was getting quite confused when fortunately the client's secretary put her head around the door and asked for him. As the relieved Senior Partner left the room, his eye fell again upon the mahogany briefcase.

That evening when Mabel opened her front door, she found Sebastian watching television. He hardly glanced up. Mabel, who in the flurry of the day had forgotten her bad temper, now felt a twinge of unease. She went into the bedroom to change. Just as she was leaving the room she glanced around. And then she caught sight of a rectangular shape nestling against her husband's side of the bed.

Meanwhile, Mr Ping had been thinking. The Senior Partner's nature was an open one, even after thirty years' professional practice, and it was not long before he shared his thoughts with his wife. "He just turned up with this silly case, several sizes too large for him," mused this perspicacious man, "and now he thinks he's the captain of the ship!"

"Well, dear, why don't you buy a new case yourself?" said his wife.

Her husband opened his mouth to protest. But looking at his own case, standing forlorn in the corner of the room, he could see patches where the leather had worn through. The handle was reduced almost to bare metal. It was not right for someone of his stature. Mr Ping began to feel uncomfortable. He was suddenly struck by the age of everything - the case, the flat, and even himself. The accumulated weight of years pressed upon him. Half starting from his chair, he struggled for breath. But the attack subsided. Later, exemplary spouse that he was, Mr Ping again sought his wife's advice.

"Why, let's go to Lotto's tomorrow," she said. And at these few words, Mr Ping's companion of thirty years was cast aside.

When Mr Ping arrived at Lotto's bag department the following afternoon, his wife was in the handbag section. She already had many, of course - this being almost a duty for the wife of a Senior Partner - but there were always new styles, and the profusion of materials was a treat in itself. The bags were a delight to touch - Mrs Ping trailed her fingers over soft calfskin and mock leopard; pinched the dimpled pigskin, and ran her nail over hard black leather. And the textures! She had to hold them to her cheek to savour them - gloss alternated with matt, smooth surfaces with crinkled, plain with embossed. Under the spotlights glowed a cacophony of colours - a white bag set off its blood-red neighbour; yellow, dark blue and aquamarine bags stood proudly in support; an emerald bag crowned the display. Oh, the shapes! - one had to stand back to properly appreciate the shapes. Bags like great leather sacks were suspended above tiny bags encrusted with glitter; and on all sides thronged big

solid bags like suitcases, triangular bags, circular bags, bags of pyramidal shape impossible to carry, cuboid bags, bags of a shape that could not be mathematically described.

Of course, Mrs Ping would not actually have *bought* anything, since she could only be seen buying in a recognised boutique, but it was always good to compare. Nonetheless, on seeing her husband – model wife that she was – she stopped, and led him to the cases section.

If the handbags dazzled by their exotic profusion, the cases had a grandeur of their own. They rose in serried ranks from floor almost to ceiling. Huge barrel-like contraptions crouched in rows, like lions at the palace gate. Only the cable threaded through their handles, it seemed, kept them from springing onto the awed shopper. And the colours! - some glowing florescent orange or yellow, others in mock zebra stripes or leopard spots. And behind these, in an inner sanctum of their own, rose the briefcases, rack upon rack of briefcases: a wall of gleaming leather.

As Mr Ping gazed on this cornucopia, his heart quickened, and he loosed his wife's hand. What could a man not do with one of these? He imagined himself striding into a meeting with such a briefcase. Instead of the snickers that usually greeted him, there would be an awed hush. Mr Ping pictured himself, not as the head of a minor accounting firm but as the leader of a great enterprise, striding onto the stage for the shareholders meeting, fielding questions from the press. Television cameras were on him, lights, reporters thrusting their microphones, and as he announced the company's plans he felt within his grasp the firm reassuring handle of his briefcase.

Mr Ping reached towards a glossy black beauty. But the leather resisted his trembling fingers. Then he saw that the briefcases were all secured with wire. Frustrated, he tugged at the handles, then gave up. And at that moment his eye was caught by a chestnut gleam.

Hardly had Mr Ping registered this when he saw walking briskly up the aisle a lady that he vaguely remembered. She was thin, really not very attractive; and Mr Ping had a horror of being recognised. He ducked out of sight, pretending to be fascinated by a black tubular suitcase shaped rather like a bomb.

When he looked up again, he saw the thin lady scrutinising the briefcases. He watched as the assistant came over and with a pang saw that she was slipping the wire off the chestnut one. The lady examined it perfunctorily, opened and shut it to test the mechanism, and then nodded. The Senior Partner was almost overcome with alarm. Throwing caution aside, he stepped out from his cover. But it was too late. The lady was already at the cash desk, and Mr Ping had one last glimpse of the case before it disappeared into a Lotto carrier bag.

The following morning in his office, the Senior Partner found himself with a free moment. He glanced behind him. Against the wall stood a new purchase, proudly erect. He had let his wife choose it: a shining black briefcase with a side flap that she felt was just right for his morning paper. Mr Ping sighed, and bent to review an audit file. His room was in order, his new case strategically positioned behind him;

even the audit file was submissive on his desk, ready for his reviewing pen. But something was lacking.

At this moment, there came into his mind the image of Sebastian. And I am sorry to say that the Senior Partner suddenly found himself jealous. Why should his manager enjoy the good things of life and not he? Mr Ping blew out his cheeks - which were already ample enough. His fat fist clenched and unclenched around the pen - another marital gift - and then flung it aside so that it actually fell off the desk onto the floor. And into the Senior Partner's oppressed mind came an idea that in normal circumstances would never have been entertained.

While his superior was in such turmoil, what had been happening to our Audit Manager? Sebastian arrived late at work that morning. He had been about to leave the house when Mabel took his briefcase into the maid's room to polish it herself. Though impressed with this display of wifely devotion, Sebastian felt that she had not done as good a job as the maid: the case came back looking too shiny. Nonetheless, he was happily at work when a strange sound caught his attention. Outside the door, someone was softly groaning.

I should emphasise at this point that Sebastian had a sympathetic streak which the disappointments of marriage and the dryness of his chosen career had not wholly extinguished. It did not take many more "Ohhh!"s and "Ahhh!"s to float in from the corridor before this kindly man just had to see what was the matter. Sebastian edged around the desk and poked his shaggy head out into the corridor, rather like a mop on a pole. And there he found Ah-Tong, bent double against the wall and holding his ample stomach.

On seeing Sebastian, his fat colleague lurched forward and clutched at him, his great weight almost pulling the skinny Audit Manager to the ground. Alarmed, Sebastian suggested an ambulance. But in a hoarse whisper Ah-Tong assured him that he needed only to reach the washroom. So Sebastian hauled his colleague's arm over his own scrawny shoulder and, with surprising strength, helped him up the corridor.

Hardly had this unevenly matched pair rounded the corner when two more managers appeared. One kept watch, while the other slipped into Sebastian's room, carrying a large shopping bag marked "Lotto". The manoeuvre was well prepared, for when a moment later his colleague gave the alarm, the bag-carrying intruder had already finished. And when Sebastian sat down at his desk again, all appeared to be as before. Beneath his desk was an object of familiar shape.

But Sebastian had little chance to immerse himself again in his work. The day was unusually busy, with call after call. Ah-Tong rang several times, assuring his rescuer that he was well. Even Mabel kept enquiring how Sebastian was, as if somehow that day he were in special danger. Our Audit Manager answered all these calls patiently. Indeed, it was hard to fluster him at all. Any frustration he might have felt was quickly channelled to his knees which, by a tightening of the inner thigh muscles, he pressed against the briefcase. The padded leather yielded just a little, and then Sebastian would relax. It was the perfect isometric exercise.

That evening was Ping, Wong & Co's Christmas dinner. It was in fact early December, but the restaurants were cheaper then, and that seemed to Mr Ping reason enough for good cheer. A large section of a restaurant belonging to a client had been booked. Already in the late afternoon, junior trainees were practising for the games, and the howls and squeaks of the amplifying system testified to progress in the karaoke contest. Sebastian of course did not join in these preparations, but he was not unaffected by the general air of excitement.

Finishing earlier than usual, Sebastian walked along Nathan Road to where he was to meet his wife. It seemed that his case was lighter than usual. But any further thoughts on this matter were dispelled as his wife appeared from the mouth of the subway entrance, looking unusually glamorous. After a greeting of more than marital warmth, Mabel slipped her arm inside that of her bemused husband, and led him to the side street where the restaurant was. Stepping over the rubbish on the pavement, the happy couple entered. Mr Ping and his wife were there to greet them. The two ladies smiled glassily at one another, but Mr Ping greeted Sebastian with a firm handshake. And as his Audit Manager sat down, the Senior Partner summoned the headwaiter for a quiet word.

The restaurant was cavernous, and yet quite filled by the joyful band of auditors. Even though the only permitted guests were legal spouses – a rule by which Mr Ping hoped to foster good morals as well control costs – such was the scale of Ping, Wong & Co that there were still more than twenty tables with a dozen places at each. At one end of the room was a microphone on a little raised dais for the performers. And in an adjacent room, the clatter of Mah Jong tiles had already reached a frenzied pitch. But now Mr Ping gave the signal. The waiters began folding up the square tables there and herding the staff towards the round ones into the main dining room. Then a large man in shirtsleeves with a striped waistcoat straining across his belly stepped onto the dais and announced that the evening had begun.

It was Ah-Tong. An appreciative roar went up from the crowd. The striped Master of Ceremonies winked at Sebastian, and got down to his job with gusto. He put the junior staff through the games, and with shrieks and hoots the audit groups cheered their champions on. The high spot was the beer-drinking contest. Dressed in aprons – on which the prudent Mr Ping had insisted - the teams lined up in front of a long table. The MC was about to give the signal to start, when there was a commotion in the audience. All heads turned, and a great figure lumbered up, a figure larger even than Ah-Tong. It was Ah-Gau - the apron flapping about his vast middle like a napkin - and the other mail boys were close behind.

The teams lined up; the first player in each raised his glass and took a breath. Even Mr Ping watched intently. The MC gave the signal. Ah-Gau leant back his head and drained his glass in one movement. And although the smallest mailboy struggled to finish, the lead built up by Ah-Gau was unassailable. The winning team was greeted with thunderous applause, in which none joined more heartily than Sebastian.

Judged that it was time for the star turn, Ah-Tong gestured dramatically to one of the tables. A delighted roar went up when the audience saw that it was Mr Ping's. After some feigned reluctance, the Senior Partner stood up and gave a fine

rendition of “*Wang Bu Liao* (Can’t forget you)”, inclining – exemplary husband that he was - in the direction of his wife. He sat down to enthusiastic applause.

Then began the lucky draw. The draw was done with the aid of a glittering drum brought onto the dais. The receptionist, who in a cheongsam surprised everyone by looking quite glamorous, turned the drum. And a succession of special guests were invited to perform the draw. It was perhaps a mark of Sebastian’s new stature that Mabel was called upon to draw prizes numbered eighty to sixty-one.

The evening was proving very agreeable to our Audit Manager. He toasted his wife’s performance heartily in beer, being able to do this with some regularity since the headwaiter kept refilling his glass. Mabel finished her duties to general applause. When she came back to their table, Sebastian thought she had never looked more radiant. Mr Ping must have shared his opinion, because he came round with the headwaiter, who bore a bottle of brandy, and everyone on the table had to drink a toast. The Senior Partner was in such good spirits that he would not let Sebastian go until he had had a second glass. It was, the host beamed, the season for good cheer. When Sebastian sat down again there was quite a glow in his cheeks. In fact, even a careful observer would have noticed little difference between their hue and that of his briefcase.

At this point proceedings for Sebastian became a little blurred. It was only when Mr Ping’s wife came up to draw prizes numbered twenty to one that he managed to focus. The staff watched with growing attention. The prizes were now beginning to be worth something. The fifth prize was a meal for two at the Queen Hotel; the fourth a return trip to Macau; the third a fine handbag donated by Mrs Ping herself. She posed smiling for quite some time with this item, although unfortunately it was won by Ah-Gau and rather wasted. Then the MC lifted a large rectangular parcel off the now nearly-empty table behind him.

“And the second prize...” said the MC, pausing for effect.

“...the second prize is...” Another pause.

“...donated by Sebastian Leung...” He raised a finger.

“...- A fine leather brief case!”

There was a burst of delighted applause. Sebastian’s neighbour at the table – who had drunk a good deal himself – slapped him several times on the back. Junior trainees whooped, and there were whistles from Sebastian’s audit group. Cries of, “*Ga-yauh! Ga-yauh!* (Go it!)”, became a chant.

“Let’s see it!” howled one of the partners. “Yes! Yes!” came a hundred voices. Magnificently, Ah-Tong held up the rectangular package and with one movement disrobed it. The tissue paper parted in shreds and there, raised high over the MC’s bald head, was a gleaming chestnut briefcase. The audience rose to its feet and roared.

Sebastian suddenly became completely sober. He looked at the briefcase the MC held, and the impressions of the day suddenly crystallised. Horror gripped his heart. But he could only watch.

Mr Ping's wife opened the flap and made a play of feeling for a slip. At last she brought one out. Unfolding it, she gave a little start. Then she handed the slip to the MC. He looked at it, blinked and cleared his throat. At his announcement, the audience gasped. Mr Ping, prudent as ever, had taken pains to ensure that the list of staff names was complete. The Senior Partner had won his own second prize!

The lucky winner laughed out loud, and rose to his feet. Then he remembered something and blushed, although fortunately his face was so red with the alcohol that no one noticed. But he rallied and strode good-naturedly up onto the dais. Afterwards, he saw that the prize was a just reward for his efforts to lead the firm, and moreover saved him from what might have been a rash act. But as he accepted the case from his wife he was sweating profusely. Afterwards, he stumbled over to Sebastian and thanked the manager for his generous donation. Sebastian nodded, unable to speak. The managers on the next table snickered. And when he got back to his place, Mr Ping summoned the headwaiter for another word.

Although his glass was now hardly refilled at all, Sebastian's discomfiture that evening was not over. The MC announced the karaoke contest. Mercifully, the heats had already been held that afternoon, but the audience still had to sit through the wailing and crooning of the finalists which no tuning of the microphone seemed to improve. But at last this too was finished, and the MC stepped up to the dais again. He raised one fat finger for quiet. The audience hushed expectantly.

"Before the competition is judged," came his booming voice over the amplifier, "I would like to hand over the stage to the donor of the evening's best prize." The MC paused. "I give you.... Sebastian Leung!"

There were shrieks from the audience. Sebastian put his hands up in horror. But his colleagues had smelt blood - a rhythmic clapping began, and the chant "*Ga-yauh! Ga-yauh!*" quickly spread through the room. Then Mabel leaned forward and whispered something in her husband's ear. This seemed to restore his confidence, and Sebastian came up to the dais. The scrawny Audit Manager took the microphone from his colleague and began to sing.

As his shrill falsetto filled the room, an appreciative murmur arose. Staff clutched one another with growing delight, and those who did not know the song were soon enlightened by their colleagues. The ditty, from a Chinese opera, was that of the court eunuch lamenting the loss of his capacity to love, and it touched the hearts of all present. Sebastian sang as if inspired, and Ah-Tong accompanied in his deep bass. The audience was in raptures. Two female trainees ran up onto the dais with a bouquet of flowers, giggled, and ran back down again. Afterwards Sebastian took the flowers to his table, and when he gave them to his wife the applause redoubled, if that were possible.

It need hardly be said that on the way home on the subway Sebastian was inseparable from his wife. So touched was Mabel in fact, that as he hustled her into the bedroom for a swift resumption of marital duties she almost made a confession.

But, prudent wife that she was, she thought better of it. And some time later, when passion had worked its course, she got up and under cover of rearranging the bedclothes, nudged the table on her side more tightly into its corner.

You might expect that after his experience, Sebastian would distrust the other managers. But not at all. When one of the them did an imitation of Mr Ping with *his* new briefcase – with which the Senior Partner was so obviously very pleased – this generous-spirited Audit Manager was the first to laugh. Mabel sometimes asked her husband, a little anxiously, how he felt about the case that he now had. But Sebastian seemed hardly to hear the question, and when it was repeated, he just smiled. The truth was, he was now platform independent: he could operate with a case of any kind.

The annual dinner had consequences that reverberated far beyond the confines of the Leungs' bedroom. A month or so later Mabel felt sick, and on going to the doctor was referred to another who diagnosed her as pregnant. This brought husband and wife even closer together. When Mabel was unwell, which happened rather often, Sebastian took over from her the role of giving instructions to the maid. Eventually, the great day came, and it was a proud father who looked on as the maid cradled a new-born boy in her arms. Some said that his son looked like him, but others drew attention to the faint reddish tint in the hair and the square jaw. In the end, these features were attributed to Sebastian's father, whose family came from North China and was rumoured to have mingled with minority peoples. Mabel, when she had recovered from the episode, said nothing at all, but some time later took advantage of a passing rubbish collection vehicle to dispose of a large carrier bag marked "Lotto".

Mr Ping was asked to be the godfather at the christening, an office which he accepted gladly. It was indeed a memorable occasion, which Mrs Ping felt not beneath her to attend. On the steps of the church afterwards, Mr Ping told his wife that he had always had confidence in Sebastian. Most people had seen the manager as a mouse, but he – Mr Ping drew himself up and held in his belly – *he* had seen the man's potential. One could not become the head of an important accounting firm like his without having some judgement of character. He had seen it all along.

Back in his office that afternoon, Mr Ping sat reflecting on events, as he liked to do. It had been a hectic year. Despite the economy, the firm's business had turned up, and – Yes: he made a note to himself to review the tax work of his listed company friend. There was really a need for another tax partner. And he knew just who might be suitable. Mr Ping's benevolent face broke into a beaming smile, although there was no one in the room to see it. No one, that is, unless we are to count the chestnut briefcase that nestled under Mr Ping's desk. Or another identical case that rested quietly against the wall behind him. The latter probably had the better view, but if it had any thoughts the case kept them to itself as it stood there gleaming with impenetrable contentment.