

THE BUSH SHOE

(FORMALLY KNOWN AS MODEL ZXR-469)

DAVID MORGAN O'CONNOR

I was several hundred kilometers east of Ankara, the self-appointed capital of Turkey, in a town near the Black Sea called Suluova, famous for onions and wrestling, interviewing Mr. Ramaz Buycaz, president and owner of BuyCanShoes.com. It was a freelance gig for a magazine entitled 'Social International Global Environment' (SIGE), a meticulous hippy rag run by a gay couple, who were Trustafarians based in Oxford. They always paid on time, had their hearts in the right place, but this job was a bit of a brown loafer, until lady-luck raised her head above the East-West wall.

They had sent me to rate the environmental friendliness of the BuyCan factory, which had just begun exporting to the European Union. The angle was supposed to be from the worker's point of view: wages, hours, living-slash-working conditions, safety, general happiness... you know the story, a sweatshop audit. I also needed to discover Buycaz's levels of profitability and the actual "naturalness" of the raw materials, which they claimed were mostly leather from free-range steer. Other questions on my personal list concerned the current economic crisis, the invasion of Iraq, oil prices and gender equality. The only way for freelancers to survive in this cut-and-paste-world, is to sell the same facts a hundred different ways. I was hoping to get at least three or four separate pay checks out of my Suluova sojourn.

The game plan changed when Mr. Buycaz began screaming into his mobile and pacing around his Soviet-era decorated office at aggressive right angles. Mr. Buycaz began hiding behind the snot-green drapes looking at the sky, as if bombs were going to fall. He spat violently into his Nokia. I turned to my Istanbul-based translator slash driver and asked, "Mehmet, what happened?"

"Not sure now, sir. He is using personal family dialect."

"You told me you knew every language in Turkey."

"This is not Turkey, sir. This is deeply Black Sea village talk. Something very, very big has happened, sir."

"I got that much, can you ask him if we should come back another..." Then I shut up. Patience is key to journalism. No one talks to anyone in a rush. I mentally berated myself for hiring Mehmet. Although I liked him and a colleague had recommended him, he wasn't reliable. I never should have hired a Christian with a Muslim name. I had thought he would have access to both worlds, but I was wrong, perhaps in Istanbul, but out here he was as lost as I was, both doors locked and guarded. Like a Scotsman in Northern Ireland, no one knew on which side of the fence he hung his hat. The locals acted warmer to me because I was clearly from another planet.

Mr. Buycaz had finished the first call and was now typing frantically into his laptop. The landline rung. All formality gone. Mr. Buycaz a general in battle. He barked at Mehmet.

"We must go now, sir. Come back tomorrow same time, sir."

"Seriously?"

"Very very. Come sir, we go."

I stood up to shake Mr. Buycaz's hand. Mehmet was already out the door. I paused, holding the gesture. Mr. Buycaz looked right through me; I was credibly invisible. The businessman turned his back, walked to the window and continued shouting into the phone. I went out the door and saw Mehmet holding the elevator open. I said good-bye to the cutely veiled secretary, who had been so happy to show off her schoolbook English. No response, she was yielding calls and spastically typing. Pen in mouth. Not even a nod.

Pulling out of the plant, I asked Mehmet, "What was that all about?"

"I don't know sir, very very strange. Best we go Hotel. Hotel TV CNN will tell you directly. I take you directly yes sir? Hotel lobby CCN okay sir?"

"Fine Mehmet, but drive slowly, I want to see town."

I was the only guest in the hotel. I told Mehmet that he could take the night off. I went straight to my room, called for lamb and beer, then stripped down and took a hot shower. I sang while the room steamed, nothing like hot water. I was drying in front of the BBC World Service football highlights, finishing the kebab, contemplating ordering another bottle when reception rang and told me a Mister Buycaz was in the lobby asking for me.

I got dressed, grabbed my notebook, recorder, downed the beer, turned off the TV and was in the lobby shaking Mr. Buycaz's hand in four minutes. Mr. Buycaz went down on one knee and began kissing my ring-less ring finger. He began chanting what seemed a magic spell. I scanned the room for Mehmet. Was this a marriage proposal?

Suddenly, a tall thin bushy-bearded man in a tight blue suit stepped forward and said in posh British, "He is apologizing."

"Accepted. How do I get him off?"

"Just say something very loud for all to hear."

"Like what?"

"It is not important. Whatever you say, I will translate it as 'I forgive you'."

"I forgive you, though I have no idea what you did."

"Keep speaking."

"Okay you were a bit cold this afternoon after the phone call, but I understand. Water under the bridge, now get up. All forgiven."

"Hello. I am Omir Buycaz, Mr. Buycaz's director of Marketing and Finance. And his nephew. Will you take tea with us? Do not worry, it is not offensive if you would enjoy a beer. You are off-duty, so to say, and this is an international hotel, so to say."

"Do you drink beer?"

"Not in front of my Uncle. I did indeed learn to love your barley and hops mixtures while I was doing my MBA in London. Full-time MBA and part-time Muslim, was what my friends said. We must return to the factory for an all-nighter, so unfortunately only tea for me tonight."

"What happened this afternoon?"

"That is why my uncle has apologized. Have you seen the news?"

"Just the football."

Omir fired off some rapid instructions to his Uncle, who began opening his laptop. He kept his eyes on the floor still embarrassed, overly coy for such a wealthy man. Omir asked, "Did Chelsea win?"

"Three nil," I said.

"That's my club. This is the greatest day of the year."

Their tea, my beer and a hookah pipe the size of a pre-adolescent child arrived. Omir inhaled and blew apple smoke in my face. He took off his shoes, folded his feet underneath him into the sofa and placed his shoes on the glass table. I knew this was strange behavior, even for a rural Black Sea-side town.

"May I tell you a story?"

"I'm all ears," I said.

"I am telling you this because you are a journalist. Publish this story, wherever you can. What are those?" He pointed to the shoes on the glass table.

I don't like condescension, but I sucked up my sarcasm and played professional. Plus humor never translates, never. "Shoes."

"Exactly, indeed. Could you be more specific?"

"Sure. Black. Leather. Simple. Low-heeled, rubber-soled, somewhere between a penny loafer and formal dress shoe, standard middle-of-the-line men's semi-formal dress shoes."

"Very descriptive, indeed. I see why you write. They are Model ZXR-469. My Uncle designed them in 1969. They wholesale for approximately twenty-five US dollars, cheaper in Asia. For the last forty years we have been selling approximately ten thousand pairs a month from Istanbul to Shanghai. They weight six hundred

grams and take four hours of labor to produce. Since the time that you were interviewing my Uncle this afternoon, around quarter past three, we have sold-out worldwide and have received orders to dispatch approximately two hundred thousand pairs by the end of the week. And you may ask why and then allow my Uncle to show you."

Omira nodded to his Uncle, who swiveled his laptop around and poked play. An un-ordered beer appeared. On the screen, a video image of George W. Bush giving a press conference in what looked to be Iraq. After a few seconds, a journalist stood up and pitched a shoe at the President, then another, which G.W. dodged with a drugged-like calm. Then the journalist was tackled, a pile of security guards could be seen stamping and kicking. The camera went shaky; there were screams and general melee. I didn't know what to think. I drained my beer, another arrived and Mr. Buycas played the clip again. When finished, Mr. Buycas spoke in a very serious tone.

"My Uncle wants to know if you are American," Omira said.

"No. But I have lived there."

"And how does this display of disrespect tickle your fancy?"

"Are you asking my opinion?"

"Yes indeed, but I am trying to be as delicate as possible," Omira said.

"Well, like most of the world, I know Bush is a clown. An evil clown.

Obviously dangerous. I guess if I had thought of doing something like that, I would have used a cream pie. Clowns should be pied."

Omira translated to his Uncle, who exploded into laughter, which became a coughing fit that he quelled with a sip of tea.

Omira blew more smoke my way and held my eyes, "I am happy. Indeed, we are happy that this Iraqi journalist used a shoe. The sole of the foot is the worst insult in our culture. Indeed it makes me happy that the Iraqi journalistic gentleman threw a shoe because it was our...."

"Model ZRY-469," we said in unison. Giggles overtook the three of us. I picked up the shoe, tossed it in the air and caught it. When silence replaced the hilarity, we were all staring at the shoes on the glass table.

Omira proclaimed, as if cutting the ribbon to a new hospital building, "We hereby rename Model ZXR-469, The Bush Shoe." Omira scanned my reaction, his Uncle burst into a Groucho Marx routine, stamping and dancing around the lobby, "Da Bushy Chew. Dabushychew."

"Let me show you our new promotional spot, hot off the presses," Omira said. He played the same video on the laptop. His Uncle continued dancing around like a drunken six-year-old. At the end of the clip, before the ruckus, the screen went to black and some big block letters in chalk-duster font filled the screen: GOOD-BYE BUSH. HELLO DEMO-SHOE!

I had to laugh.

Mr. Buycaz had flipped over the sofa coughing; he grabbed a shoe off the table and put it to his ear like a telephone. "Hello, Bushy? Good bye Bushy... hello democrat-chew."

"What do you think?" Omira said.

"I think you have a great new marketing campaign. I think you have given me an incredibly refreshing story. I think you will sell many shoes. Coverage will skyrocket sales. News content beats advertising any day. Ride the wave."

"That is why we came, indeed, and to apologize. What is the next step?"

"Well, I guess I'll go to my room, write it up, get on the phone and start pitching it, starting with Reuters and The New York Times. Then, in the morning, I'll come by and rattle off some photos, check some facts and bingo, your company should be getting some major International Press within the next few days."

"Indeed, we are happy. Incidentally, for your article, we have promised the journalist, Mr. Muntazer al Zaidi, once he is released from his five to fifteen years of torture, and the complete Zaidi family, a life time supply of the Bush shoe. What do you think?"

"Dabushychew... dabushychew..."

Mr. Buycaz's chorus kicked off again. When I stood up and extended my hand to officially take leave, Omir pulled me into a bear hug and kissed me four times on each cheek. I waved good-bye to his Uncle. He was skipping the hookah cord and chanting all sorts of gibberish, of which I could only understand the name of his newest cash cow.

I went to my room and logged on. I opened a Word document and started my copy. I plugged in my headphones and started down my list of contacts. I got through to an old university roommate who was a sub-sub-editor at the New York Times. "Yo Paul, I'm in the armpit of Turkey at the shoe factory, yes the press conference-shoe, yep, the one Bush dodged... selling like hot-cakes.... it's pure

economic proof of the political unrest to come, these sales are a global forecast, everyone that ordered the shoe is an anti-US sympathizer, more than 200 000 overnight...”

Paul said to send it through. I contacted an ex-girlfriend at Reuters who also wanted the story. I covered my contacts in the UK, Canada, Australia, and even India. All told, if they all accepted, I'd be looking at over six grand for 1200 words and a couple of photos. Not including the original commission from SIGE. It was impossible to sleep. I worked all night and felt great. The next morning, I checked my camera gear and went down to breakfast. Mehmet was standing outside my door smoking.

"Sleep well sir?"

"Not much, and you?"

"Sleep very very well, sleep with Suluova girl. She teach the local wrestling, very good sir."

"Is the car ready?"

"Clean and ready sir."

We arrived at the BuyCanShoe.com headquarters. Omir met me in the parking lot with more hugs and kisses. I told Mehmet to stay by the car. Omir told me his Uncle would not be joining us, as it was all hands on deck in the plant. He also informed me that sales orders had jumped to 900 000 pairs overnight and they had hired 20 new workers. I congratulated him and then he offered me a job running his international advertising department, I pretended to not take the offer seriously. A few minutes later, Omir showed me into a showroom. I took photos for about two

hours. Omir produced the secretary, with veiled, striking, deep eyes. I took some photos of her standing on the American flag with the Bush shoe, a photo I knew I could never use, at least not in a newspaper. Just before lunch, we wrapped up. The secretary hovered away. Omir hugged and kissed me good-bye, and Mehmet drove me back to the hotel.

I went straight to my room and started uploading the photos. After a shower and a couple of hours typing, I submitted my final copy and a selection of the best photos. I was over the moon and went down to the lobby to celebrate with a massive meal. After my second beer, the receptionist brought a phone over. It was Paul.

"What the fuck are you trying to do to me?"

"What are you on about?" I asked.

"Did you forget where I am? Who I work for? They almost canned me for plugging this drivel. They have submitted the text to The Feds. They want a list of all the buyers."

"But it's true, all true."

"I don't care what it is. My boss is on the phone to the CIA. This is a national security issue. We can't run this story. We can't help terrorists sell shoes. If I were you, I'd get the fuck out of there fast, and don't call me for a while."

"But they are not terrorists... they are just buying shoes."

He hung up. I stared at my beer. Two seconds later, the Ex from Reuters called. Same story. "We can't help terrorists sell shoes." No debate. I threw the phone on the sofa. I walked over to the window and lit a cigarette. I looked out at the hotel pool. It was cracked and had no water.

END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author: David Morgan O'Connor
Country of residence: Brazil
Nationality: Irish/Canadian
Mother tongue: English



David Morgan O'Connor is from a small village on Lake Huron and now keeps home in Jericoacoara, Ceara, Brazil, where a first novel progresses. He works in Theatre or Film when the coffers are low and he has an MA from RADA. His writing has been published in The Write Practice, Collective Exiles, Bohemia Journal, The Literary Yard, Fiction Magazine, Halfway Down The Stairs, The New Quarterly and The Guardian.