(1) Roger Jergenson's Flyout

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I'll let you in on a little secret: incandescent is dead. Doesn't matter the reason. Compact fluorescent bulbs are the king. Long live the king. Sam Fillmore, by the way, VP of light bulb sales, very nice to make your acquaintance. When I saw you sitting over here at the bar, I said to myself, 'Sam, there's a fellow traveler with a couple hours to waste. Why don't you go make yourself comfortable in that seat next to the only person at the bar?' My mother used to say, 'Make friends or make trouble.'

(2) Can I buy you a drink – or another? Visited Taipei before? I'm here every three months to check in at the factory. Have to keep up to date on product. Originally from Boise, Boise, Idaho – haven't been back in two years. I swear these hotel maître D's know me better than my own mother. 'Your usual T-bone and baked potato, Mr. Fillmore? And your glass of house red with that?' You can probably tell from my figure, I'm a meat and potatoes man.

(3) What's that? Just here to watch the game. Not interested in chatting? That's fine with me. Baseball's my favorite sport; after all, I'm an American too. I gather you already know the Taiwanese are crazy about it. You think *we're* fans? Well, let me show you something. Take a look at this bill here in my wallet. You see that? That's their little league baseball champions. That's how much they love the sport. They put a baseball team on their money. What's that? Never knew that, huh? Well, I'll tell you another story you might not have heard. **(4)** Ever hear of Roger Jergenson? Oh, well, sure you know him now as the big hitter for Cincinnati – bats about three-ninety, career RBIs over eight hundred, in the All-Stars last year, as I recall. But I'll wager you didn't know who he was five years ago. Well, five years ago I did know him, and I'm in no way bragging when I say this because if you knew him then, you'd say he was a real son-of-a-biscuit – excuse my French. And I'll double-or-nothing my bet that you didn't know it was some little Taiwanese girl who turned him around.

(5) How did I know him? Well, he was playing for a team right here in Taiwan. Used to drink in this very bar. As you may know he started out playing for Tampa Bay. Was there exactly two years and twelve days before they dropped him mid-season because he couldn't get on base. Every one of his hits was a fly-out, aimed for the fence. Then his agent dropped him. He'd lost his sparkle as we say in the sales business. And he fell into a pool of players waiting to be picked up in the Triple-A league. Four months later, his wife left him – that didn't really hit him hard until later. At the time he didn't believe she was sacrificing enough for his best interests.

(6) Well, a couple weeks later, he got this call from a manager here for one of the national teams. This manager, in his broken English, said they could use a hitter and wanted to give him a chance because of his early record. Jergenson spent one sleepless night thinking it over real hard. He'd never stepped one single foot outside the forty-eight states, didn't much care for foreigners. But he knew he needed to play. That was the only thing that mattered – stepping back out on that field, gripping the pine. He needed to get back into a game. **(7)** A neglected skill's no different than a neglected factory machine – after a time, they both rust and stop working. You know what it's called when a player drops out of the majors for six months? Retirement. Jergenson didn't even know where Taiwan was, but he signed that contract the next day and faxed it back.

So, there he was, one major league dropout – no pun intended – stepping off the plane onto this Asian island, knowing nothing except that it was his last shot. Well, as you may know, these Taiwanese are all about the appearance of professionalism. **(8)** They picked him up in a limo, started him out in that four-star hotel across the street before moving him into his luxury apartment, got someone to take him around and show him the sights. The coach for that team was a man named Ken Wu. He was about sixty at the time, but as fit as someone half his age. Still got out there and hit the outfield practice flies. Learned his baseball from the Japanese and followed their training regimens which I can explain in three words: drills, drills and drills. And unlike the young players, he was the only one who knew English well enough to talk much with Jergenson without the translator they hired.

(9) Now, Jergenson appreciated those rote drills. He saw them as a refresher course. To him it felt like baseball boot camp all over again. And when that first game started, he was ready to knock that ball off the island. Well, number two got on first. With one out, Old Wu gave the signal for him to bunt. Bunt??? That's what Jergenson was thinking. Taiwanese baseball parks look a lot smaller than American ones. The stands are smaller, but the field is regulation, the length is no different. The crowd for the opposing team was standing, filling the stadium with cries, whistles and sounds from their noise-makers to disrupt the batter. **(10)** Jergenson's blood burned hot, he needed to let loose, kill it, send it out of the stadium. So he shook off Mr. Wu's signs. Mr. Wu signaled again, this time more emphatically. Sacrifice bunt! The team needed that runner on second base. But Jergenson didn't lower his bat. He needed to win that game. He needed to show all those people that dropped him that he could do it. He needed to show himself most of all and he didn't believe any of the other players could help accomplish this important goal. The first pitch was thrown, right up the middle and a little low. **(11)** His sweet spot. He twisted with everything he had. Crack! and that ball –

Look at that! We missed a double play on the TV. And wasn't that your team that made it? What's the score? Top of the seventh. Perhaps I talk too much. My mother used to say, 'Better to put a fork in your mouth than a foot.' You ready for another drink? Certainly, I'll tell you what happened, if you want. Where was I? That's right, the first game. The start of Roger Jergenson's comeback.

But it didn't happen. He sent that ball flying up, up, up. It must have had a record height on it. **(12)** When it fell, it fell nice and easy – might as well have been on a parachute – it fell straight into the centerfielder's glove. In that one fly-out, Jergenson's belief in his abilities and who he was collapsed like one of those buildings they demolish with explosives. When he returned to the dugout, he broke his bat over the steel railing. Later, after the game, he got into an argument with the coach about the team's need for his hitting. And if you understand this culture, you understand that arguing with a superior at your job is as bad as arguing with your church preacher. It's just not done.

(13) His teammates tried to talk to him, make him feel at home. They invited him out for dinner and drinks, but he never accepted. Jergenson spent his time inside his apartment or at the American bar next door, turning his back on anyone trying to speak to him. During this time he found much to complain about. The jostling crowds, the taxis honking at him, the heat, local dishes having too much soup and too little meat, the mopeds that people drove carelessly down the sidewalks, the mix-ups caused by language barriers. **(14)** Funny story – he once ordered a hamburger with extra mayo, but got bread without meat. You see the word mayo sounds like the Chinese word for 'without.' Mayo and beef must have been misinterpreted to 'without beef.' It's a funny mistake, but when you're hopeless, those small things add up, can make you go mad.

It was Mr. Wu who came to Jergenson one afternoon, after watching a third disastrous loss, and said they were going out. Wu told Jergenson to leave his wallet behind, he didn't need any money. **(15)** Now, I think you've at least read about the gentlemen's clubs here. Two beautiful women for every man at the table. Others serving top-shelf cocktails. Jergenson had that in mind as they headed out in Wu's car. Jergenson's thoughts drifted from remembering his bachelor party to images of oriental massages while Wu talked about team spirit and relying on his friends. Jergenson didn't even take note as they left the skyscrapers of the city behind and moved out into the rice paddies. **(16)** Jergenson figured he was ready for a wild night out with the only person in the country he felt comfortable with. For three hours they drove, passing betel trees, glassy rice fields and red brick houses, discussing the game, sometimes arguing, sometimes agreeing. Finally in some village at the foot of some mountain, Wu stopped the car. Jergenson asked where the nightclub was. Wu replied that they weren't here for that. Confused, Jergenson got out of the car and looked around for a baseball field or sports center. **(17)** He asked, 'Why are we here?' Wu replied: 'I brought you here to learn something.' And then, with the sun just starting to set over the mountain, Wu started to drive away, back up the road they had come from, soon disappearing behind a cluster of banyan trees.

What did Jergenson do? He laughed. He stood there in the middle of the road, which was nothing but packed dirt, and laughed, sure that Mr. Wu would turn around, come back and get him. He waited ten minutes before sitting down. After twenty minutes, the sun had fully set, the clear sky darkened and the summer air cooled slightly. **(18)** After forty minutes, he finally saw the light and knew Mr. Wu was not coming back, and so he stomped up that road toward a group of low structures.

Oh, the things he imagined doing to that Mr. Wu. He wanted to wring his neck with his own two hands. Who the heck did that Mr. Wu think he was, and what kind of spit-ball trick was he trying to pull? The path turned into a one-lane paved road that rambled through the small village. The stars were out above a few clouds now, and Jergenson worried about the neighborhood as he looked for a taxi. Then he remembered, reaching to touch his back pocket, he didn't have his wallet. In fact, he didn't have a single dollar on him.

(19) What's that? You want to know about the little girl? Well, hold your horses, I'm getting there, I'm getting there.

Where was I – oh yeah – Jergenson started looking around for street signs. With Mr. Wu driving he hadn't seen which direction they had headed much less which streets they'd passed. But of course in the country everything's in Chinese. All those characters made as much sense as chicken scratch to him. He could hear the muffled sounds of people talking, radio music, children laughing behind glowing windows. He could smell and hear foods being fried – the scratch of the spoon against the wok. **(20)** And this got his stomach grumbling because he'd only eaten a late brunch.

Well, now, I have to admit something. Maybe you figured it out already, but I don't miss many meals, and I've heard that empty stomachs can make people do things they might not do when they feel all filled up and comfortable. Some people say there's a desperation or panic that takes over when one doesn't know where that next meal is coming from. Fortunately, I have never felt that, but that's what Jergenson was feeling as he turned around in a circle, lost, hungry and helpless. **(21)** For an hour he walked the streets. At one point he came upon some men sitting around a low table, drinking. He quickly turned around and went the other way. He didn't know what they were up to – they might try to kidnap and ransom him. Up another street an old woman pushing a cart stacked with bags started talking to him in her foreign tongue, making no sense, so he jogged away from her. He found a wide

avenue and followed it for a while. **(22)** The houses there were strange to him, the living rooms opened up onto the street like a garage should. He quickly passed these little pockets of life so the families inside wouldn't get suspicious.

After another hour, his stomach was gripped in a knot of pain. He usually ate a good sized dinner, and it was like his body was demanding what it always got. He passed convenience stores, but without a coin what would he buy? Then as the avenue ran along the flat, dark field of a rice paddy, he saw a banana tree with its fruit hanging. It was just inside a low wall and under a street light. The bananas were green, but large, ripe. **(23)** He walked up the street, looking up at this find like manna from heaven. Without a thought, he jumped the knee-high wall, quickly broke off one of the bananas and in one move stepped back over onto the road. He made himself comfortable on that wall, peeled down the skin, exposing that wonderful, fragrant, delicious fruit and bit off a chunk. Thinking it was the best banana he had ever tasted, he finished it off in seconds. He sat there enjoying that substance hitting his stomach, still holding the green peel in his hand with his eyes half closed when he caught the smell of smoke in the air.

(24) Where did the smoke come from? Oh, the smoke was from a cigarette. He turned and saw that he was being watched, an old man puffing on a cigarette that glowed red in the shadows of the house. Jergenson didn't move, wondering how long the man had been there. Then the old man started talking, quietly at first, stepping out from under the awning. His words were sing-song, but warm. He walked over to the banana tree, continuing this one-way conversation that Jergenson couldn't understand a single word of. Then he reached up and broke off one, two, three, four bananas, the cigarette dangling from his lips. **(25)** He turned, Jergenson stood, wondering how much trouble he was in, as they faced each other from across the low wall. The old man held out the fruit, nodded and spoke in his tongue, probably not even speaking Chinese, but the local dialect of Taiwanese as they do in the country. Well, as I can tell you, one banana does not a meal make. Jergenson knew he would need more. Feeling embarrassed and ashamed at having stolen from some poor old farmer, Jergenson, head bent, took the gift, and quietly walked back up the street to the avenue.

(26) He sat at a bus bench and ate his dinner, watching a woman feeding ghost money into a blazing caldron across the street. Above him more clouds raced by. I'm sure you've seen that Taiwan is one of those few places where your umbrella can become your parasol and your parasol can become your umbrella in less than an hour. It is an island after all. Well, in a short time, fat drops began hitting the pavement, and Jergenson, pulling in his feet under the bus stop's cover, mulled over his helpless situation. Even if he did get a taxi, how would he tell the driver where to go? The rain came down hard now, falling like a curtain around his little space. **(27)** He found the bus schedule and could make out a timeline with regular numbers, and it looked like the last bus had passed almost an hour earlier. Across the street, the woman had finished her praying and was gone. At that hour the streets were mostly empty except for the occasional passing truck. Jergenson rubbed a chill off his arms. The rain was splashing up and hitting him. Then through that curtain of water appeared the woman who had been across the street. She was holding two umbrellas. One she used, the other was closed. She started talking to him. **(28)** Again he couldn't make out heads from tails about what she was saying, but it was clear she was offering him the closed umbrella, practically forcing it in his hand. He didn't know what to say as he held the umbrella, and watched her turn, a smile stretched across her face. She returned the way she'd come, her umbrella clearing a cylinder of space around her.

It was so strange, as if she'd read his mind, but of course she'd seen him getting wet. Jergenson thought about the time he had seen a stranger walking through his neighborhood during a rainstorm.

What did he do? He called the cops – that's what he did. Jergenson opened the umbrella and looked it over. He never thought he'd be so appreciative of something so common. **(29)** He would need to look for a drier spot, somewhere with more cover. He figured it was going to be a long, uncomfortable night. He looked up, wanting to say thank you to the lady, but she had already gone inside.

He followed the avenue for half an hour in a direction he felt was right, passing convenience stores excessively lit in brilliant white and small temples with rows of red lamps flanking statues of mysterious gods. He could see inside some of the homes with their doors opened to let in the air. There were children studying, mothers cooking and fathers watching TV just like anywhere and he wondered why he hadn't noticed that before.

(30) Then, just as he passed between the cover of two buildings, holding the umbrella like his life depended on it, a man stepped out from what looked like a small bar. Jergenson was forced to stop on the slippery pavement to avoid hitting him. The man's eyes grew wide.

"Welcome!" He smiled and waved Jergenson in. Jergenson could see there were three people already inside. A bartender, a waitress and one other patron sitting at a four-stool bar. Above this was a TV with a local baseball game playing. Ah, he realized, the man was a baseball fan and knew him from his Taiwanese team. "Welcome – welcome!" The man waved, obviously insisting that Jergenson join them. **(31)** Glancing up into the darkness of night ahead of him, the invitation to spend some time out of the rain was a small relief, so he went in.

Yes, he tried to tell them he had no money. He patted and pulled out his pockets. But those people in there were so impressed at having a famous baseball star in their little bar, they bought him drinks. "Welcome!" The man slapped his back and tapped his beer bottle with Jergenson's before taking a swig. It was clear no one in the bar knew much English and the few words they did know were repeated often. Over the next few hours they used a lot of sign language and gestures like they were playing a game of Charades. **(32)** They watched the baseball game and the man showed Jergenson the way he batted and Jergenson showed him his way. They drew words on napkins to try to explain things and looked over a few baseball magazines the bartender kept on a stand across from the bar and they finished a number of bottles that collected on the counter like bowling pins and Jergenson forgot all about being lost.

Jergenson didn't know when he had gone to sleep, but he woke up on the couch beside the magazine rack. A thin wool blanket covered him. The room was empty. The lights were off, but it wasn't dark, sunlight leaked in around the front door. **(33)** A clock above the bar showed it was late morning. He got up, found the restroom, washed his face and then stumbled out into the daylight. As he waited for his eyes to adjust, a man called out to him from across the street. It was the stranger he had drunk with all night. His biggest fan, he was sure. The man worked in a scooter repair shop, and had a greasy rag in one hand, a screwdriver in the other. The stranger waved him over and called out to someone deeper inside the shop. Jergenson waved back and crossed the avenue. As he neared the garage, a girl of no more than twelve came out of a back room. **(34)** She introduced herself in fairly good English, saying the man was her father. Well, when Jergenson heard her speak English, he felt like he had found his way out of a long cave. In a blur of words he explained to her that he didn't have any money, but needed to get back to Taipei. He said he would gladly pay for all the expenses.

They did give him a ride home. The man and his daughter seemed proud to have the baseball star with them the way they kept smiling and showing him things that the locals were proud of, even

took him to lunch before heading off. He felt like some sort of royalty as they got on the highway in the old van the man owned. **(35)** Hours later, when they arrived outside his high-rise apartment, he told the girl to wait so he could get some money. When she translated this to her father, he became adamant about not wanting payment. Over and over Jergenson told the girl he would pay them, but her father would not agree. Seeing the man push back so much made Jergenson give up on trying to reimburse him for the ride. As he stood beside the van, he asked the girl if they wanted his autograph. It was the least he could do for such a big fan. She and her father talked for a time, and it almost appeared as if they were avoiding him because they didn't understand what he was saying. **(36)** "An autograph," he said, "From a baseball player. It's what he do in America." The father said something and the girl translated: "We don't need anything." The man seemed ready to leave, and Jergenson could understand why. They had a two-hour drive back to their home. Then the girl said something that left him speechless, and unable to do anything but stand there and watch them drive away. And then he stood there a while longer.

You already know where he ended up. I don't need to say anything about that. He started playing a little different after that. Trusted his teammates, listened to the coach, didn't always try to hit the fence. **(37)** He found he was pretty good at moving the bases up, getting singles, sometimes doubles. He started writing cards to his wife. Didn't even know if she'd reply, but he wrote her every week. His stats shot up. Eight months later, an American scout, sitting in those noisy Taiwanese stands, wrote up a good report on him, saying he was batting like a superstar. Two American teams made him an offer to return to the States. It was hard leaving. His Taiwanese teammates and coach had become his best friends.

(38) What's that? What did the girl say to him? She told him, with that bluntness children often have, that they had no idea that he played baseball. You see, they didn't know he was a big league player. They weren't fans. And that truly was a curveball for him. To them he was just a stranger.

About the Author

Patrick Wayland was born during a hurricane in Corpus Christi, Texas. He graduated from The University of Texas at San Antonio, worked in Silicon Valley in the high-tech industry and later studied Asian languages in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Author of *The Jade Lady*, Patrick lives in Taipei and spends his time walking the line between technology and culture. Visit him at patrickwayland.wordpress.com.