

By the early '70s, Eaton's had become a very stressful place to work. Not just for me but for many of the senior executives in my peer group who felt that they'd been getting 'the mushroom treatment,' that is, being kept in the dark and fed nothing but manure.



Seasoned and talented merchants started jumping ship in every direction. Alan Boothe left to become President of Warren K. Cook, a high-end menswear company. Hartley Cutten (also from my lunch group) went over to the Parker Pen Company as their Head of National Sales. Even Ted Leishman, whose mother was an Eaton, left the company!

It had become all but impossible to manage towards a shared objective in an atmosphere marked by the secrets and pointless infighting of the top brass. And my boss, Jerry Despard, was so depleted and miserable from defending his upper front that he had little time or bandwidth to keep up with the strategies of his own merchandise managers.

In fact, it had been years since Jerry had last asked me what the heck I was doing. Out of necessity, I had been making changes that should have never been allowed at my level, without his approval and backing.

When I'd first been promoted to National Merchandise Manager it was fun and easy.



I had a terrific staff of knowledgeable and hardworking people with great ideas.

And so, most of what I found myself doing was just clearing away roadblocks so that they could implement all the new things they wanted to try.

And as for the buyers working under me at the divisional and regional levels, I took the same collective approach. Why not harness the tastes, legwork, and cooperation of the entire group? (After all, we weren't buying dishwashers.) So, during market week, we'd all go to market together and make our notes. Then I'd say, "Pick whatever you want and have them send all of the samples up to the hotel." I would rent a huge conference room for five days and everybody's picks would be out on display.

This is not how it was being handled elsewhere in the company and I certainly never discussed it with my boss, but it eliminated 90% of the frustration and circular conversations. And when we left Montreal, or wherever, everybody's orders were written.

I offered a similarly broad and simple approach to quantities. I'd say, "If you think you might do a \$100,000 in sales on a particular item, take 20% of your budget and buy it now, even if you're just guessing at it. Don't worry if you're wrong. And, if you see the item starting to move, buy 50% more immediately."

That math worked out really well for our kinds of categories, where fashions could change so suddenly. We found that the velocity and supply of our 'wins' could more than make up for any end-of-season markdowns on our mistakes. I never spoke to my boss about that either.

But by my fourth or fifth year in that job, I had definitely begun to feel the downward pressure and meddling that Jerry Despard had been trying to protect us from. I remember one day Jerry's boss's secretary called me up. She said, "Mr. Kinnear was in our Calgary store this afternoon and there were no white handbags on any of the counters. It's the middle of the season! Fix it!"

David Kinnear was the Executive Vice President of Eaton's at that time and so I called up the Divisional Head of our western stores and said, "I'm flying out there."

As it turned out we had similar inventory issues in Edmonton. So, I said, "Let me ask you something. Could we put in some sort of new system where we tag all of the handbags? What I mean is, would you support that idea if I could find a way?"

"Yes, of course!" he said. Then it quickly dawned on me that whatever solution I pursued would be perceived as implicitly sponsored by a director of the company. This pain in the ass problem was actually an opportunity!

I began working with our nascent computer department to adapt their programs to this purpose and to secure mutual cooperation between them, our inventory department, and the stores in our western division. Eaton's computers were mainly being used to process credit cards and while today's reader can easily imagine inventory being scanned and instantly updated from a point of purchase, no such technology existed in 1972.



In fact, Fairchild Semiconductor (a recent division of Fairchild Camera, where I'd begun my career) had just introduced the first commercially available 131K memory system built on its own 256-bit chip, and Eaton's mainframes had it.

In order to implement the new controls, it meant a top-to-bottom change in our process. But by the end of the following season, we were acting on weekly reports about the stock and flow of evening bags, handbags, pocketbooks, wallets and bill folds, and our sales had almost doubled!

And while this one anecdote certainly had a positive ending, it didn't change the fact that a lot of people around me were fed up with the nitpicking of small things in the face of abject silence on many of the big things.

Jerry Despard finally gave up and took an early retirement just before turning 65. He refused to attend a retirement dinner. He just wanted to go home and never return. He was replaced by Paul Dubé from our Montreal Division.

Immediately I could see that Paul's focus was on networking rather than net sales and before too long he would become a cautionary tale for me. Paul's claim to fame was that he had an MBA which was impressive at that time within our industry but as far as I could tell, he knew nothing about nothing.

So, it probably wasn't a surprise to anyone that I'd begun to set my mind on leaving that job – not the company necessarily – but certainly that position.

For the time being, however, I was still the guy who decided on and approved everyone's travel outside of the country and I thought, I would really love to see the Far East before I go!

I had crisscrossed Europe several more times by this point, and London had become a routine visit. I had been to the top of the Swiss Alps (to buy scarves) and toured the inner sanctums of Vatican City (when visiting Uncle Al's brother, Father Cyprian) but I had never been anywhere in Asia.



For Pk, I had always brought home a doll dressed in the traditional clothes of whatever country I had been visiting.

And in Paris, I had seen this miniature tandem bicycle and shipped it home for the kids.



I began researching everything about China and planning my trip. I applied for and received permission to attend The Canton Fair, a massive trade exhibition which took place every April. This would assure that my remaining time on the job was spent as fruitfully as possible. Also, I wanted to wait until Doug Sherer, one of my lead buyers, had returned from Europe so I could best augment whatever new selections he had made.

The plan was to go for a month and visit Canton (now called Guangzhou), Tokyo, Osaka, Seoul, Hong Kong and then Honolulu on the way home for some R&R (a customary perk for Eaton's executives after a lengthy junket).

My invitation had to be registered in Ottawa with the Canadian government for travel between specific dates and the American Embassy issued me a second passport since China wouldn't allow entry if the person had also visited Taiwan. I was told, "Carry one passport at a time. Do not get caught with two passports!" And with that, my trip was all set for April of 1973!

Then seemingly out of nowhere, and without any reason that I could understand, Paul Dubé announced that he was going to Hong Kong in January of 1973 and insisted that Bill Cable and I come along on that trip with him.

I said, "Paul, that's not good for me. The Canton Fair is in April and there's really no business to be done there in January." I also pointed out that my visa for mainland China had a narrow and specific range of dates which did not include January! None of this seemed to make the slightest dent with him and sure enough, there we were on this commercially useless trip.



Here: Paul Dubé, Bill Cable, Brian Laxdale, and me with our local buying agents from Dodwell & Co., a century-old firm from England which Eaton's had hired to bring us around.

If you recall, Bill Cable was the one from my carpool who'd been shot down over Germany in the Lancaster Bomber.

And I must say upfront that despite my assessment of Paul's skills and judgement, I found him to be a delightful travel partner. And though I didn't yet understand the circumstances which had brought us here, I could already sense that this trip would be unlike any other in the amount of free time I'd have to look around. So, for that I was thankful, albeit still confused.

We had landed in Tokyo, which was the most populous city in the world at that time. Being a native New Yorker, I felt almost



at home amongst the skyscrapers, billboards, and bustle of the streets. Their fascination with western culture and dress also helped to mask just how unusual a place it really was. After several days there the differences

came into starker focus and their traditions of efficiency and deferential etiquette stood out in every single interaction I had.

Next, we rode on the famous Shinkansen, the world's first bullet train to Osaka, Japan for a solid week of night clubbing.

Though by definition it was a quick ride, I did a lot of fateful thinking on that train!



For there we were, a couple of nights later, sitting in a nightclub with the ironic name of "Arrow" since – without any future target or predictable direction – I offered my resignation to Paul Dubé.

(Come to think of it, “bullet” was equally ironic.) I truly had no idea where I was going when I told Paul, “I will not be in this job a year from now. And while I’m not leaving tomorrow or the next day, you can take this as my notice.”

After that I felt free to enjoy myself, since the real-life aspects of my decision were unlikely to kick in while I remained immersed in the sights, sounds and flavors of these cultures which were so startlingly different, ancient, and new, all at the same time!

We tasted all the fare, from fine dining to street level cuisine and availed ourselves of every experience from traditional tea rooms to the geisha houses of flower town.

I was certain that I would be hearing something from Eaton’s about my resignation on one of these stops, but it soon became clear that Paul had never passed along my news to either his boss or the personnel department. In fact, as we travelled on to Hong Kong, he acted as if he hadn’t heard me that night at all.



I loved the people here! They made a lasting impression on me. This man in particular inspired me to bring home a painting which will always remind me of my time there.



I also surprised Ria and the children by shipping home a complete set of Chinese dishes – of well over 100 pieces – including teapots, tureens and serving vessels.



Pk and Edward always took great pleasure in setting out the service whenever we'd bring in Chinese food. Today this set lives half at Pk's house and half at Edward's, and I understand that the tradition continues.

I was enthralled with the chaos and inevitability of Hong Kong. Victoria Harbour is a natural harbor between the Kowloon Peninsula and Hong Island. Like Manhattan, it was destined to become a densely inhabited nexus for international commerce.



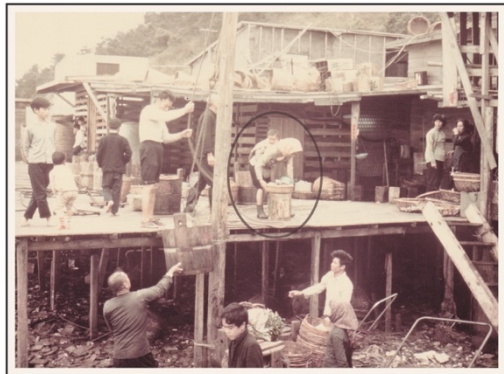
And though I've pared down the number of possessions I have, many, many times over the last thirty years, this portrait continues to hold a prominent place.

Bustling with junks, fishing boats and trade of every kind!



The Sea Palace was a giant floating restaurant in Hong Kong. A massive operation with a hundred chefs preparing traditional dishes from lobster, fish, and crabs that had just been pulled from the ocean, moments before they were placed on your table.

Although scenes such as these (where women toil in difficult labor while caring for their children) were an all too sobering reminder of how harsh life can be for the masses who make a place like this possible.



The office had arranged for a driver to take us four Canadians from Kowloon to The New Territories, the border between Hong Kong and Mainland China. There, armed guards patrolled a fence to prevent the undocumented from crossing into China.



These young people were also there accepting gratuities in exchange for having their photograph taken with the curious.



This final stop was a religious shrine in Seoul, Korea. I had been due to fly out that morning but as luck would have it, a sudden fog postponed all of the flights. I was able to spend one last day there – alone – touring the entire city before my return to reality.

That reality of course included some serious discussions with Ria (and with Eaton's) about what I was going to do next.

It also included us discovering the truth behind the reason for our journey (and why Paul had never handed in my resignation). It turned out that Paul was in Hong Kong for final interviews with a chain of ladies' specialty stores based in England. He was to become the head of their Hong Kong buying office.

So, while we were hunting for merchandise, Paul was looking at apartments, neighborhoods, and schools in which to relocate his family. And apparently Bill, Brian and I were along for the ride to make his trip look "official."

I thought it to be a complete misuse of his authority and budget, not to mention our trust. But what we also didn't know was that Paul had been staring down the prospect of a major demotion and wanted to exit Eaton's gracefully to a new opportunity.

He announced his departure in a big merchandising meeting attended by all of his direct reports from every division after we'd returned. "Effective in a few days." And then he was out.

I guess he didn't want my news to step on his. Which was fine.

A few months later, I offered my resignation again to one of the personnel guys who happened to be a friend of mine. I told him the truth, that I wanted to leave the company but couldn't really afford to. He asked if I would be willing to stay on until the end of the fourth quarter which I agreed to.

I suppose I should finish up Paul's story before going on with my own. Within the year, we all heard through the grapevine that he'd been terminated from that new position in Hong Kong and that he'd taken a job there at one of the airports managing the duty-free shop.

He stayed there less than a year before moving to New York City where he nailed down a very impressive position with a high-fashion clothing chain from Germany.

I visited him at his new offices in Trump Tower and we had lunch together. His assignment was to open as many new stores in high-end malls across America as he could. I realized immediately that he was in way over his head. He was fired within six months.

Somewhere in there, we'd heard that his wife had left him and that he'd moved back to Montreal to become a Merchandise Manager for the Hudson's Bay Company. He should have been good at this but somehow that lasted less than a year as well. Then he landed the role of Vice President of Zellers (a chain of Canadian discount retailers). That also went south quickly.

Finally, one day he rang me up to tell me he'd been made Vice President of Sales for a bedspread manufacturer in Montreal. He said, "Ed, I need you to tell me everything you know about bedspreads." So, I told him what I knew, which wouldn't have helped anybody (it didn't even help me to know it).

After that, it couldn't have been more than nine months before we all heard that Paul had been fired yet again and that he'd committed suicide. I never learned how, and I didn't want to know. All of this had taken place within three or four years of that night back at The Arrow Club in Osaka. Boy, you never know which way the arrow is going to fly in this life. As I said, "a cautionary tale."

I was determined not to drift. Still, how does one get from here to there without knowing precisely where "there" is? That's a question for anyone of course, but at that particular time, it was mine!

Even though I still had the corner office until the end of that fourth quarter, I offered to switch with the guy who'd been picked to take my place so he could sit amongst the people he'd soon be managing. He said, "No need, Ed," then he leaned over and whispered, "I'm leaving too."

At that moment – more than any other time – I knew that 'the good ship Eaton's' would be facing rough waters ahead.

Still, I was extremely proud of my tenure there. It had been eighteen years since Homer Loudon had taken a chance on me. From that small satellite office, sorting through orders for piece goods as an assistant, to managing a national organization of buyers, I felt that I'd learned my trade. But now it was time to try something new.

It was the end of
February 1974.
I was almost
42 years old.

