

Linehan Saves

Bryan Murphy

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Linehan Saves

Yingnmeng, China, April 2020.

“I want a man! A man!”

Sean Linehan slams the door in the young woman’s face. She takes a step back, stands still for a moment, then adjusts her dress to its most opaque and walks away down the corridor, shaking her head.

Linehan leans back against the other side of the hotel room door and tries to control his breathing. *God, she was beautiful.* He staggers over to the armchair next to the bed, flops into it, pulls out his phone and calls Mo.

“Show-un! Good to hear you. What can I do for you?”

“A man! I want a man!”

“You don’t like Miss May? Everyone likes Miss May.”

“I want a man,” he groans.

“Miss May is the best we have. Most pretty. Very sweet.”

“A man.”

“You will see. She is an excellent interpreter. The bestest.”

“Look, Mo, I’m here to work. How can I work if my very sweet, most pretty interpreter keeps turning the front of her clothing transparent?”

“You don’t like?”

“Yes, I do. Too damned like. So if you people really want the 2030 World Cup, you’ll get on to the agency double quick and have them send me a male interpreter. A good one. Who wears normal, old-fashioned Western or Chinese clothes!”

A wave of tiredness hits Linehan. *Jesus Christ*, it feels late.

Mo is talking. “Sure thing, Show-un, I’ll do that. Whatever you want. Are you OK? You don’t seem quite yourself.”

“You’re right. I’m not the Sean Linehan you met in Switzerland. And I’m not your typical corruptible sports executive. See? I’m the new, improved version. Sean Linehan in shining armour. So you guys had better clean up your act. Get it?”

Mo is laughing softly. “You seem jet-lagged.”

“Yes, I am, my friend. You can’t imagine. It’s been a long, long journey.”

“You hungry? I send you Aunty Jun’s speciality. Noodle soup and thousand-year-old egg.”

“No, I just need sleep.”

“Must eat. Very important.”

“I’ve eaten.”

“Eaten? Good. Anything you want, you ask the Reception. Anything at all.”

“Right.”

“I send interpreter tomorrow. We meet afternoon. Good, not good?”

“Good.”

“Sweet dreams.”

Linehan closes the connection. Good, not good? He never gave that a thought, once. Now it has become the central question in his life.

Feeling both hungry and thirsty, he reaches out and opens the mini-bar. It is well stocked with beers and spirits, but they are all laced with energy-boosting potions. He settles on something named ‘Red Bullock’: alcohol-free beer laced with an energy-boosting potion. To accompany it, he pulls out a bag labelled ‘Chompis’. He munches a handful as he sits dictating another message to Veronica, who has not yet answered his first one. The Chompis are crispy and savoury, though he cannot identify the precise taste.

Linehan finishes the Chompis and half of the Red Bullock, then falls asleep in the armchair.

He wakes up a couple of hours later, alert. Something has changed. Just below the door, five business cards sit on the grey carpet.

Linehan pulls himself out of the armchair, picks them up and examines them carefully. All feature photos of a young woman pouting as she disrobes. The woman is the same, but the name on each is different, as

are the promises of satisfaction on offer. Linehan groans, bins them, takes off his own clothes, climbs into bed and falls straight into a dream of Veronica.

The morning light seeps through the thin curtains and banishes Veronica. Linehan wakes, aggrieved that he has not been kissed goodbye. He wonders where on earth he is. The theme tune of *Chinese Housewives Karaoke OK!* blares through walls, ceiling and floor to remind him. For a moment, it makes him wish he were back home in London, or at work in Zurich, but then he remembers that he has a mission, for football and for himself. *I'll show 'em*, he thinks, and gets up and ready for the day ahead, full of energy.

On the way out, he slips on the pile of business cards by his door. It is thicker than the pile of the carpet. A couple of fingers appear below the door and flick another card on to the heap. Linehan tries to stamp on the fingers. He is a fraction too slow. Enraged, he boots the cards out of the way. One of them features a different woman. Her hair is blonde, though her features are Chinese. Linehan picks this one up and slips it into his shirt pocket without reading it. He throws the rest into the bin with force, then leaves the room.

There are only two people manning the Reception desk. Linehan does not mind, though he used to lodge at swanky hotels on his travels. Before Padania. Now he saves money from his daily travelling allowance by staying at businessmen's stopovers like the KK Inn. The money is destined for the World Football Authority's Development Fund. He has specifically earmarked it for grassroots soccer in Laos. It gives Linehan a real buzz to feel that he is at last putting something back into the game.

Linehan explains to the young man standing behind the counter that the last thing he needs is a prostitute. He ignores the devil in his head whispering *Only one? They've got to be joking!* The young man smiles and nods, repeatedly. Behind him an older man stares levelly at Linehan over the back of his computer's monitor. When the young man deems Linehan has finished his rant, he gestures in the direction of another young man, who is sitting in the lounge area, engrossed in the Seattle International Times.

The interpreter folds his newspaper and rises as Linehan approaches. His shiny suit does not fit him well, but his tie looks new. His handshake is dry and firm.

“Good morning, Mr. Linehan. I trust that your jet-lag is receding.” He is tall, and he does not smile.

“What’s your name?”

“Xiao Xin Xue. But I use the English name Daniel. Look, I hate to bring bad news, but while you were sleeping – and I’ve already told those Reception people not to let the hookers wake you – Switzerland was getting a hiding.”

“What?”

“World Cup qualifier: Turkey 4, Switzerland 1. Sorry.”

“No, no. That’s good. Turkey is a much bigger audience. Anyway, you’ll do. I mean, I’m glad to meet you. Let’s go get something to eat.”

It is late afternoon. Linehan is in another restaurant, Mo’s favourite. It is much classier than the one where he had brunch. Linehan is tired after his whirlwind tour of the city with Daniel. Daniel proved knowledgeable and efficient, good company, but Linehan has sent him home for the day. He doesn’t need an interpreter with Mo. Linehan is happy to be getting down to business.

“Firing squad, is it?” asks Linehan.

“No. Bullet in the back of the neck. Person who shoots does duty, is happy, does not mind who knows.”

“Yeah. I’d do it. No hesitation. People who drag our game through the mud.”

“You would, Show-un?”

He would. But Linehan knows he should not. Not even want to.

“Well, maybe not. No, I couldn’t, not personally. More to the point, Mo, you can’t!”

“WFA say government must not interfere in sport. Right?”

“Damn right!”

“Our government say WFA not interfere in government. Right?”

“Wrong. It’s not government, it’s murder.”

“China business. Only China business.”

“Not when you kill two Brazilians as well.”

“Brazil so special?”

“In football, yes.”

“In China, all equal before law. Brazilians equal, too. Break law, get punish.”

Linehan can see this is getting nowhere. It is not Mo he has to convince but Mo’s big boss, the Minister for Sport. Better to mine his friend for information.

“How did you nab the bastards?”

“Heard too many rumours to ignore. Brought in experts.”

“Football experts?”

“No. Financial experts. People who crunch numbers and spot patterns.”

“And what did they spot?”

Mo gets technical. “They start with the simplest things: throw-ins.”

“Throw-ins?”

“Yes. They find lots and lots of money being waged on how soon the first throw-in is given in certain matches.”

“Big deal!”

“It becomes a big deal when it correlates with spending patterns by players in the team that gives away the first throw-in.”

“Come off it, Mo! The fans won’t stand for that kind of thing.”
Linehan tries to sound convinced.

“The fans won’t know. And they will soon forget a throw-in if their team scores a goal or two before half-time. And when their team goes in at half-time, the players find red envelopes waiting for them in their lockers. We have it on film.”

“Even so, you don’t shoot footballers for giving away throw-ins.”

“Not yet. So our experts look for more patterns. Anomalous patterns. Unusually high-scoring games. That kind of thing. And they match them with betting patterns, and with spending by players and match referees.”

“Ah, the referees.”

“Oh, yes. They have so big chance to help the result. Was he tripped or did he dive? The ref decide. Red card or yellow card? The ref decide.”

“So they looked at whether a certain team always does well when a certain official referees their matches?”

“Obviously. But also more subtle things, like the foul-to-bookings ratio.” Mo is in his element.

“Like, if my team gets a yellow card for every twenty fouls it commits, and yours gets one every six, something is probably not right.”

“You bet!”

“You can bet on anything in football these days.” Linehan sighs.

“And that means that anything can be corrupted. That’s why gambling was one of the Five Evils. And now that we have caught some bad guys red-handed, we will shoot them. Bang-bang.”

“Yeah! I mean, no, you can’t. Not Brazilians, anyhow.”

“Tell that to the Minister, tomorrow.”

“Especially not on the first United Nations Day of the Sports International.”

“What better day can there be? Did you bring me that photo of Splatta?”

“Sure.” Linehan reaches for his pocket.

“Save it for the Minister. I hope it is signed.”

“Of course.”

Linehan takes his leave. He needs to get back and study the case file on the Brazilians.

Linehan gets a taxi back to the hotel. He wades through the heap of business cards inside his door, unlocks his suitcase and pulls out the file on the Brazilians.

It is a badge of honour among Greater China Super League teams to field a couple of South Americans, and Lhasa Lenovo are no exception. Even though no-one back home had heard of Teasharer and Avlanjy before their death sentence, being Brazilian gives them extra status here.

Teasharer and Avlanjy claim they did not know what was going on. They picked up their red envelopes like everybody else, but say their teammates told them the money inside was ‘an incentive from the sponsors’. They certainly look surprised on the police video, which unfortunately has no sound. The authorities’ position is that if the money went to the whole

squad, so should the punishment, even when that means public execution. Linehan knows the Chinese will get to stage the World Cup whatever happens. He will just have to insist on the damage to the nation's international image if two Brazilian footballers are shot in public. He wonders if the authorities are going to televise the spectacle.

The phone rings. Linehan answers it.

"You like me. I come you now." The voice is female.

"What? Who?"

"You like me. I love you long time. Come now."

"What? No."

"Come now."

"No! I said no! Understand? No!"

Linehan slams down the phone and unplugs it. Anyone he wants to talk to will call his mobile. He goes down to the Reception and gives the clerk a piece of his mind.

The clerk looks at him coldly over his computer. Then he answers, loudly.

"Hear, no un'stan."

"What?"

The clerk replies calmly.

"I heard what you said perfectly well. It's just that I didn't quite catch your drift. So I should be grateful if you would be so kind as to repeat it, perhaps enunciating a little more clearly."

"So you know damned well what I said, you deceitful little bugger!"

Linehan storms out of the hotel and starts to walk off his anger. His mood improves at the sight of so many attractive women.

The fashion among young women is for head-to-ankle covering. Some of the dresses are slit to the waist, and most alternate opacity with flashes of transparency. The effect is heightened, now that dark has fallen, by their inner lighting systems. Linehan is mesmerised. He decides to head back to the hotel.

On the way, he diverts his eyes from the sartorial street scene to the shop fronts. Among the fruit-sellers and clothing stores, all open late, he notices a few places offering foot massage.

His feet are aching. *Can't be bad*, he thinks. *Must be legit. It's only feet.* He sees a place that looks clean and bright, and goes in.

Several men are sitting in recliners, chatting with each other while white-clad women or men rub their feet or cut their nails. A middle-aged woman in a nurse's uniform approaches Linehan.

"You want massager?"

"Yes, please. Foot."

The woman indicates a price list on the inside of the door. Linehan points to a picture of feet with pressure points indicated. "Foot." The price is low.

"You want foot massager?"

"Yes, please."

She waves to a sofa, where a few white-clad young women and men are sitting, apparently half-asleep. The women immediately look at him and smile, but Linehan points to an older-looking man.

"Him."

"Him?"

"Him."

The woman says something to the man, who gets up and joins them. He mumbles a greeting to Linehan. The woman leads them out of the main room and down a well-lit corridor with numbered doors on either side. Linehan notices that there is no number four. They stop outside number ten. The woman opens the door and ushers them in. It is a narrow room with a camp bed in the middle, covered by a thin mattress and a crisp sheet. There is a wash basin and beside it a table with plastic bottles. Acupuncture charts line the walls.

The woman indicates that Linehan should lie on the bed, on his stomach. He does so, and the woman leaves the room. The sound of Cantonese pop music wafts in from the hallway.

Instead of starting on the feet, the masseur starts on Linehan's head and neck, using not only his fingers but also his knuckles. Linehan does not find it relaxing.

The masseur progresses to Linehan's back. Now he is also using the bones near his wrists, and Linehan finds this painful. It is not what he bargained for. He asks the man to stop, but the masseur carries on, regardless. Linehan brushes the man's hands off his back.

"Stop, for Christ's sake! Stop!"

He twists around on the bed and points to his feet.

"God damn you! Massage my *feet*, will you? Bloody hell fire!"

Linehan lies on his suffering back and points at his feet until the man starts to work on them. Linehan relaxes.

His comfort does not last long. The man is as tough on his feet as he was on his back, but this time Linehan is determined not to lose face by acting like a sissy. He grits his teeth and closes his eyes.

He opens his eyes when he feels a pair of hands unbuttoning his shirt. He looks into the round, sun-tanned face of a smiling young woman. The foot massage is continuing, getting even more painful. There must be something in the idea of pressure points, because it is not just his feet that are hurting. The woman begins to rub his chest, softly. Linehan wants to tell her to go away, but he is immobilised by the pain.

"You want happy ending?" she asks.

Linehan just wants the whole experience to end.

"Yes," he croaks.

The woman slides her hands over Linehan's stomach and starts to massage his thighs through his trousers. Then she unbuckles his belt, unzips his fly, slips her hand into his underpants and leans in towards him. The pain in his feet is too much to bear. Linehan passes out.

When he comes to, concerned faces are peering down at him. Strong arms help him to sit up, and someone else presses a mug of lukewarm, leafy tea into his hand. Linehan sips it. The pain has receded. His neck is even feeling good. He gets to his feet, puts down the mug of tea, adjusts his clothing and staggers to the door.

"Thank you. I'm all right. Thank you."

The owner of the massage parlour refuses to let him pay. Instead she summons one of the masseurs, not the one who caused Linehan so much agony, and has him accompany Linehan back to his hotel.

When they arrive, Linehan gives the man the massage fee as a tip. His feet still ache, but his back is better. He has no trouble getting to sleep.

His interpreter is waiting when Linehan comes down the next morning. Veronica has not been able to send a message and Linehan feels desolate. Daniel takes him to a Cantonese place for brunch. A waitress approaches them, pushing a trolley laden with dimsum. Linehan recognises them from the Hong Kong Palais, which he frequented in his student days in Brighton. The waitress is veiled in full-body black.

“Is she a Muslim?” Linehan asks Daniel.

“No.”

“Then what’s with the burqa?”

“Burkan,” Daniel corrects him. “Kan means see.” At that moment, the middle third of the waitress’s garment turns transparent. She does not appear to be wearing underclothes. Linehan’s eyes open wide.

Daniel explains. “We have suffered a lot of terror attacks recently. You probably heard about a few of the bigger ones. Islamo-fascists. The Army provides a military response. Our women, some of them, provide a cultural response. To show they will not be intimidated.”

Linehan is staring at the woman’s midriff, but she has turned her burkan opaque again.

Daniel is filling Linehan in on the Islamist insurgency when Linehan’s phone rings. It is Mo. The Minister will see them in the evening. Linehan is pleased. If he can tie up this business fast, he will be able to pay Veronica a surprise visit in London before heading home to the hallowed halls of the WFA in Zurich.

“Do you time need to prepare?” Daniel asks.

“No, I’m ready. I’m always ready,” Linehan blusters. “Let’s see something cultural. And old. Is the East Tower open today?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s go there now.”

The East Pagoda is around 2,200 years old. At least, there has been a Buddhist temple on the site in one form or another ever since that time. The current Pagoda is only some 400 year old, and other parts of the temple compound were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and rebuilt in the

1990s. The grounds include miniature gardens and a traditional-style tea house set among quince and pear trees.

As they ascend the main tower, Linehan feels a thirst for Nescola, which, as a beer-drinking man, he has always regarded as akin to piss. *Strange thing, jet-lag*, he thinks.

Despite it, Linehan feels elated as he climbs the flights of wooden stairs leading up to each of the twelve storeys. The height of new buildings in the old town, whose eastern approaches it oversees, is restricted: they cannot be taller than the Pagoda. Even today, it towers above its surroundings, and affords Linehan and Daniel a fine view, plus a breeze with a hint of the sea. They can enjoy it without the milling tour groups, who have yet to arrive and shatter the peace with their leaders' competing megaphones.

On the way down, Linehan remarks on the graffiti that disfigure many of the walls. Daniel explains that it is an ancient tradition which the city's modern inhabitants feel obliged to carry on, in spite of the damage it does. He says that several of the messages etched into the old walls wish the perpetrator a long life in good health. Linehan suggests that instead of making the walls even uglier with placards begging people not to deface them, the authorities simply spread a rumour that defacers will suffer illness and early death.

As they leave, he asks Daniel the meaning of the words scrolling across the electronic board at the entrance.

"Oh, that's nothing. Just some government propaganda. But don't watch it."

"I tried to grasp the gist when we came in, but frankly I couldn't understand a thing. What's it about?"

"Actually, I don't know. We never bother with that stuff these days. And you'd better not, either."

"Hey, come on. Nobody can brainwash me!"

"It's not the political message that's the problem. It's the subliminal commercial messages. They're full of them. The government earns billions that way."

From the Pagoda, Linehan and Daniel stroll through what was left of the old town, admiring the women among the crowds in its narrow lanes. Linehan's careful investigation ascertains that when they flash from opaque

to transparent, it is the women in burkans who reveal more of their bodies. He also notes that Daniel pays more attention to their shoes than to their dresses. In fact, he sees that most of the men in the streets who are at all intrigued by the show are fixing their eyes on the flashing of ankles, insteps and toes.

Linehan tries to call up a vision of Veronica's feet, but fails. Anyway, he knows her size. He has Daniel take him to the finest local shoe shop, Pieduchy's, where he buys a pair of the smartest thought-controllable flashing footwear, and has it wrapped.

He is carrying this when they arrive at the Ministry. Linehan leaves the package at the Reception, to avoid being required to offer it to the big-shot as a present for one of his mistresses. Linehan has renounced both giving and receiving such things.

Fei is a tall, thin man dressed in a white suit. His jacket has an ever-orchid in the buttonhole. Fei's eyes are steely grey. He receives Linehan and Daniel with considered courtesy, and pours the tea himself.

Without mentioning China's candidature to host the 2030 World Cup, he calls in the plans and models of the ' Soccer City ' about to be built there in Yingmeng, and lays them in front of Linehan.

"Two years," he says, "from drawing board to full community and international use."

Linehan believes him, and is impressed.

"I signed my approval last week. The Asian Under-17 Nations Cup will kick-off there in 20 months' time. We dearly hope Dr. Splatta will grace us with his presence on that occasion."

Linehan takes the cue and brings out the photo of the President of the World Football Authority, to which he has added an exact copy of the signature that he has seen so many times. He proffers it to Fei with both hands.

"Dr. Splatta asked me to give you this as a token of his personal esteem." Fei's eyes gleam as he takes it, again with both hands.

Can't hurt anyone, Linehan thinks.

"He also has a personal message for you. Dr. Splatta hopes it will not be necessary for China to mark the First United Nations Day of the Sports International by shooting all those corrupt players and officials in public."

In other words, there was room for manoeuvre on the day, the victims and the witnesses. Even the method.

Fei sighs. “You urged us to get serious about dealing with corruption in sport. Now that we have got serious, you still complain. That we find hard to understand.”

“We understand your position. Personally, I ... wonder about the choice of date.”

“Yes, I do see your point. Actually, the government lost its appetite for public executions years ago, but we have to listen to what the people want.”

Linehan can hardly believe his ears. He was expecting to be met with a stone wall, to have to make empty threats in order to wring marginal concessions from the Minister. Maybe he won't.

The Minister continues. “We would gladly rescind those sentences, but the public would be unhappy. And the government would look weak.”

So that was the heart of the matter. “I think the world would see an act of clemency as a manifestation of great strength,” Linehan suggests.

“Hmmm. There *is* a way we might square the circle.”

“Tell me.”

“Go home, Mr. Linehan. I mean back to Zurich. Tell Dr. Splatta and the world that your mission failed. We would not be moved. If you do that, then, within the month, we shall announce China's intention to mark the First United Nations Day of the Sports International by commuting the sentences of all concerned. Drastically. Teasharer and Avlanjy can go and serve theirs in Brazil. I believe they have some good prison teams there, and some decent open prisons. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go and meet the media before laying the foundation stone at Soccer City. Let me know your answer tomorrow.”

Linehan stops at the Reception to collect his package. The receptionist gives him two packages. One holds the shoe-box. The other is smaller.

“What's this?”

“A small token from the Minister.”

Linehan has an extensive collection of small tokens at home. Since his trip to Padania, he has been passing them on to friends, or selling them and giving the proceeds to good causes.

He pockets it. "The Minister is exceptionally kind."

Linehan gets Daniel to help him book a flight back to Zurich via London, leaving the next afternoon. While they wait, Linehan unwraps the Minister's gift. It is a scroll. It looks ancient.

"Genuine," pronounces Daniel. "You can bet your life on that, from the Minister."

Linehan has a collector's heart. It skips a beat. Then another.

"However, no-one is allowed to take antiquities out of China."

I'm not bloody giving it to you, Linehan thinks, then quickly suppresses the thought. He cannot deny the object's beauty.

"You are not safe walking in the street with that in your hand. Better let me carry it for you. Or put it inside your shirt."

Linehan rolls it up and slips it inside his shirt. He feels it cool against his skin, and hopes he will not sweat from nerves or heat.

Daniel wants to take Linehan back to the hotel by taxi, to protect the scroll, but Linehan is keen to see the inside of a Chinese public bus.

Daniel produces a bus pass for Linehan, as well as his own. The bus is crowded but not jam-packed; the passengers are good-natured and vociferous. Nobody gives Linehan a second glance.

Linehan treats Daniel to a beer in the small hotel bar, then bids him good-night. He does not say anything to the two familiar men behind the counter as he passes.

No cards litter the floor of his room. Indeed, the whole room has been thoroughly cleaned, including the drawers. His clothes and other personal effects have rarely been in such tidy order. He checks: nothing has been taken.

Linehan strips, showers and goes to bed, but he cannot sleep. Every time he is close to dropping off, the horns of his dilemma prod him awake. Should he accept the Minister's ultimatum and parade himself as a failure, or should he play hardball, just go back to Zurich and wait for the Minister to back down for the sake of certainty over hosting the 2030 World Cup? The old Linehan would never have risked his own reputation, never mind his job, but the nascent Linehan allows that other people's lives might be more important than his own image and livelihood.

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