Black Market

Robert Harvey*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

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THE two of you leave the area just after sunset, your field jackets bulging from the cartons of cigarettes jammed inside, your pockets full of candy and gum. The guard at the gate grins knowingly. "Don't let 'em have it too cheap, Mac," he calls. You pretend not to hear. You push through the throng of Korean boys in the road outside and start toward town.

Alex looks back at the boys. "I don't get it," he says. "Here I'm wearing a field jacket and I'm still cold, and those kids are running around with no coats on at all. Half of them don't even have shoes. How do they do it?"

"You're just naturally puny," you say. You think of the shoes you saw in the market place last Sunday. A cheap canvas pair they were, worth maybe a dollar and a half. The man who had them wanted three hundred yen, almost twenty dollars for them. At twenty dollars a pair, how many American kids would have shoes? You shrug your shoulders and think of something else.

"What's the system?" you ask Alex. "Do we just offer the stuff to everyone we meet until someone buys it?"

"Not hardly," says Alex. "Too many MP's cruising around for us to start doing that. I know a corner where there's usually a buyer. We'll try there."

You walk on. Past an ox cart creaking slowly along the road. Past a small hut defiantly flaunting its red hammer and sickle poster, with its little group of young men lounging outside and glowering at you as you pass. The huts draw closer together and become larger.

"There's the corner up ahead, and there's a fellow leaning against that building. Suppose he's our boy?" As you come nearer, the man spots your bulging jackets, straightens up, bows, and smiles. Even in the dusk you can see the glitter of his gold teeth. He's fat, the first fat man you've seen in Korea. All the others have been thin, too thin. He wears a long black raincoat over a dirty, shapeless blue suit. His hair is black and oily, molded close to his head. He smiles again, expectantly. Only his mouth
smiles, not his eyes. They remain cold, aloof, and a little contemptuous. He reaches into his raincoat pocket, pulls out a crumpled handful of yen, and the business begins.

One carton of cigarettes—one hundred yen; one candy bar—ten yen; one package of gum—five yen. One pair of cheap canvas shoes—three hundred yen. Why should you think of that? Keep your mind on what you’re doing. Check all the money, make sure he doesn’t try to pass off any Japanese yen on you, they’re no good here.

The money feels cold and greasy as he hands it to you. Your hand brushes his and you involuntarily jerk away. He feels cold and greasy too, like congealed lard. He crams everything into a child’s school bag lying at his feet, bows and smiles again, his eyes still not smiling, and scurries off into the shadows.

The two of you turn back toward the camp, walking slow, not saying much, feeling the strangeness of the yen bulging in your pocket. Back you go, back through the kids playing in the road, the kids with no shoes because shoes cost too much. Back into camp.

“Shall we try it again next week?” Alex says.

“Might as well,” you say. “We’ve got to get enough yen so we can buy some souvenirs to send home.”

You walk toward your barracks. A gust of wind blows the ever-present stench of Korea into your nostrils. You think again of the kids with no shoes. “Oh, Christ!” you say. “Christ, but I wish I was home!”

Crowning Glory

Jean Anderson

THE family is sitting quietly at the supper table listlessly slurping up Friday’s left-over stew. The atmosphere is strained. Again the family has taken sides over a vital issue. The radio. Tonight, time for the 6 p.m. news flashes, Father is hoping to hear the casualty list from a bus accident in Southern California in which two were killed (he knows a man in San Francisco and fears for his life) while Junior is perishing to know whether Daddy Warbucks and Punjab will escape the flaming