Don’t Send A Boy

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Abstract

The sun was just lowering itself over the Korean hills. The faint red tinge of day’s-end was changing to a more chill blue-gray...
THE sun was just lowering itself over the Korean hills. The faint red tinge of day's-end was changing to a more chill blue-gray. Translucent green plastic squares on the sides of quonset huts shone brightly, indicating lights turned on inside. In the quonsets, pinochle games were in full swing. Outside, a few fatigue-clad figures could be seen going to the airmen's club for a few beers or going to the base for fun-and-games in the off-limits areas. Down one of the streets, an olive-drab truck carried its load, eighteen airmen with helmets, canteens, and loaded carbines. The evening guard mount was on its way.

The truck passed by the Base Exchange, where the Korean workers were getting off. One of the airmen called, "Hey, Josan, takusan king-chucka-bobo hava yes?" Then he turned to the airman sitting next to him and said, "Hey, Chuck. Did you see that moose in the blue skirt? She looked just like Penny."

"Penny? Which one's that?"

"That's the one in Suwon. Remember, I showed you the picture?"
“Yeah, I think so. Was that the one with the clothes on or off?”
“Both, stupid.”
“Hell, I can’t tell one tight-eye from another.”
“No sweat. After you’ve been here nearly a year, you can tell them apart in the dark. And that’s just what we’d be doing now if that damned First Sergeant hadn’t put us on guard. We’d be sitting in the big room, right at the entrance, all four of us. Me an’ you an’ Penny an’ her kid sister. Mama Kim would bring us in some of that V.O. I took her last time and—”
“Don, are they really sisters?”
“Hell, kid. Who cares? Probably not. She’s probably some kid who had her family knocked off in the war and now Penny’s teaching her the trade. Don’t worry about that. You’ll like her. She’s almost as young and innocent as you.”
“Now, damn it — I’m only six months younger than you are. Just ’cause I haven’t been here as long as you have—”
“That’s right. Just ’cause you haven’t been here as long as I have. Been off base yet?”
“Once, with Sherman.”
“Oh boy! You’d better stop by the medics, I know the places he goes. Anyway, you’ve been off base. You’ve seen a little of what this crummy country is like. In about a year you’ll hate it like I do.”
“You’re always bitching about this country, and how bad the Gooks are; so how come you like this Penny so much?”
Don looked away for a second, then looked back. His voice became more serious as he said, “Because I can talk with her. Wait’ll you’ve been here a while. Every day, the same God-damned thing. You work ten or twelve hours a day come rain or snow, mud, blood or shit. You get off and what do you do? Squat on a bunk and play pinochle till you see cards in your sleep or go to the airmen’s club and drink quarts of Jap beer till you stagger to the barracks, puking all the way. You go off base and here’s all these grubby Gooks gibbering and clearing their throats and calling it a language, or you shack up with some josan — two bucks a throw. We’re just a bunch of God-damn animals. With Penny, it’s — different. Sometimes we sit up all night and just talk. Nothing else — just talk.”
“With a Gook? You’re kidding!”

“No bull. Before the war, she was going to school in Seoul, then,—well—anyway, she’s real smart. When we go to Suwon, I’ll show you that wall around the old town. She told me all about it. It’s just like the Great Wall of China.”

“Ho boy! Wait’ll I tell the troops about this. Mosher, the great paddy-hopper, a culture addict.”

“Listen, you son-of-a-bitch, one word from you and I’ll pound the living shit out of you.”

“Okay, okay, just kidding. Calm down.”

A voice from the cab of the truck roared, “Post number fourteen.”

“That’s mine,” Chuck said and stood up. Strangely, his helmet and carbine didn’t make him look fierce and dangerous, just young.

“See you in six hours,” Don said.

The truck whined on, past mechanics, just visible in the dim light, who were putting their planes to bed for the night. The jets hunkered on their low wheels, receiving their plastic covers, then snuggled two-by-two in their revetments, waiting for morning when they would again leave man’s earth and return to their sky.

“Post number fifteen,” came the cry. Don hopped over the tailgate, tilted his helmet to a rakish angle, and walked to the cab of the truck. An overweight Tech Sergeant looked out of the cab and said, “Your post’s that hangar over there, inside and out. The password is ‘swing’ and the countersign is ‘low.’ Got it? Okay — take off.”

As the truck lurched off, Don walked to the hangar. He went around the hangar once, then found a spot near the main door, and squatted in imitation of the old Korean Papa-sans.

The night was one of those autumn nights with clearly resolved stars accompanying a half moon so clear and sharp that you could reach to it and smooth its face. The sounds of the base putting itself to bed carried well through the cool air, interrupting the stillness and giving a contact with the world to the silent hangar. One of the stars to the north blinked and moved. Don watched, and soon he could make out the green color of the light, then the sound of the
engines. The plane landed and taxied past the hangar. He identified it as a C-124, the same type of plane that had shuttled him from Japan to Korea.

He settled back against the hangar and thought of his trip to the Far East. The memories came easily; the helpless frustration was still sharp after nearly a year. The flight across the Pacific had been perfect, with the air clear enough to see waves and even whitecaps on the ocean 20,000 feet below. The palm tree growing in the open patio of the Hickam Field terminal and the gooney birds waddling in the night lights at Midway had made the trip between worlds seem more real. Then Yamata, the processing center. He didn't know what base in Japan he wanted, any would do. He went to the Yamata Base Exchange and picked up books on Japan, and lay in bed thinking of places to go and things to do. The Ginza, Shimbashi, the Kamakura Buddha, Mt. Fuji — magic names and places, an alien culture waiting to be discovered and absorbed. Then his name was posted for a shipment to Korea. It must be a mistake. He ran to the orderly room and showed them his orders for Japan. No mistake. Korea. He remembered the ride through Tokyo to the air field, different from the ride to Yamata — the second time, the brightly colored kimonos didn't seem happy, instead they pointed up a dull haze. The take-off didn't dispel the sick feeling, and the precise rice paddies gave him a feeling of having lost something he had never gained.

The landing in Korea bore out his worst fears. The drab landscape, the bored, almost antagonistic, reception, the thin, hard-faced Koreans, the row on row of identical olive-drab quonset huts separated by slit trenches; all these were signs of stark desolation. But the worst were the planes; the sleek, silver, symmetrical symbols of beauty and technology had become devices to carry terror.

Bwanggg! The loosely hung door of the hangar swung in the breeze, bringing Don, once again, to reality. He looked at his watch. An hour had gone by. Just about time to check the hangar. He flicked on his flashlight, and watched the bright spot of light leap from point to point, plane to plane. "Nothing," he thought. "Light up time." He again sat next to the hangar door, and lit a cigarette. The smoke drifted up
in a solid stream for about a foot, then curled and twisted. One of the curls floated up, past the face of the half moon, then dissipated, going nowhere and everywhere.

"Well," he thought, "five more hours and home." Home — the barracks — corrugated olive drab iron lined with olive drab bunks and blankets — clothes hangars carrying olive drab fatigues and field jackets — olive drab shelves supporting olive drab helmets and gas masks. Fighting the monotony, there were the pictures — pin-ups cut from magazines, pictures of the girl back home, and sometimes, places where a picture of the girl back home used to be; the space holy — inviolate — and empty.

The old Plymouth had been a refuge, a place where tomorrow's departure could be forgotten in yesterday's remembrances.

"Don't worry, Shirley," he told her. "Two years isn't so long. I'll be back soon and we'll have the biggest darn wedding this town has ever seen."

"I'll write every day, Don. Promise me you will too."

And she had — for the first month or two. Every night he'd sit on his bunk and read the day's letter, then he'd answer it. Then, abruptly, the letters stopped. No mail. Then, a month later, a letter from an old friend with a newspaper clipping. It had been a big wedding all right, but he hadn't been there to enjoy it.

"Bitch!" he said. The word rolled off with a practiced ease. He stood up and stretched against the chill, then walked around the hangar, pausing at the rear to close an entry door and relieve himself. As he sat down, he saw a shooting star. It flashed by Orion's dagger and burned out. He wondered about the stars. No matter how overcast the days were, the nights were almost sure to be clear with melancholy sharp stars. The nights, full of sound, empty of meaning — show your pass to the A.P. at the gate — down the road, past little shops made of cast-off boxes and covered with flattened beer cans. "Hey G.I.! You want fatigues?" Past the josans — sharp faces with too much lipstick — improved by the lack of light. "Hey G.I.! You want short-time?" And everywhere the little boys; scrawny and pinch-faced, dirty-necked and raucus. "Hey G.I.! You want shoe shine? Skivvy pikcha? Nice girl?"
“What am I worrying about these damn gooks for?” he thought. “Twenty more days and I go home.” He reached for a cigarette.

A quick blur near the hangar door!

“Halt!” and he tried to rise but his legs wouldn’t lift him.

“Halt!” and he rolled on his side, his helmet rolling off, his tongue stuck to the sides of his mouth.

“Halt!” and his voice rose and cracked as he fumbled for the carbine’s safety and stared over the barrel at the running figure.

He was conscious of the gun kicking and trembling, but it was not until the bolt closed on an empty chamber that he heard the roar as it echoed from the hangar.

He turned the crank on the guard phone and told the voice in the receiver, “Post fifteen; I think I’ve killed a gook.”

He walked to the limp figure and saw the torn, and now blood soaked trousers, made from black market army blankets; he saw the gray hair, done up identically to that on any other Korean Mama-san; and he saw the five radio tubes which had spilled from her hands and broken on the concrete.

“I told you to halt. — Damn it! — I told you.”

When the ambulance arrived, they found him sobbing and being sick on the ground.

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**Haiku**

*by George Hopkins*

I stood up to speak.
The crowd’s hearing stuttered, so
I sat down again.