



Troubled Men

Sam Martin

Down in the Dirt 2007 chapbook

**God molded Adam;
Adam broke the mold.
(Man comes from
a broken mold.)**

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Bread Run

1.

Mikel Materek was in love with Ba' Bo's sister. He had come into Babe's Café every day lately, since she had started accepting, with Babe's permission, his courting moves. One was to give her an expensive watch. Another was to take her for car rides, which Babe okayed, as long as Ba' Bo' chaperoned. These were sentimental journeys, with romantic ballads wafting over the A. M. waves. Ba' Bo' sang along in serenade, and since his voice was changing, he could make all the notes.

But fathers can be fickle. Babe suddenly decided Mike was an unsuitable suitor, so he was banished. Mike cried. Sister cried. And Babe would have, too, if Ba' Bo', now teetering on the brink of manhood, hadn't shushed him. The decision was likely due to Mike's growing, on-the-road reputation delivering the goods in/from his bread truck to recipients in the nearby, small-town outlets, or "Mikel inlets," as a local wag re-named them. Mike had added Babe's Café to his itinerary, one guy said "after he got a load of Babe's girl." This mis-speaker caught himself when he recalled Babe's size and reputation.

While it might be accurate to speculate that Babe was in decline, physically, since the time he had, using sheer strength, held a running, 1937 Chevrolet by the rear bumper, until the Deputy could block in the occupying criminals from the front with his jeep, his reputation was only increased by this unbelievable (even for eyewitnesses) display of righteous intractability.

The decline, if any, was manifested internally; his outsized, although perfectly-proportioned, physique, revealed no deterioration. His hands appeared still able to grip and soothe any animal, human or otherwise. His gaze remained steady, his personality, stable. Yet the old fear of him remained, oddly enough, unjustified, unjustifiable even, when viewed from the past manifestations of his equanimity, or perhaps because of these always tempering justice with mercy, perhaps because some transgressors needed pure mercy: Mike, for example.

2.

Well, need or not, Mike one day invited Babe and Ba' Bo' to accompany him on the first day of school vacation, 1954, on his rounds of the surrounding towns, delivering bread products to small stores and cafes.

Mike pulled the Delivery Van up to the porch before daylight the next morning and honked, loudly, then wiped the wonder from the waiting Ba' Bo's face with a slight smile, and this comment,

"We got things to see and people to do." His faint smile faded.

Meanwhile, Babe stepped down off the porch, more slowly and less energetically, and with considerably less agility than Mike would have expected. *Well, he is a night person. The café and all.*

Mike was a short, slim guy, unencumbered even by excess hair, so he fit comfortably on the driver's stool. Babe, on the other hand, was forced, by stint of genetic inheritance from who knows whom, or environmental impact of who knows what, to rig a seat of boxes behind the driver's stool. As Babe settled in, Mike spoke over his right shoulder,

"Babs...uh...Mr. Woodley, you know what they call the girl who rides cross-country behind the bus driver?"

"Naw." Babe admitted he didn't.

"Passenger." Mike answered his own question.

Babe merely grunted, and relit his cigar. Ba' Bo' grabbed onto the "passenger bar," but his initial exhilaration turned to terror as they passed the city-limits sign. He had to ride upright! Moreover, the passenger door was missing! It was his first lesson in bravado, but Ba' Bo' must still have shown alarm because Mike shouted, "A bad ride beats a good walk!"

3.

Twelve miles later, at their first stop, "Tootie's Hot Do-Nut Shop," Ba' Bo' jumped out onto shaky legs, hungrier than a hound after a hare-raising day. He gobbled down two hot-glazed, while Mike grabbed a "double-do," inserting his thumb and middle finger into the adjacent holes, exchanging smiles with Tootie as he did so. Babe never ate breakfast. (Constant overindulgence in his ravenous teens finally resulted in Papa's insistence that he force down a pound of butter one morning. Babe was a quick study. If only he had converted to a similar regimen for general comestible consumption, he might have preserved his youthful reputation as a strongman.)

Long after Ba' Bo' was ready to travel, Mike emerged from the back part, his face paler, a whitish cast on his sparse, light-blond hair, his light-

blue eyes expressionless.

Ba' Bo' asked, "Where ya been?"

"Deliverin' the staff of life." Mike shakily responded. "You ready?"
(Ba' Bo' was, but he had more questions that he didn't get to ask.)

"Okay, then. Let's hit 'em!"

As Ba' Bo' gathered a safer nest, opposite his father, he noticed that the driver's door had been removed *to generate a cross breeze* he imagined. Mike stood just outside where the door used to be and took off his jacket, not to stay cool, as Ba' Bo' thought, but to "be cool." His shirt boasted this lament:

"Lucky in Courting,
Unlucky in Court."

4.

The next several stops Ba' Ba' equated later in life to a string of women who had loved him: distinct, but not different. At least, the stop for the noon meal was memorable: "Mama's BIG BUNS." Ba' Bo' had heard rumors of over-sized hamburgers, irresistible to a growing boy, but this nutty myth yielded a kernel of truth, because Mike delivered the BUNS!

Ba' Bo' ate one, and Mike ate one. Babe ate two, and cast around for more (in Ba' Bo' estimation; Babe said he was looking for the men's room.) Mike excused himself to "fetch the BIG BUNS," while Ba' Bo' nursed his six-ounce bottle of Coke, and Babe relit his cigar. When the two emerged from the Men's Room, Mike and Big Mama were mumbling at the cash register station. Mike looked "funny" to Ba' Bo'.

"What's the matter?" Ba' Bo' asked.

"I'm bushed!" Mike answered.

Big Mama giggled.

5.

During the wearying ride to their final drop-off point, Ba' Bo' concluded that the contrived cross-breeze served only to eliminate any cool dark left in the bread truck.

They had turned from a paved road onto a gravel road onto a dirt road, and they were soaked in sweat, drenched in dust, and spitting grit. Suddenly, Mike jerked the wheel and made a sharp turn into a place facing a scene reminiscent of the cover of a Faulkner novel. The gas pumps were of ancient design and rusted so as to prompt doubt of their efficacy.

The steps and the porch showed more holes than wood, like the handle on Ba' Bo's Mama's inherited kitchen knife, which would suction-cup your hand if you gripped it too hard.

As Mike exited the Van, Ba' Bo' watched him remove his shirt *surely this time for comfort*. But no, Mike's T-shirt trumpeted this confession:

“My Ex went to Court,
And I got this shirt.”

“I'm all give out.” he said, smiling.

They trudged, Babe last, into a shadowy interior, un-greeted, except by a slight shift in dark expressions. And there shone the prettiest face Ba' Bo' had ever seen, of an “older girl” of almost legal age. The contrast between her brown skin, black eyes and hair, and white, even teeth was startling. Both the teeth and the eyes were smiling at Mike. It was Ba' Bo's first disappointment in love! (He was almost too young to notice the lush figure. He was a short juvenile, but he grew inches in seconds.)

While Ba' Bo' and Babe slaked their thirst with a cold chocolate soda each, taken from an ice box filled more with icy water than ice, Mike delivered the goodies in the back.

Babe and Ba' Bo' soon retired to the porch steps, where they sat, resting, but poised for an abrupt departure, an instinctive reaction they'd learned just today.

“I'm tired.” Ba' Bo' whined.

“It ain't far.” Babe soothed him. “We made a big circle.”

Then Ba' Bo' looked to the end of the porch and saw her beckoning him! He walked over to her on trembling legs.

“Here.” she said, and opened Ba' Bo's hand and stuffed some bills into it.

“What?” he said. “Why?”

“Because I love you.” She swallowed the last word, then she turned and walked quickly back around the building.

At that exact moment, Mike ran out and yelled, “Git in!” Ba' Bo' responded to his urgency, but Babe was relighting his cigar, so he lagged behind. As Mike peeled out, Ba' Bo' heard some pings, and shouted,

“What was that?”

“Gravel!” Mike responded.

But Ba' Bo' noticed some cracks in the windshield, and looked back to see a man cradling something in both hands. He was lowering it.

Back home, Ba' Bo' could only stumble out and yell, “Thanks!” Babe exchanged a few words with Mike before coming inside.

Lying sleepless, thinking about her, Ba' Bo' witnessed, suffered Adulthood rearing its transforming head for a second time that day. She

had said, "Because I love him!" Ba' Bo' kept the money for a long time, but never told anybody about it. He eventually spent it on girlie magazines.

6.

Thirty years later, back home to attend his father's funeral, Ba' Bo' found out Mike was in the Hospital, near death, so he went, with his brother-in-law, a distant relative of Mike, to visit the "Bread Man," as Mike had come to be known. The two were his only visitors. Just before leaving, Ba' Bo' leaned in close to Mike, who tried to smile, and gasped out two words.

BACK ON THE STREET

Ba' Bo'—I heard 'bread,' but what was that other word he said?

Brother-in-law—Eight.

Ba' Bo'—A-T-E?

Brother-in-law—No. The number.

Ba' Bo' was mystified until his Brother-in-law translated the English into Spanish.

[Ed. Note: Bread Eight = Pan Ocho=Pa' Noche=Para La Noche=For The Night]

Ba' Bo'—By the way, when did he retire?

Brother-in-law—When they gave 'im a male nurse.

In Honest Toil For Peace

“I cannot, I must not, I will not” boomed from the stage of the Base Theater, where the new Commander, an overripe Lieutenant Colonel, stood, without a microphone, but with a full mouth, outlining the new rules: major changes in behavior in response to minor improvements in conditions. Sandy’s mind quickly grew deaf, but his heart was all ears: blue jeans were now forbidden wear on base, for casual wear, that is; the Navy enlisted men could still “don their denims daily.” *Dam’n! This guy’s nickname must be Al!*

Sandy heard a drawl behind him. “Hael. In Weff Ferginya, blue jeans means ya fit fer school.” Joe Blough added his home-state motto: “If we had some bacon, we’d have some bacon ‘n’ eggs?if we had some eggs.” The usual sniffers sniggled and snuffled.

As the grunts and gobs exited the Theater, they were each handed a medallion: on the obverse, “Shu Linkou Naval Air Station”; on the reverse, “I. H. T. F. P.”

Joe clued Sandy in later on the new rules. One was, don’t resell your weekly cigarette ration downtown. Since Sandy didn’t smoke, he gave his two cartons to Joe, who did. Joe’s ration wound up in the hands of his girlfriend, Candy, from House Sixty-Nine. “She’s a smoker!” Joe grinned.

Sandy did exchange money downtown, against all rules. The Base rate was forty Yuan to one Dollar, but he could get more at the Houses-of-Will-Repute. *Shoot, the difference is pidlin’*. So he soon voluntarily abandoned the practice.

The one new rule Sandy failed to follow was never to go downtown unaccompanied. He couldn’t help it. He’d volunteered to work Christmas Eve and Christmas night, so he was awarded four days off, while everybody else was working. He was a loner, anyway, except in love, and this long stretch off afforded him the opportunity to keep company with the girls-of-open-virtue, accessible at the end of a pedi-cab ride.

The ride had always cost ten N.T. (New Taiwan) on the thrust forward, and ten N.T. on the pull back, but some drivers apparently charged an evening rate Sandy hadn’t heard about. He had planned to buy an “all-night,” and had eaten a dozen raw oysters in anticipation. Since he didn’t expect more than a half-dozen to work, he had elected to start late.

He exited the Club at 10:00 p.m., stepped into a pedi-cab, and told the driver his destination: House Sixty-Nine. After a block or two, Sandy chanced to ask, “Ten N.T.?” The driver grunted something, in

affirmation, Sandy thought. Upon arriving at House Sixty-Nine, he stepped down, and as his wallet opened, the House door closed.

“Sunny Ni’.” the driver said. “Crose Ealry.”

So Sandy stepped back in, disappointed, but delighted in the religious conversion of his little brown sisters.

When they got back to the Airmen’s Club (now as tightly closed as the girls’ House, or the House’s girls), he wondered if he had missed the last bus up the mountain. This proved to be a minor consideration.

Mr. Chingele, the Chinese Cheat, seized the day. “Folty N.T.” he demanded. As Sandy protested, several idle drivers surrounded him, each dangling a bicycle chain. The light of courage was dispelled by the will to live, as he cast around for a safe way out. Just then, he heard,

“Hey, Sand’! Over here!”

It was Joe! And Joe’s unconverted girlfriend, Candy. Sandy executed a quick oblique-march and joined them on the other side of the street. Joe then shouted at the circle of jerks:

“Git outta here! Kwadi-Kwadi, Mother Fletcher!”

As they retreated, Sandy thought he heard one say,

“Ah, so. Weff Ferginya!”

After the three had stood there a few minutes, Sandy asked, a little apprehensively,

“How we gonna git back?”

“We ain’t.” Joe said, smiling. “We goin’ ta her place.”

“House Sixty-Nine?”

“Naw, son. Her apartment.”

Sandy glanced at Joe in admiration. Joe was tall and big-boned, not exactly muscled, but strong-looking anyway. (He recalled Joe’s story of putting on the gloves in the gym with the school bully, and the satisfying word brought from his opponent by the coach: “One more round be okay?”) His sailor suit fit him perfectly, and the set of his white cap on the back of his head accentuated his black eyes, his bushy, black eyebrows, and his swarthy complexion.

Just then, two Shore Patrol rolled up in a canvas-top jeep: “Put that cap on right, Sailor!”

“Right, Chief! Can you gimme a ride up the hill?”

“Shore! Jump in! Dontcha buddy need a ride, too?”

“Naw. He’s a flyboy.”

They all laughed. Just before Joe climbed into the back seat, he turned and smiled with a mouthful of crooked teeth at the couple: “Y’all have fun!”

As they drove away, Sandy turned to look at her.

“I Candy!” she exclaimed, with a bright smile.

“I see.” he said. He looked her up and down, from the tip of her nose to the tips of her toes.

She was short, and was wearing a dress that buttoned up the front, from nearly up to her neck to well past her navel. It appeared to be a half-size too small; she was bursting out all over, including at the top, which surprised Sandy. Her black eyes were round, and her black hair was short *but still enough to hold onto*. Her nose was small and her face was round, but these often-denigrated features only enhanced her cuteness. Her one distracting feature was scattered, shallow scars. *Smallpox? Acne?*

A taxi-cab stopped, and as she climbed into and settled herself in the small back seat, Sandy cocked his head, and said,

“Ooh! I saw everything!”

She gave him a pleased and playful slap on the forearm.

At her “apartment,” really a room in her family’s house, she climbed onto the bed mat, lay back on her elbows, pulled her skirt up, and asked him, “You come?”

“Yes.” he said, with a coarse voice. “I come.”

He climbed onto the bed, bowed down on his knees, and leaned forward to kiss her. He couldn’t believe his eyes! The gusset of her panties had been sliced open horizontally, and three buttons/buttonholes installed! As he unbuttoned them, and rolled the top part up and the bottom part down, he grew frightened. He looked up at her and asked, with some urgency,

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen.” Then she understood his concern. “Mama-san same. She thirty-six!” Then she added, with some seriousness, “I Whole!”

After Sandy had kissed her several times, she pulled him forward onto her, having unbuttoned her dress meantime. They literally melded into each other, and that’s the last conscious moment Sandy had until afterwards. Even then he could only think of the words in Genesis: “And God said, ‘It is good.’” It was his first realization that “God” and “good” are the same word.

A few days later, back at work, Sandy felt a certain coolness in Joe’s mood, and in a nearly-typical smile that faded too soon. Of course, they worked different shifts, and met only in passing. One day, Sandy stopped him and asked,

“You mad at me?”

Joe smiled normally and said, “Naw, good buddy. She loves me! And I love her!”

I love her, too. “Then what’s wrong?”

“They won’t let her go home with me! And I know she wants to!”
No she doesn’t. She told me. “What’re ya gonna do?”

"I dunno. They gonna take away my security classification." He paused. "But I'm not gonna give up."

And he didn't. And they did. One morning, armed guards met him coming out of the compound (Sandy saw them.), gave him a few minutes to change into civvies and gather his belongings, then rushed him to the airport and off the island. His eyes had met Sandy's briefly, and Sandy concluded the message in his eyes was not, "Help me!" but "Help her!" Sandy decided to help himself.

For months he looked for her. Uncharacteristically, he went downtown on every break between tricks?day, swing, or mid?and asked everybody around the Airmen's Club and the Houses. Nobody knew, or would tell him, or could tell him. Even some who he knew understood English fairly well, would say, "Don' unnerstan'."

Eventually, his turn to rotate back to the Zone of the Interior came, and on the last afternoon, he packed both his barracks bag and his duffel bag, and took the bus downtown to the Hostel. He was to leave early the next morning, but as the hours wore on, he became restless, put everything in his locker near the cot, and walked outside and down the sidewalk. He hadn't gone a block when he heard a male voice, saying,

"Hey, G. I.! You catchee girl!?"

He got into the pedi-cab, which was the largest, most decorated one he had ever seen. *My last ride.*

He didn't even realize they'd arrived, until the driver got out and just stood there. Sandy paid him double. The driver smiled and escorted him through the door. There, on the bed, lay Candy. They didn't discuss the past, but as Sandy was hurriedly leaving, just at daybreak, he kissed her, and said, "I love you." Her eyes went wide with wonder: "Sandy. I Whole!"

After he boarded the DC-3, along with a buddy, McCunkel, for the nearly interminable, ten-thousand-mile flight stateside, he suffered remorse as he fingered his medallion, with its motto now metamorphosed in his mind.

"Look!" Sandy said to him, pointing at the initials, 'In Honorable Toil for Peace.'"

McCunkel's laughter nearly drowned out the roar of the engines.

"S..t! That means 'I Hate This F...ing Place!'"

Sandy recovered on his first three days back home by over sleeping. On the fourth day, he visited his old Doctor. After an examination, the Doc handed him a prescription paper, and said, "Take two of these four times a day for a week." Then he smiled, "And stay out of warm, moist places."

Walnut Goodbye

“Angel” wasn’t her Chinese name, but it was her most descriptive one. Angel served nectar and ambrosia to Airmen and NCO’s in the Enlisted Men’s Club at Shu-Linkou Naval Air Station, Taipei, Taiwan, during the 1959-1960 season. She smiled with her whole face; her facial features were divinely-fashioned, and were made for each other.

Every Airman lingered at table, grateful to prolong even the angst of unrequited love, an agony she appeared to sympathize, even empathize with. Evidently, her external angelic manifestation emanated from an inexhaustible internal essence. Or maybe she was crying to keep from laughing.

On Rick’s first day in Taipei, the sky touched down in places. The trip up the mountain revealed soldiers in raincoats guarding General and Madam Chiang-Kai Shek’s mansion. Coolies in rain hats were tramping out rice paddies where the nation’s wealth was stored. And Rick had left his rain gear in sunny San Antonio! At least he got to ride shotgun in the six-by, while the other guys had to bounce the “forty miles of bad road” in the covered bed of the six-by, on hard benches without seat belts.

After depositing his stuffed duffel bag and compact barracks bag in his locker next to the narrow cot (with mosquito net) where, for the next year or so, he’d work out his dream life, Rick sought out the bathroom. It was one block down the street. During typhoon season, Rick took three showers daily: one coming, one going, one there.

From the *Benjo*, Rick strode directly to the Club, to start working on his waking life. He entered a lowering, barn-like building, rendered more depressing by seeming acres of tables of pinochle players, sipping iced tea. Then his temporary blindness was permanently erased by the light of young love.

The unrequited love of the other Airmen for Angel quickly transformed to un-requitable once Rick and she locked eyes. Not only did her eyes hold his, they silently directed him to devise a plan to relieve her martyrdom, and eliminate his “competition,” so that the eternal battle between the genders could commence.

After Rick had finished his first set of day-shifts, and had started his three-day break, he sauntered confidently into the Club, ordered a bowl of fried rice from another waitress, and casually inquired of Airman Mooning, “Where’s Angel?”

“Oh, I dunno. I guess she’s in the kitchen.” he responded gloomily.

“Maybe she’s in the toilet.” Rick lightly suggested.

His face aged, and death stalked him. Rick knew he wanted to say,

“She doesn’t go to the bathroom!”

As the true rumor spread, Angel’s cadre of suitors dwindled, then disappeared. There remained only to pick off any newcomers to the fray, which Rick did ruthlessly, after first gaining their confidence by commiserating with their lovesickness. He became a sort of counselor-without-conscience, a profession so ubiquitous these many years later.

Rick and Angel quickly graduated from accidental hand-brushing to smiling, a practice Rick was never adept at, so had to force. Rick suspected some of her smiling responses were really squelched laughs at his unnaturalness. But she didn’t hold it against him. She just smiled and waited.

She knew he “went downtown,” but showed only nominal anger at this puerile behavior. In fact, she likely concluded that he was thereby rendered more manageable, so that when he offered her the ring, she could more easily slip it into the Dirt tender part of his nose.

She was surprised to learn that he also went through downtown to the opposite mountain, to *P’eto* Resort, where the night manager of the Mayflower Hotel, Friendship Read (the name on his business card), and he grew quite chummy from Rick’s near omni-presence there on his work-breaks. Angel’s best friend worked at the hotel, and proved to be the instrument of the consummation (and culmination) of the love affair.

Meanwhile, the battle raged on, sort of. He passed her notes, imploring her to meet him. She returned him notes, explaining why she couldn’t: “No can. Paren no let.” He began to behave suspiciously like his previous “competitors.”

Of course, Rick struggled against coronary compromise. After six straight mid-shifts, he and his trick-mates would retire to the Club to play “Buzz.” As they counted off around the table, they had to say “buzz” if their number contained, or was divisible by, the numeral seven. Failure to do so meant they had to “*gombey*,” that is, drain their glass. The alcoholics cheerily messed up, to get drunker faster.

This exercise was an attempt on Rick’s part to present a brave front, but the beers often turned to tears. After one of these sessions, Rick, blinded by love (and alcohol), fell into a cement *Benjo* ditch onto his head. Luckily, it was empty at the time.

One night, after meticulously tucking in his mosquito net, Rick settled in for a sleepless bout of thinking about her. As he turned over onto his left side, a large bug (a sulking skulker, genus and species), shot down his right ear-channel, causing temporary vertigo. The “Doc” (a medical corpsman) flushed out his ear with a water-filled, miniature bicycle-pump, drowning the intruder.

Rick sought sympathy from Angel, who didn’t apprehend either the

literal meaning or figurative implications of “a bug in the ear.” He begged for sympathy, if not empathy, but the more he entreated, the more she retreated.

Happily, Rick quickly caught himself up short. He avoided contact with her, and spread the word he was spending a lot of time with her best friend at *P'eto*. The repeated lie worked, so she agreed to tell her parents she would visit her friend at the Mayflower.

It was the weekend of Rick's nineteenth birthday, two days before he was scheduled to leave the Island for home, and there was a party of drunken G. I.'s, and loud music in the party room they'd rented. She knew where to find him.

Her friend knocked, and told him, “Angel wait.” He found her down the hall, sort of shrunken into herself. He escorted her to his room without touching her.

They sat facing each other on the *titami* mat, and for the first time he smiled genuinely at her. She smiled back, but without looking at him. He asked,

“Are you hungry?”

“Yes.”

He went out into the hall and found a maid who followed him back to the room and stood in the doorway. She looked surprised. There was an exchange in Chinese, the maid left, and Angel said, “Bling foo'.” The main fare was two bowls of long, green stems in a clear liquid. She explained, “Bamboo sou'.” He would have eaten grass in water.

They communicated the best they could, about family, likes, needs, even music. They sang to Little Brenda Lee's latest hit, “I'm Sorry,” wafting down the hall from the party room.

“I'm sorry, so sorry, that I was such a fool...”

He tapped his chest. She shook both her hand and her head, then tapped her breast. After a while, she stood up.

“I go.”

“Don't go.”

She didn't want to, but she had to. She understood that he needed her intensely, and that he loved her more than he needed her. Still, she had to go. She tried to explain by saying,

“Nobody want.”

“I want.”

She smiled, then brushed his lips with hers, an obvious violation of her own code. He tried to hold her, but she broke free and hurried down the hall. He yelled after her, “Sunday! Six O'clock! Here!” She seemed to nod in assent, then disappeared around the corner.

He rode down the hill for the last time early Sunday afternoon,

checked himself and his luggage into the Hostel next door to the Club, then after cleaning up, took a taxi to the Resort. Friendship met him at the front desk, and told him, "She say, say you, 'Tsai-chen.'" He paused. "Give this." He handed Rick a plastic walnut. Rick twisted the top off and saw inside two tiny figures. "She say (he struggled with the words) 'You arlways togethelr.'"

It was a long flight home. Rick had trouble sleeping at first, but he soon settled into his usual routine of twelve hours of deep, dreamless sleep daily.

In the 1970's, Rick worked with a man who had served at Shu-Linkou after him. Rick asked him, "Do you remember a girl named Angel?"

"I sure do." he replied, then added, "You know, she married a Tech Sergeant who brought her here, and he beat her so hard and so long, she finally gave up and went home."

Downtown Christmas

My first Military Christmas (1958) was a feast of fruitcake and vodka. I had just received a "Dear Sam" letter, with a picture of my replacement: a short, fat kid with pig-eyes behind thick lenses. It was most festive: both bladders and funny bones nearly burst. And hearts.

My second foreign Christmas, one year and seven thousand miles removed, I did the jilting, and let my audience do the drinking.

Inexplicably, my trick-mates had perceived in me a talent for organizational skills and people-management, so had asked me to set up the Trick-Four Christmas Party this year (1959). Their faith in me ultimately wasn't justified, but since I hadn't yet embraced full misanthrope-hood, the festivities didn't exactly flop. Besides, we rehearsed.

One pleasant Sunday afternoon, we (The Quartet, The Pianist, and I) bounced in the bus down and around the mountain from Shu-Linkou Naval Air Station to the Airmen's Club in downtown Taipei, singing the first hundred of the verses to the Shu-Linkou fight song.

Example

"We're a raunchy bunch of bastards,
Scum of the earth.
Born in a whore house,
S..t and p...ed and kicked all over the Universe.

Of all the other m.....f...ers,
We are the worst.
We hail from Shu-Linkou,
Scum of the earth.

Any other parts of the song are too obscene to be repeated, or even remembered.

Upstairs at the Club, we commandeered the bandstand. While the pianist accompanied, and the Trick-Four Quartet (actually, one member was an extra-tall sergeant from Trick Two) developed a nearly-perfect rendition of the 1954 (read “jazzed up”) version of “White Christmas,” I starred on the bongo drum. The diners smiled and occasionally applauded. In those days, the white people appreciated us more than we appreciated them.

On Christmas Eve, however, I discovered that approval is but a blemish on the skein of the Doomed Human Race.

Before the program began, everyone was most solicitous.

“Sam, is the piano okay over here?”

“Sam, where d’ya want these chairs?”

“Should the microphone stay, uh, stand here, Sam?”

Anticipation saturated the preparations: The stagehands were arranging the props; the talent were ranging their voices; the audience were practicing their smiles. Meanwhile, I noticed two guys (at two far-separated tables) gazing greedily at the goings-on.

Finally, it was Star Time!

Trying to sound like a cross between Ed Sullivan and a Ring-Master, I intoned, “Ladees and genilmen, Welcome to the Trick-Four Christmas Party!”

I stood amazed at the acclamation.

“Yeah, Sam!”

“Okay, Sam!”

“Go, Sam!”

“Let’s hear it for Sam!”

I smiled sincerely. I held up my left hand vertically, to shush the crowd, but held my right hand low and wriggled it, to encourage them to continue. When they got the joke, they laughed, leaving me a perfect opening for my introduction.

“And now, from Trick Four (I lied a little.), ‘The Four Tricks!’” There was wild applause (though not necessarily in appreciation of my verbal agility).

The first offering was the best. After all, “White Christmas” appealed to both black and white traditions. But even the several Christmas songs that followed, albeit adjusted to the black ear, were well-received by all (or so I thought). I detected some hum-alongs near the stage, but farther out could be heard the liveliness engendered by alcohol injudiciously imbibed.

Unfortunately, Sergeant Ex-Tall caught some notes in his basso profundo, and retired to the back of the stage to expel them. I immediately felt a rush from the audience, then an unfamiliar white Sergeant grabbed the microphone and exclaimed to his party-mates:

“I know y’all think I’m drunk, but I’ve only had tee martoonies.” and proceeded to deliver a comic routine he had memorized long ago, and had always dreamed of presenting. It was funny, even if colored a bit by racial overtones, and he was funnier still as he exited stage front, stumbling a little, to proffered hands, laughter, and diminishing applause. I called for an intermission.

Now, taking a break might have been a mistake. (Alcohol consumption increases proportionally to the time allotted it.) But on the plus side, some kindred (read “timid”) souls accosted me behind the drawn curtains, and insisted on forming a chorus for the finale. Spirits had emboldened them, so I soberly agreed. But their offer proved to be anti-climactic.

My second-half intro seemed underappreciated, due apparently to egocentrism, ultimately dangerous in individuals, but imminently destructive in the collective psyche (read “mob”).

Anyway, I announced the continuation of the music, but before the quartet, the choir now, could assemble, another white Sergeant jumped onstage, grabbed the mike, and directed the pianist to play “Great Balls of Fire.” Our newest volunteer pounded out a creditable rendition until he fell off the stage.

Happily, a group quickly formed around the microphone to lead us in the benediction: “Auld Lang Syne.” Apparently, “old long since” was too clearly remembered, as a push-and-shove broke out between the two factions I had previously noted: over a promotion, some said; over a woman, I suspected.

Well, to make a short-story even shorter?the original ensemble, accompanied by the expanded chorale, a group fit for anybody’s Black and White Ball, piled onto the bus back up the mountain, determined to enjoy the third half of the evening by filling in the missing pieces of the song puzzle. During a lull in the music, one sour note was hit. The two feuding volunteers, now snuggling in mutual remorse, passed us in a taxi, and spat at me an Improper Noun: “Sambo!” (expletive implied).

I never again celebrated anything human.

Down in the Dirt *chapbook* <http://scars.tv>

Troubled Men

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