

## OUR FIRST POSTING

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When David Glaser and I first saw each other in 1968 at the Maryland faculty and staff meet-and-greet at the Sanno Hotel in Tokyo, we both laughed.

Back then we looked enough alike to be brothers. We were the only two Lecturers with beards. We were also big and extraverted and fun-loving. We hit it off right away.

David had arrived a few days before me and was already an expert on Tokyo nightlife. He introduced me to a rocking disco in Shinjuku that featured a covey of beautiful Japanese women who loved to dance. David told them that he and I were Vikings, mimicking horned helmets with pointed forefingers. The lovely Japanese women giggled discretely behind their shy hands.

The disco bar provided plenty of Kirin beer, the one with the dragon on the label. My Berlitz book, which I had perused diligently during the plane ride over, had taught me not only the three polite greetings for each period of the day, but also the all-important word “benjo,” toward which I found myself repairing in the direction pointed out by the bartender.

As I was standing before an American-made urinal and enjoying the pause that refreshes, the benjo door opened and a striking woman with long black hair came in, nodded to me casually and began combing her hair in front of the mirror.

My second day in Japan and I’d made a terrible Ugly American faux pas—I’d gotten into the wrong restroom!

Then my Kirin-beclouded brain remembered that I was standing before a urinal and, to my knowledge, ladies’ rooms didn’t provide urinals. Wait a minute, I thought, what is *she* doing in the men’s room?

She, nonchalant, entered one of the stalls. I zippered, washed my hands, and left the benjo. As the door swung shut, I saw that the kanji character on the door was neither “man” nor “woman” but the one for “benjo.” A unisex bathroom! In Japan! In 1968! My cultural assumptive system took a right to the jaw. I wasn’t an Ugly American, I was just provincial.

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A week or so later David and I were on our way to Thailand, where we were to teach at Camp Vayama (Army) and U-Tapao Airbase. But first we landed in Bangkok, where the Education Director for Thailand, whose name I think was Wayne, met our plane and drove us

into town. Since it was Labor Day, we assumed we'd have a day to explore Bangkok before we meandered south to our first posting.

"Oh no," said Wayne. "No Labor Day holiday here. You're due to begin your first class in five hours. I'll get you a taxi."

Minutes later we were sharing the back seat of a blue taxi that was also transporting a third passenger sitting shotgun. The driver, however, sat well to the left side of his seat. He grinned at us, pointing to the center of the driver's seat saying, "Buddha sit here. Buddha drive, not me!"

I noticed that there was a lei of jasmine flowers wound around the rearview mirror. It smelled wonderful.

It turned out to be a blessing that Buddha drove, for as we hurtled south at speeds I'd never formerly experienced in a car, there were several occasions on which we were certain we were about to die. I remember passing a buffalo-drawn cart in the face of an oncoming orange bus close enough to wipe the snot from the buffalo's nose and give the bus driver heart failure. When David and I looked at one another in horror, I noticed he was a paler shade of gray.

During those brief interludes when we weren't facing our Maker, I was stunned by the verdant beauty of the Thai countryside. The vegetation, much of which was unfamiliar to me, was orange and red and white against a background of deep green. Whole families, dressed in loose, colorful clothing, strolled along both sides of the road as if heading to or coming home from a party. Goats and cattle and water buffalo grazed in the pastures, and there were strange white birds everywhere. Bananas and mangoes grew in tall trees. I had to admit I wasn't in Kansas anymore.

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Or Iowa, where I had spent my last three years dodging the draft by hiding out in grad school, which up till then had been a deferment. Please forgive me if I now divulge some of my checkered past, for the backstory is necessary to set up the climax of this tale.

In the spring of 1965, just before I was to have two bars made of gold pinned to my the collar of my uniform, I had resigned my position as the Cadet Commander of Harvard's Army ROTC program because of my growing opposition to the Vietnam Police Action. Though I had long looked forward to service in the military, I could not in good conscience go to fight in a conflict that I judged immoral, illegal, and stupid.

That act made me fair game for my local draft board, which notified me that because of my complete training in ROTC, they would start me off not as a private but as a corporal, a term that has since fallen out of favor.

To postpone this reckoning, I had accepted a place in the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa where I was given a teaching assistantship to support myself and my wife.

With grad school exemptions being eliminated, however, I had to scramble to find an alternative to prison or Canada. A friend alerted me to UMUC and I was happy to accept a position in what was then called the Far East Division, a term I thought smacked of British imperialism, which I wasn't shy about letting everyone know. I was delighted to hear, some years later, that my agitation, along with others, had initiated a change in terminology.

But I digress. The salient point here is that were I to lose my job with Maryland, I would immediately become a prime target for the draft again.

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After we had in fact survived our hair-raising (literally, and this is important) drive in the blue taxi, the Ed Director at U-Tapao, a very genial young captain, greeted us warmly and let us drop our minimal baggage in his office. He suggested a restorative meal in the Officers' Club before we were to teach our first classes, which I thought a very wise decision, given how shaken we still were.

Evidently the base commander, Col. Freddie Furchner, saw us at the club, for he ordered the Ed Director to present us at his office immediately.

This office was a room such as I had never seen. It was long and narrow, with tiny clerestories for light up near the ceiling. Freddie sat behind his massive desk up on a raised dais as if he were a king upon a throne. With a regal wave of his hand, he motioned for us to be seated on the chairs before his dais. As we sat, our knees came up to our noses—he had trimmed the legs of these chairs to put those sitting even lower than normal. I felt like a kid in the principal's office even prior to his first words:

“I'm a blunt man. Shave off your beards or get off my base by sundown.”

While I was not about to submit to this order, I foresaw a nasty dilemma: If Maryland didn't back us up, and I got fired, I would have to deal with the draft.

David, being a few years older and having already served, was the cooler head in that moment. He said:

“Sir, if you feel you can dictate our appearance, do you also feel you can dictate what we teach in our classrooms?”

Freddie didn't bat an eyelash.

“Course not. As long as you're not teaching any kind of *radicalism*.”

We didn't have to ask who would define radicalism on Freddie's base.

“Well, sir,” David said, “can you give us an hour to think about it?”

“Of course. Be back in one hour.”

As David and I exited the bizarre office, we turned to each other and said, simultaneously, "I'm not shaving for that S.O.B."

The Ed Director, who had been present the whole time, said to us, "Come to my office and I'll try to put a call thru to Pacific Air Force Command."

While we cooled our heels, the captain went into a private room to make the call.

When he came back, he shrugged and said, "The PACAF commander was asleep. I had to leave a message."

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An hour later, back in Freddie's interrogation chamber, we faced him standing, to deliver our refusal.

He seemed delighted.

"I'll put a call thru to PACAF to get you on the next flight out," he said, dialing his phone. "Please sit."

We sat.

The next thing we heard was, "Yessir. Yes, General."

The captain smiled at us.

Freddie picked up a pencil and began doodling like a besotted teenager. He doodled on his yellow pad. He doodled on his blotter. He even doodled on the desk itself. He was quiet for a long time.

Then he said, "Well, one worse than the other, sir."

I assumed he was talking about me. My longish hair, wind-blown and fear-enhanced, no doubt gave me the look of an Australian aborigine. To be fair, we had gotten off a long plane ride and into the taxi without ever being able to tidy up. I'm sure we looked disreputable.

"Yessir," he concluded, and gently reseated the phone.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "it seems that you'll be with us for the next few weeks after all. So I'll tell you what I tell all incoming personnel...."

And he launched into his "the women off base will give you VD" sermon. Then dismissed us.

As we made our way back to the Education Office, the captain said, “Boy, you don’t see a full bird back down very often. You two have made my day. Well, let’s get you billeted in the BOQ so you can clean up a bit before class—which starts in about half an hour.”

Ensnconced in the BOQ, I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror—and had a good laugh. Yup, just like an aborigine. I took a quick shower, combed out the tangles, and put on a clean shirt and a tie. I gathered up my notes for English 1 and walked to the building that held the classrooms.

When I walked into my first Maryland class, every student stood up from his desk and gave me a standing ovation.

Three hours later, I found out from David that he had had the identical reception. News travels fast on a military base.