

“In the Bar Atomic”

By

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One autumn evening in 1966, Hospital Corpsman Third Class Ryan Caldwell slouched against the counter in the Bar Atomic, one of twenty or thirty neon-pulsing bars and cabarets clustered in a tangle of alleys outside the US Navy base in Yokosuka, Japan. Hostage to his thoughts, Caldwell remained oblivious to the bar girls giggling and smoking at the entrance, to Roy Orbison’s sweet voice emanating from the jukebox, and to the drunken sailors squabbling in a corner. He remained oblivious to it all because he confronted a very big problem--one that seemed about to swallow him up.

For weeks Caldwell had been captivated by television coverage of antiwar protestors back in the United States. “Hell no, we won’t go.” The words rang in his ears; they resonated in his mind. “Hell no, we won’t go.” His predicament, simply put, was that Caldwell did not want to go either. But orders had come in detaching the twenty-three-year-old sailor from the Yokosuka Navy Hospital and assigning him to the Third Marine Division, then embattled in Vietnam. He was to ship out in a few days, depending on flight availability. Too many Marines were getting killed; he assumed too many corpsmen were also getting killed. He did not want to be one of them.

The prospect of boarding a plane at Tachikawa Air Force Base and flying to Vietnam launched ripples of near nausea roiling through his gut. It was not a question of tender conscience; the morality of the war did not mean squat to him, one way or another. The question was one of tender courage--it was one of bone-chilling fear. Three of the corpsman he had trained with, gone bar-hopping with, in San Francisco had all been cut down. How could he

bring himself to climb into that airplane? It would be like stepping into a silver-skinned hearse that would deliver him to a cemetery. He was scared shitless.

“You want usual?” The Japanese bartender, round faced, and sporting a white shirt with arm garters and a black bow tie, leaned forward awaiting a reply. Caldwell popped out of his reverie. He smelled the cloying sweetness of the camellia pomade in the man’s slicked back hair. It wrinkled his nose, like the stench of an old whore’s bargain bottle perfume.

“Yeah, Smitty, the usual--*mizuwari*.” He had no idea of the man’s real name. Everybody called him Smitty.

“Okay, Caldwell-san. One whiskey water coming your way.” The man busied himself mixing the drink, his back reflected in the bottle lined mirror that ran the length of the bar.

While the sailor waited, a shopworn, forty something Japanese woman in a kimono appeared at his side. Plain as an old rice bag, she smiled, showcasing a mouthful of gold teeth.

“Hi, sailor. You looking sad tonight.”

“Hi, Mama. You got that right. Where’s Miyako? I thought she’d be here.”

“She went dinner some ship sailor to Petty Officer Club. Back pretty soon.”

Miyako was the other reason he didn’t want to leave. Just another bar girl, ten years older than Caldwell. Didn’t even know her last name for sure. Still, the thought of saying goodbye to her in a few days ravaged him with the same cougar-clawed ferocity as did his fear of death in Vietnam. He really had a thing for her. She recognized he didn’t get paid much, and she never asked him for money when she took him home after the bar closed.

He believed she cared for him, and when they were together in her little apartment she made love to him with an unconstrained passion. Her enthusiasm and imagination surpassed in every way the obligatory performance of most bar girls he slept with (and there had been quite a few during his two years at the base).

Of course, he couldn’t always count on being the one who spent the night with her. He understood the system--the way things worked in the night world of *mizushobai* (the water trade). He understood, but it tore him up nonetheless. On occasion, she would say something like, “Not tonight, Ryan-san. I stay Kanko Hotel with *Oriskany* chief.”

He abolished from his mind the knowledge of the men who paid her. He abolished from his mind the fact she was the likely source of two bouts of nonspecific urethritis. He abolished

from his mind the rumor she had a Japanese husband and child in Tokyo. Yet, he could never bring himself to call his feeling for her love; the idea came freighted with too many issues.

She had sniffled, then sobbed when he first told her. “Why you boys all go away so soon?”

How many times had she parted from some “steady boy friend,” sailor or Marine, as she was about to do with him now? Perhaps they came and went, rising and falling like targets on a shooting gallery conveyer belt. He hoped not.

Caldwell downed his drink. “Gimme another one, Smitty.” In his disintegrating world, all he could think to do was have another drink. Jesus. Somebody had punched in *The Ballad of the Green Berets*--the last thing he wanted to hear.

“Hey, there, Caldwell. How they hanging?” Boatswain’s Mate Third Kevin Cole hoisted himself onto a stool next to Caldwell. Thick set, with a brush mustache, Cole endeavored to transmit the impression he was a tough guy (he wasn’t). Dumb as a stump, and twice busted back down to seaman, Cole regarded himself as Caldwell’s buddy. Caldwell put up with him. “Gimme a beer, Smitty. Kirin Dry.”

“You know damn well how they’re hanging. Puckered up--that’s how. I should never have signed those fucking reenlistment papers. That chief didn’t say word one about Vietnam, you can be sure of that. Not one damn word.”

“Yeah, that’s the way they get you.”

“Damn straight. I really got conned. Talked about Hawaii, maybe San Francisco.”

Caldwell tossed down his third drink in ten minutes.

“Where’s Miyako?” This time he asked Smitty. “Mama-san said she’d be back soon.”

“She went out with fleet sailor. Back anytime now. You wait.”

“Hey buddy, you’ve been pretty thick with your sweetheart. I expect you’re going to miss that little piece of tail.”

“Watch your mouth, Cole.”

But, Cole had it right. Ever since the first night she took him back to her place, he’d had the hots for her. His passion persisted--undiminished. At the thought of leaving her, his eyes moistened. God, he *would* miss her. He conjured up her naked, soft flesh next to him in her big bed. Funny, the bar girls all seemed to have Western style beds, even in cramped Japanese

apartments. “Business furniture,” one called the queen-sized bed that almost filled her little room.

“Hey, Ryan don’t sweat it. They say those Vietnamese honeys have it all over these Japanese. They don’t just *speak* French, if you get my drift,” Cole said.

“Why don’t you shut the fuck up, Kevin?”

“Just trying to be helpful.”

“How many days do you think I’ll last down there? Ten? Twenty? Joined the Navy so I wouldn’t get killed. Now I’ve gotta go humping around with the damned Marines. Do I look like a goddamned leatherneck?”

“Well, actually . . .”

Caldwell could have been a Marine as easily as anything else. The native of Fort Morgan, Colorado was, in fact, an *everyman*. Slim, close-cropped brown hair, brown eyes--ordinary, unmemorable in every respect, except perhaps for his laugh. From a warm chuckle, it escalated into a breath-grabbing all-out laugh, overwhelmed by the hilarity of the moment. Except, these days he didn’t feel like laughing--not at all. His buddies reckoned him a squared away sailor, a good shipmate. So his ill-concealed anguish about shipping out surprised them.

“I guess it hit him like a ton of bricks,” Hector Talento, a yeoman who worked in the hospital’s admin office, said to one of the nurses. Talento had been the clerk who notified Caldwell his orders had come in.

“Look at the bright side. You won’t have to see Smitty anymore,” Cole said.

“Why don’t you just shove it?” Caldwell pushed his glass toward the bartender. “Not too much ice, either. I’m not one of those fleet sailors, you know.”

Where was Miyako? He considered his watch for the third or fourth time.

“Okay, so you’ve got a cob up your ass. I think I’ll go over there and get that girl in the red dress a drink. She looks like she needs a little male companionship.”

“Fine with me. Shove off.”

While Cole sauntered toward the gaggle of hostesses ensconced on a bench across the dance floor, Caldwell glanced over his shoulder in time to see the entryway curtain push back and Miyako come inside. She was alone. At least, tonight he wouldn’t have to endure the distress of watching her make out with some guy in a corner booth--unless, of course, one of her regulars showed up.

Miyako paused, surveying her realm with confidence bred of long familiarity. Unlike the other bar girls, outfitted in garish evening gowns, Miyako had on a gray sweater and dark skirt. He supposed she had dressed that way for her dinner date. He thought she looked great, but then he always did.

In her early thirties, Miyako was still slim, although tending toward fleshiness, the result being a kind of voluptuousness. Below plucked and repainted brows, enhanced by false lashes, and heavily shadowed and lined, the openings of her almond eyes were narrow, like those in a Japanese *ukiyo*e print. Her once black hair, now auburn, had been teased and puffed out in a kind of modified bouffant. She possessed ripe, pouty lips, a feature exaggerated by carefully applied red lipstick. Bathed in the soft orange and silver light of the Bar Atomic, the overall impression was one of sensuality, something the hostesses all strove for. After all, in one way or another, they were peddling sex--their clientele, American men.

When she joined him, Caldwell said, "Hi, baby. How about a big squeeze?"

Her arms still around him, she said, "Give me money for juke box, Ryan-san. Music makes me happy when I am sad." Her voice transformed itself according to her mood: huskily affectionate, chirpy, teasing, and, at the moment, that of a whiny child.

He fished some ten *yen* coins from his pocket, and soon the room pitter-pattered with the harmony of the Cascades and *Rhythm of the Rain*. She steered him to a booth where she snuggled against him and gripped his hand with intensity, as if she feared he might leave at that very moment. The waiter, expert at delivering unwanted drinks to unwary customers, left them alone. They leaned against each other with a long silence between them. When Miyako's second record selection, the Drifters' *Save the Last Dance for Me*, began to play, they both experienced an emotional crush brought on by the awareness of Caldwell's near-at-hand departure. Could he feel any more distraught? He had associated the song with her since the first time he came into the Bar Atomic. A surge of affection interrupted whatever else he might be doing whenever he heard it.

"I want you to stay Japan, Ryan-san." She said it with a kind of sincerity he hadn't imagined her capable of. "Why you go to Vietnam? Is there Navy base? I don't think so."

"You know I don't want to go. There's a war down there. We're fighting the Communists. I don't really know why we're in it, but . . ."

"Maybe you get shot. I don't want you to get shot."

He pulled her closer and spoke into her hair. "I don't want to get shot either. I don't know what to . . ."

"Better you go AWOL. Stay in Japan."

"If I could only figure out what to do, but I . . ." Caldwell hung his head.

"No one wants to get shot--especially in an immoral war." A man's voice carried over the barrier separating them from the next booth. Someone else had been listening. "Mind if I join you?" the man said.

Fording a stream of unhappiness, Caldwell had been only vaguely aware of the foreign man and Japanese girl sitting in the dim light behind them. The girl struck him more like a student than a bar girl, and the man's longish hair, goatee, and unkempt look signaled he was not a military man.

The man got up and came around to Caldwell's booth, the girl trailing him. When he spoke again, Caldwell pegged him for an Englishman or maybe an Australian. What brought him to the Bar Atomic?

"Name's Jerry. I teach English up in Kamakura. This is my friend Mari. One of my learners." Jerry looked to be in his late thirties, the girl about eighteen.

"I'm Ryan. This is my girl, Miyako." His arm around her shoulder, he gave her a confirmatory squeeze--my girl--and caressed her with his eyes.

"Could I buy you a drink?" the man who called himself Jerry said.

"What the hell. What's one more?"

Jerry called over the waiter and ordered a round of drinks. "We hear so much about the base and all the Americans here, we hopped a train down tonight to have a look around."

"Yeah, kind of like going to the zoo I suppose. See all the wild animals."

"Nothing like that. I feel close to you Americans. And I suspect you and I are much the same sort. I'm against the war--just like you."

"I didn't say, I was . . . anyway, that's political stuff. I'm no politician or whatever," Caldwell said. He scrutinized the man, like someone encountering a door-to-door salesman.

"But, surely you agree that the idea of dying there for a meaningless . . ."

"Hey, Jerry, don't you put down the US of A. It's a damn fine country."

"Oh, no. Surely not my intention--not my intention at all. But, I gather from the media many of your countrymen have their doubts."

“The media?” Caldwell had to think. “Oh, you mean like the newspapers.”

“Right. Newspapers. Television.”

“I guess maybe you’re right. “*Hell no. I won’t go.* That’s what a lot of Americans are saying these days.”

“Have you ever been to Hokkaido?”

“No. I know it’s up North. What’s that got to do with anything?” Caldwell sounded irritated.

“Perhaps you’d like to go there for a visit.”

“You’re talking in circles. What the hell are you driving at?”

“A good many Japanese fishing boats operate out of Hokkaido ports; some of them do their fishing off Alaska and Canada,” Jerry said.

“So?” Caldwell looked at the man unresponsively.

Jerry lowered his voice, his tone conspiratorial. No one could hear them anyway; the Shirells’ plaintive rendering of *Soldier Boy* filled every corner of the Bar Atomic.

“The thing is this. Some of those boats, very quietly mind you, carry passengers. I have friends who can arrange for you to be one of those passengers, Ryan. The Canadians are quite understanding of Yanks not eager, you might say, to go to Johnson’s war.”

“Run off to Canada?” Caldwell allowed the thought to settle in. “You mean desert?”

“I can assure you. You wouldn’t be the first.”

“Who the hell do you think you’re talking to, anyway?” Caldwell’s eyes swept the room. Who else might be listening?

“We’ve already helped nearly a dozen of your military colleagues. Once in Canada, you can get a job, go to school--whatever you fancy. There’s bound to be an amnesty later on. And then you’ll be free to return to the US if you want to.”

In his anguish, Caldwell had, in fact, considered going AWOL as Miyako suggested. Perhaps she had friends who could hide him. But, although he revisited it frequently, he invariably rejected the idea as a wild one; he had to believe he would eventually be caught.

“Sounds far-fetched to me.,” he said to Jerry. “Going to Canada I mean.”

“Not at all. It’s like your “underground railroad” before the North-South war. Good people want to help you. As I said, several of your soldiers have already made this journey.”

“You sure they didn’t end up in Russia? I heard some GIs out of Japan ended up in Russia.”

“Think about it, my friend.”

“No accident, I bet. You turning up here. Probably came down here trolling around for people like me. Right?”

“Does it matter? I’ll be back tomorrow. I gather you haven’t much time. It’s already Tuesday. I understand you leave Friday.”

“Where did you get that?”

“Mari heard some hostesses talking about your friend’s unhappiness because you’re leaving. I take it it’s true then.”

“Yeah, it’s true . . . You some kind of Communist?”

“No. Simply a person with a conscience. Willing to lend a hand. As I said, I’ll be back tomorrow.”

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They had gone back to her apartment for what Caldwell knew would be one of the last times, whatever happened. They had fallen straight into bed, but their enthusiasm for lovemaking had evaporated like a melting shadow. His imminent departure wrapped around them like a lead weighted mantle.

“Why he talk all time Hokkaido, Ryan-san? That’s cold place. Nobody live there. Just bears,” Miyako said. For many Japanese, including her, Hokkaido existed like a phantasmagorical land somewhere over the horizon--near Siberia or maybe the North Pole.

Propped on one elbow, Caldwell said, “He’s offering me a chance not to go to Vietnam. To avoid being shot--don’t you get it?”

“No.” Flat on her back, she stared at the ceiling.

“He says he can get me to Canada from Hokkaido.”

“*Aa soo*. I see.” But, she really didn’t see. Hokkaido? Canada? Like Buddhist prayer inscriptions or old poems rendered in cursive script, maps confused her.

“It could be very dangerous. If I got caught, I could end up in Portsmouth.”

“Where?”

“Portsmouth. It’s a jail for sailors--in America.”



She reached over and touched his shoulder. “Oh, don’t go there.” She failed to fully understand. She only grasped that somehow he was considering running away and the man they met in the Bar Atomic wanted to help him do it.

He smiled at her innocence. “I sure as hell don’t intend to end up in a place like that. You won’t say anything to anybody, will you?”

“The cat has my tongue.” She kissed his neck.

He detected wetness against his shoulder. “You crying?”

“A little bit.”

Could he be more miserable? More confused? The notion of fleeing to Canada, still taking root in his mind, both attracted him and repelled him. It might mean he could save his skin, and surely lots of Americans, especially younger ones, wouldn’t hold it against him. Hell, they burned draft cards all over the country.

“But, you know what?” He completed the thought aloud. “A lot of them’ll think I’m a fucking traitor. That’s what they’ll think.” He pictured the Fort Morgan VFW vets marching in the Memorial Day parade, some pushed along in wheelchairs. They’d never understand. He called to mind the regulars lining the bar down at the American Legion Club. *Heard that young Caldwell run off to Canada. Never would a thought it. What’s this world coming to, anyway?* And he thought of his single mother, still waitressing at the Red Goose Restaurant. What kind of abuse would she have to put up with? They hadn’t been real close, but still he’d feel bad for her.

At the same time, although he did not need to read Japanese, the front page of the *Asahi* newspaper featured a Vietnam photo--three ripped up, bloody, dead Marines trussed to the hood of a vehicle. They reminded Caldwell of deer carcasses hauled back on cars by Colorado hunters. He did not want to be a deer carcass.

What did he know about Canada? Not a hell of a lot. The police decked themselves out in red coats and Smokey the Bear hats and the place spewed out a lot of hockey players. At least the people spoke English; or most of them anyway. Canada. What would he do in Canada? One thing he wouldn’t do--he wouldn’t stop a bullet. He wished he knew of someone who had already made it. He had nothing to go on except the word of this guy Jerry. He hadn’t asked for money. So, what was his angle?

Caldwell needed time to think, but he did not have it. Like a spectral beast, the departure date crept closer, only days away. When Caldwell checked in by phone Wednesday morning,

Talento told him he had received confirmation of a requirement to report to the Tachikawa Transportation Desk on Friday by 1000 for a flight later that day or the next. That gave him two days, maybe three. Caldwell wrung his hands. What to do?

During the day on Wednesday, he napped, swallowed Scotch, and munched Japanese *osembe* rice crackers. He stared at Miyako's small black and white television (*The Guns of Will Sonnet* and *The Desert Rats*). Both were dubbed in, and he got a kick out of the old Western actor, Walter Brennan, speaking Japanese. The dubber even sounded like Walter Brennan. Only a transitory distraction, the television failed to prevent him from obsessing about what answer he would come up with if Jerry actually reappeared. Caldwell felt immobilized, physically and mentally.

Miyako stirred him up some fried rice around six o'clock, then they flagged a cab and rode to the Bar Atomic. The place seemed almost deserted. But, an aircraft carrier had steamed into port an hour earlier; the bar would be jumping once the ship's liberty parties surged out the base gate. Matter-of-factly, like sales attendants waiting for department store doors to open, three or four hostesses who had already arrived sat chatting; two more played a match stick game at the end of the bar.

Miyako went to a back room to change into her hostess gown. Caldwell slumped forlornly at the bar. For the umpteenth time, his mind explored the possibilities. He had nowhere to turn. His life seemed tipped upside down, bobbing as randomly as the ice cubes in his drink. He exhaled deeply. Why couldn't he simply bring himself to accept his circumstances, to be a dutiful sailor, and to follow orders like everyone else? It's all psychological, he tried to tell himself. Once I get there, everything will work out. But, he did not believe it. The image of the three bodies on the truck hood consumed him. The image terrified him more than ever. *Hell no, we won't go. Hell no, we won't go.*

"Hello, Ryan. Here I am. As promised." Caldwell had not heard Jerry come up behind him, silent as an evening fog bank off Tokyo Bay. "How are you doing?"

"Okay, I guess." But, his mind muddled. He had downed more booze during the day than he realized.

"Where is your girl friend?" Jerry said.

"Changing. Why?"

“It’s better that we speak privately. Have you given any more thought to my proposal?”

He again spoke in a confidential manner.

“It’s just hard to imagine. Why me?”

“Serendipity, Ryan. Serendipity.”

“If--I said *if*--I’m going to take you up on this, I need more details. I mean . . .”

“You have to realize secrecy is essential. By car to Yokohama, from there to Aomori in a truck; across to Hakodate on the ferry (same truck), and then to a port--I can’t say which one--for passage on a boat. That’s all I can tell you for now.” It could have been the plot for one of the paperback thrillers Caldwell devoured when he was off duty.

“Seems pretty sketchy.”

“You needn’t worry. My Japanese colleagues in *Beiheiren* are well organized. There will be friends to guide you and furnish provisions at every stage.”

*Beiheiren*? What’s that?

“It’s the Peace for Vietnam Committee.”

“I figured something like that.”

“You need to decide, my friend.”

The impulse had been building all day. Now he made up his mind in a flash. “When? Where do I go?” Caldwell said. He couldn’t believe he was actually going to do it. He wanted to know so much more, but a sense of pressing desperation yanked him along.

“You’ve made the right choice, Ryan. No one should die in this imperialist war.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Be at the Yokosuka train station, the entrance in front of the parking area, at nine o’clock tomorrow night, that’s Thursday night. Civilian clothing. A Japanese man in a black Toyopet will arrive shortly after. He will flash his lights two times. Get in the car. After that . . . everything will be arranged.”

“What if I change my mind?”

“Then you will have missed a chance,” Jerry said. “I gather you consider the alternative quite unattractive.”

“Hey, Caldwell, how you doing?” It was Cole. “Who’s your friend?”

“Somebody I met. He’s just leaving.”

“Quite right. I hope we’ll meet again, Ryan. Good bye.” With that, Jerry strode briskly to the entrance, pushed open the curtain, and disappeared into the street.”

“Not very friendly. I suppose you’re out here drowning your sorrows. I hear you’re leaving Friday,” Cole said.

“That’s right. I’m leaving.”

“Well, if I don’t see you, keep your pecker up,” Cole said. “Been good knowing you.” The sailors shook hands, and Cole sauntered off to dance with the same girl in the same red dress.

As the evening wore on, more girls emerged from a back room to entertain the raucous sailors who piled in and out the entrance. Through it all, Caldwell perched on his bar stool, sporadically talking with Smitty and the mama-san, while Miyako, like a utility infielder playing all bases, flitted from table to table working hard to keep three different sailors happy at three different tables and ordering “cocktails” one after another.

“You let go my arm. I come back.” Caldwell caught Miyako’s voice in a darkened corner.

One of the besotted sailors did not want her to leave for another table and had grabbed her wrist. This sort of thing happened occasionally, but Miyako, pro that she was, always managed to extract herself. This time Caldwell, psyched up by the hidden prospect of desertion and of leaving her, vaulted off his stool, charged across the floor and punched the offending--and unprepared--sailor full in the face. “Leave her alone, damn it.” Caldwell postured, ready for the man to counterattack. Instead, two of the man’s buddies helped him stagger back to his table. Caldwell had failed to comprehend that the sailor, like a boxer unable to answer the bell, was so incapacitated he could barely stand--let alone fight.

Miyako tugged at Caldwell’s arm. “Don’t make trouble for me, Ryan-san. The manager won’t like you hit customers,” she said, her face clouded by concern.

“Well, fuck him. The manager didn’t do a GD thing to help you. I just didn’t want that guy to put his paws on you like that, that’s all. I’m kinda worked up, you know.”

“I think you nervous.” Miyako didn’t know the word for agitated. “I have customers now. But, we go home early. Be good boy. No fight.”

“It’s my last night, you know.”

“No. Ryan-san you say two more night. Don’t trick me.”

“Just mixed up a little. Too much *mizuwari*.” He had almost betrayed his intention to jump at Jerry’s offer--to leave the next night. Had he said anything to Cole? He didn’t think so.

Back at the bar, he realized his good fortune in that the Shore Patrol had not come charging into the Bar Atomic. It would be a bad time for him to attract attention. But, nothing had happened, except that he now favored a set of sore knuckles on his right hand. He drained his glass and felt a little better-- but it didn’t last.

Despite his seemingly firm decision to opt for Canada, like someone suffering anticipatory buyer’s remorse, he plunged once more into the maelstrom of reconsidering what to do. His mind a jumble of thoughts and counter-thoughts, he’d been mulling Jerry’s proposal all evening. Damn it, he’d been a good sailor. He had learned to follow orders, please his superiors, and keep his individuality to a minimum. The doctors and nurses seemed to think he did a pretty good job. Could he really throw it all over? He felt sick, and his hands shook. Hell, he could back out any time. Let the chips fall where they might. He grabbed a bottle of Scotch left on the bar and poured himself a tall one. Then another. Then another.

Caldwell came to later in Miyako’s apartment, with Miyako cradling his head in her lap. He didn’t feel sick--just woozy. But, he could not lift his head.

“Go back to sleep, Ryan-san. Five o’clock morning.” She touched each of his eyelids with her tongue. “Close eyes.”

“I guess I had too much to . . .”

“Your friend Cole, he worry you gonna miss airplane. I told him you not go until Friday. I guess he mixed up. Said you told him leaving today.”

“Did I say anything else?”

“No, too stinko. Now you get in bed.”

“Yeah. I need more sleep.” Caldwell sought refuge under the sheets and began to snore. Miyako lingered in the room’s single chair watching him. The television set flickered silently in the corner it shared with a little shrine. Caldwell lay deep in sleep until late Thursday afternoon. When he woke up, he found Miyako cuddled spoon-like against him; he slipped into her as she guided him with her hand.

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He wanted to tell her, but he feared she would spill his plans to the mama-san or one of the other girls. Jerry had warned him, and it was better she not know anyway; it would make

leaving easier. So he said nothing. They had dinner at the Petty Officers' Club. Like a condemned man taking his last meal, he ate hearty portions of steak and shrimp although he had little appetite. He did not know when or what his next meal might be.

After dinner, Caldwell delivered Miyako to the Bar Atomic. So far as she could tell, it promised to be a night like any other. She worked the clientele (the carrier sailors back for another night on the beach), and Caldwell stationed himself at the bar, swapping raunchy jokes with Smitty and drinking with pals from the base who wished him well in Vietnam.

Although outwardly he seemed in good spirits, Caldwell's stomach crumpled and his heart fluttered. He would take a deep breath and his fast-beating heart would slow. But, when apprehension at the void ahead sliced back into his mind, his heart palpitated again. He traded sea stories with former shipmates, but, like those of someone transported a thousand miles away in a dream, his answers sounded mechanical.

Caldwell checked his watch repeatedly. At 8:15 he climbed off his stool and did something he had not done in a long time; he approached Miyako and asked her to dance.

As they rotated slowly across the crowded floor, emotions crowded into him. Arms wrapped tightly around each other, they swayed together in one place, well after the music ended.

"Miyako, you know I don't want to leave you."

"Me too, Ryan-san. Maybe you come here on leave. I stay Bar Atomic. Wait for you. My friend Michi's boyfriend come all the time from down there. He's Air Force."

"Miyako, I'm not going to go to . . ."

"What?" She looked at him quizzically.

"Never mind," Caldwell said. "I have to go over to the transient barracks on the base and check in now." "It should only take a few minutes," he lied.

"You come back, okay. This last night. I want you stay with me. Be close."

He suppressed the urge to tell her this was, in fact, goodbye. Instead, he said, "Give me a big hug." They embraced for a long time. "See you," he said and, without looking back, stepped out into the street. He felt like a heel; to make matters worse, it had begun to rain. The front edge of a typhoon was stomping over the Miura Peninsula.

Despite the rain, Caldwell managed to hail a taxi. "Yokosuka Station," he said and slumped in the back seat. He could still back out, have the driver drop him back at the Bar

Atomic. But, during the five-minute ride to the station, the mind picture of the dead Marines insinuated itself as it had repeatedly over the last two days. Sometimes the image began with a black curtain. The curtain concealed death, and he didn't want it to be drawn back. But, it always opened, and there they were. He resisted; he tried to will the picture away, but he could not. He did not want to be maimed or dead, his body a bloody pulp, in some Vietnam rice paddy; and he remained convinced that is precisely what would happen to him if he boarded that airplane.

He did not want to be so gutless. No. He wanted to do his duty. He wanted to be a hero. He wanted the Fort Morgan vets to think good things about him. He wanted his mother to be free of ridicule--*Oh, yeah, her son was a coward, ran off to Canada.* He handed the driver some *yen*, hesitated at the cab door, then trotted over to the station entrance to wait for the Toyopet.

Sheets of rain gurgled and splashed in the headlights of taxis and buses swinging round in front of the station to drop off or pick up fares. Caldwell huddled under a small portico, wishing he had worn something other than sneakers. Rain water soaked his feet, and squished between his toes. Still ten before nine. Why had he come so early?

Preoccupied with escaping the rain, people scurried in and out of the station, paying him no attention. When the Shore Patrol started to hunt for him--as they surely would when he didn't turn up at Tachikawa--they'd have a hard time finding anyone who had seen him. He sought to console himself with that thought, but whatever consolation it provided failed to stop his trembling, which was intensified by the rain and chilly air. He should have worn a jacket.

Five to nine. As if in a bad dream, it seemed that half the cars circling through the station plaza were Toyopets. Their headlights blinded him, and he shielded his eyes; the cars all looked black. Maybe the guy would be early.

The 8:55 train from Yokohama rolled in and crowds of people jockeyed for places at the cab stand or sprinted to waiting cars or buses. Umbrellas unfurled everywhere. By nine o'clock the crowd had again dispersed, and the area in front of the station stood near vacant. Caldwell shifted from foot to foot. His chest was about to explode or implode; he could not tell which. Where was the Toyopet? Where *was* the goddamned Toyopet?

The rain continued to pound down, but now he peered into a barely lighted parking plaza. Two cars showing only parking lights and positioned across from the station showed promise. Either vehicle could be the one. He studied them, waiting for the signal. After five minutes of

suspense, the headlights came on for one of the cars; he waited for them to flash. Instead the lights remained on, and the driver swung around to retrieve a late-arriving woman passenger.

Caldwell shifted his surveillance to the second car. It had to be the one. He could barely make out the driver inside. What was he waiting for? A quick time check--9:05. Maybe the guy didn't see him. But, Caldwell had to be hard to miss, a lone American standing by the lighted entrance. Maybe he should forget about the signal--just walk over and check the car out. Jesus. What to do?

"You need taxi, sailor-san?" The voice of a station attendant startled him.

"Thanks. I'm just waiting for a friend," Caldwell said.

Except the clock over the entrance now read ten after nine, and no *friend* arrived. Caldwell had committed himself; he had gone this far. Increasingly impatient, he wanted to be on the way. Apprehension piled on apprehension.

Finally, he heard the second car start and saw the headlights come on. Caldwell listened to the engine idling softly in the rain. Okay. The time had come. Perhaps he had misunderstood about the lights. Expectation rose like a gorge as the driver pulled over in front of him and stopped. After a painfully long pause, he rolled down his window. The Japanese man peered furtively over his shoulder and then into the station, making sure no one was watching. Caldwell stepped toward the car.

"Hey, GI. You want nice girl?"

Caldwell froze in place.

"What?"

"Nice girl. Pretty. Not cost much. Dollars okay."

Caldwell hesitated, struggling to make his thoughts jibe. "Did Jerry send you? I mean are you from . . .?"

"Huh? What's wrong with you, mister? Young girl. Likes Americans."

"No. No, I . . ." Distressed and at a loss, like a rejected suitor, Caldwell retreated toward the station

The driver elevated a middle finger and drove off into the darkness.

9:15. I'll give him ten more minutes, Caldwell thought.



Ten minutes elapsed, and then ten more. Additional trains arrived. Taxis and buses scooped up riders. The rain let up, and the damp air filled with the stink of the harbor. And still Caldwell stuck by his vigil.

At almost ten o'clock, Caldwell scanned the lot once more--nothing. He shook his head and hailed a cab. "Honcho. Bar Atomic," he said, uncertain of his emotions--dejection, reconciliation, relief--all stirred together in an olio that left him washed out. Just not meant to be, he told himself. Just not meant to be.

When he pushed through the door of the Bar Atomic, Caldwell spotted Miyako on a customer's lap and went straight to the bar. But, she immediately turned up at his side, squeezing his arm.

"You all wet. Where you been so long?"

"Canada and back."

"What you mean?"

"Nothing. I got caught in the rain, that's all." Caldwell beckoned to the bartender. "Smitty, give me a *mizuwari*."

The Bar Atomic closed at midnight, and Caldwell and Miyako fell into the back seat of a taxi. They kissed and fondled each other, much to the disgust of the driver who issued disapproving sounds through his teeth. Extracting his tongue from her ear, Caldwell said, "Miyako, don't let me oversleep. I've got to catch an early bus up to Tachikawa."