

"I miss you, Dad"

Letters from a Military Brat

by Kat Kaneko Avila

My mom was in one of her garage-cleaning moods and found several letters I had written to my dad when I was eight years old. At the time, he had been assigned to the repair ship USS Ajax (AR-6). The ship's home port was U.S. Fleet Activities, Sasebo, Japan, once the home of the Imperial Japanese Navy. We lived there in off-base housing for over three years before he and the rest of the family were transferred north to Yokosuka, Japan, then to San Diego, California.

To a military brat, it just seemed normal for dads to be away for months at a time. They were these strange men in uniform who sailed back into our lives periodically with their arms filled with woodcarvings from Manila and Subic Bay in the Philippines, jade from Hong Kong, dolls from China, and treasures from other mysterious ports that beckoned with entertainment and shopping districts filled with bars, nightclubs, and black markets. You wrote letters as often as you could so your dad wouldn't be left empty-handed at mail call.

"June 9, 19xx Dear Dad, I do everything wrong every time. The last time I spilled milk on the table, chair and my clothes. I had hard whip with mom's hand. The next day I broke the door for dishes. I again had a hard whip with mom's hand. Mommy had to take the car to the garage. Because the car made too much noise. And mommy was sick at one night. She has too many troubles to worry. I'm pass. I'm going to 3rd grade in September. I have about 13 goods on my report card. My 3rd grade teacher is Miss Seilfing. I know because is says on the back of the report card. I have 3 or 4 bad on my report card. I'm writing a letter to Mrs. Ueoka today. God bless

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the U.S.S. AJAX! I miss you, Dad."

I suppose my mom had a lot to worry about. While her English was adequate, she occasionally did have to rely on a second grader, namely me, to translate for her. Of course, she also had her support group at the military base snack bar consisting of other Japanese women who had married American servicemen. Much of what they chatted about was us, their children - how so-and-so got straight A's all the time, and another was taking piano lessons, still another was pretty enough to be a model. They bragged about us in public, but in private they told us we had to work harder so as to not bring shame upon the family.

Since World War II, over 60,000 Japanese women have married American servicemen, leading the large numbers of Filipino, Korean, Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese women who have done the same. Japanese "war brides" initiated a Japanese American identity not overshadowed by the World War II internment experience. Their existence also challenged America's historical resistance toward interracial marriages and Asian immigration.

As late as 1952, with the exception of two brief periods, Japanese spouses - along with their interracial children - were restricted from coming to the United States unlike European spouses of American servicemen who were not. While some American servicemen married Japanese women thinking the women would be passive and more subservient than their American counterparts, the rigors of military life require servicemen's wives to be as self-reliant as possible. Our moms not only had to virtually single-handedly raise their families since our dads were away so often, but they had to accommodate a new culture and language and to endure holdover ethnic prejudice on top of that.

"June 18, 19xx Dear Dad, How are you today? We are all very fine over here. It had been raining, almost all day. This morning our bathroom made loud noise and it stopped. Then after that we made four Father's Day cards, and one letter. Mommy receive your savings bonds. Mommy is not taking me to the bank. Because I can't write

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so good. Today Mommy is paying rent. I'm writing this letter for Mom. We God bless you dad."

My mom never quite outgrew the need for her children to write letters for her, to answer the telephone and the door, and to talk to store clerks. Then it became outright clever of her to claim she didn't know much English when she didn't want to be bothered by somebody. If her children were around, she would point to us and we'd have to get rid of the annoying stranger or salesperson.

"June 25, 19xx Dear Dad, How are you today. We are very fine. It was a very sunny day today. We was very hot in the house. So we went to go to the movies today. We went to the Snack Bar then we went home. We went home at 4:00 in the afternoon. Mommy was sick yesterday. She had a high fever. She couldn't clean the house. All she did was cook and wash us. Mommy always bought japanese ice cream. We always have sweets every day. Mommy always says not to eat too much sweets. We miss you Dad. We hope you come home. When you come back we will go to the beach. We God bless you."

Dad never seemed to be around long enough before he was shipped out again, just when you were starting to refamiliarize yourself with his face. You drove down to the shipyard to wave goodbye. And you and your sister and your brother and your long-suffering mother were always waiting for this man to come home.

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