

Benjamin Hanson

Parsons' Lips

In South Korea, it rains. In fact, there is an entire season dedicated to the rain. The native people refer to it as the season of the monsoon. Consequently, Korean theologians concocted elaborate rain gods, and Korean engineers concocted equally elaborate rain gutters. During my stay in Korea, I spent many days in the rain. And those two days were no exception.

Amidst a downpour, our Army truck struggled down a bumpy road like a toddler taking its first steps, unaware yet persevering. I propped my head against the frosty window, closed my eyelids, and listened to the wipers sweep back and forth, back and forth. The side of my head knocked against the window as the truck hit pothole after pothole, the rain smacking the other side. 18 years on this planet and I still did not know how to sleep off the jitters. The cold shook right through me, keeping me conscious and contemplative.

Screech! A patch of barbed wire ceased our forward motion. The two and a half ton truck that I was in came to an abrupt halt. I wiped my hot eyes and stared out into the world stirring before me. The gray morning sky parted as the heavy rains tired. Against a gray backdrop, small wisps of cloud danced in circles like dandelion seeds caught in the wind. Majestic cypress trees sprinkled the landscape around us.

With a nod from a stern-faced guard, our truck entered the barbed wire gate and hobbled through a muddy hole. I gazed across the makeshift camp, past the pools of coffee-colored water, past the mounds of soft sliding mud. Unaffected soldiers trudged right through them. Half-dressed with their morning eyes, Army men scuttled around the area like zombies with a purpose. Some soldiers stood by the green canvas tents erected on high ground, holding tin cans of steaming coffee and telling war stories. Other soldiers broke apart bundles of sharp concertina wire and carried it around the outskirts of camp. The sharp barbs attached to their clothes, gear, and chain mail gloves. "We're here!" exclaimed the driver, a giddy red-haired man who was on his way home to America in a few days.

Beside me, Private Hatzinger squirmed. He was the other new guy or "tur-

tle” as they called us. We were two “turtles,” being shipped together to our first field exercise. He reminded me of a little boy with a chubby tummy, sticky lips and sticky hands, searching for his lost lollipop. At that moment, he had a pale, edgy look about him. I could tell he feared future encounters with our new leaders. I felt the same way. Together, we fell out of the truck into a large puddle, sending globs of mud to our sides and up our wrinkled pant legs. Right away, the vultures swarmed around us.

Armed with a Kevlar helmet, flak vest, utility belt, gas mask, canteens, night vision goggles, ammunition pouches, and M16 semiautomatic machine gun, I pretended to stand upright with ease. I clinched my jaw muscles tight, until those eyes found mine.

Without warning, Mr. Haunting Eyes stepped forward and claimed me. He looked close to forty years old and had a thin pair of eyeglasses on. He acted like he was my frustrated father, preparing and exercising his belt to beat me. The nametag on his uniform said Parsons. I noticed the small crop of blonde hair set high upon his shiny forehead. I tried not to look too far into his glassy blue eyes. I ended up lowering my head and inspecting his neatly pressed uniform, then the tops of his black boots that stuck out an inch above the mud and water.

“Look at me, Private Hanson!” the sergeant cried, with a tinge of North Carolina in his voice. He forced me to study his fragile face, complete with its contorting creases and folds. He forced me to examine his thin eyebrows, starting high on the outside of his face, and then sloping downward to his nose. They were quite devilish. He looked like he belonged in one of those old silent movies, in which the villain’s facial features were overtly emphasized.

The scariest thing about him, though, was not his stretched skin or his sinister eyebrows; it was his lips. His lips actually stuck to the side of his face. For a moment, I thought that maybe he had the inside of his mouth caught between his molars. As seconds became minutes, I realized the permanent nature of his oddity. Staff Sergeant Parsons’ face was a little off-center, and I couldn’t help but smile when he started verbally abusing me.

He had a curious habit of pushing his words out sideways. When he told me to get my bags of gear and get my ass into the tent, his voice sounded off to the right and then faded away. Hatzinger and I swiftly followed orders. With 75 pounds already upon us, we both added 80 more pounds of rucksack and duffle bag. On my way to the tent, I toiled up the hill, receiving no assistance. Within seconds, one of my bulging bags was floating in a puddle. And

the only human interaction I received came in the form of condescending looks and sneers.

At the tent, I readjusted the bags on my back and breathed deeply. “You two get in there and make your cots, now!” shouted Parsons, behind our hunched backs. I coughed out the remaining air in my throat and went for the tent, fumbling with the door flap and catching my rucksack on a hanging cord. Hatzinger followed. We had no idea how to turn three pieces of metal and a sheet of canvas into a bed. Hatzinger began to whimper like a little boy, chubby tummy and sticky hands. I struggled with the pieces like they belonged to a jigsaw puzzle, not knowing which end was up. After a minute and ten seconds, Parsons rushed in, grabbed the pieces from my quivering hands, and threw them across the tent. He did the same to my friend without haste. Then, he jumped at me like I was the enemy he had been searching for.

After seizing my shirt at the neck, he hoisted me straight up into the air. “Hanson,” he said with his lips pursed to one side, “if you don’t smarten up, I am gonna kill you.” I stared forward the best I could. I decided that this guy was not the type who drew lines or gave warnings.

That night was unbearably cold and dark. It was hard to stay awake during my three-hour shift of guard duty. I paced back and forth behind our tent, pondering the day’s events and pretending that I was somehow protecting my unit’s well-being. By the time the shrouded moon was looming overhead, I was comfortably asleep beneath my sleeping bag, oblivious to the pitter-patter of light drizzle upon the canvas top of our tent.

“Wake up girls!” screamed Parsons. His jarring voice echoed throughout the tent. It was the next morning. I scrambled awake, wiping a night’s worth of drool away. Then, I quickly unzipped my sleeping bag and peeked out, shivering from the cold, shivering from his voice. Nineteen other sleeping bags lay still. Smoke from the small heater billowed up to the top of the tent. Even though the heater burned lava red, I could still see my breath spilling from my purple lips. I needed my clothes and I needed them right away.

Within an hour, our platoon of 40 soldiers stood in line for breakfast. By then, the rains had ceased, but the puddles still remained. Several plastic buckets sat in a row on the naked ground, and Army men with scoops and spoons stood eagerly behind them. Little did I know the Army had reduced the art of cooking breakfast to a job for an assembly line.

The cook took my cardboard plate. He plopped a curled slice of tough ham onto the main section. Then, he passed it on to the next man, who piled some soupy grits and southern gravy on top of that. Then, he passed it on.

The last guy topped the mound with a dry biscuit. After that, he handed me the sagging plate. On the end table, I swiped a mini-box of Raisin Bran and a carton of shelf-life milk (able to be consumed after months without refrigeration). With the breakfast plate sitting on the fender of a truck, I indulged mainly in the cereal, donating the rest to the more tolerant appetites of other soldiers.

After breakfast, soldiers went their own way, most staggered towards the portable outhouses. Sergeant Parsons took Hatzinger and I aside. "I just heard something about you two that made me really upset. One of my soldiers tells me that you were sleeping in his room and using his stereo system." Parsons snickered. He was right, sort of. The night before we were shipped to the field exercise, Hatzinger and I were housed in our unit's barracks back on post. Private Hatzinger did use Ellis' stereo, but he did not break anything.

"Well, is this true?" Parsons asked, his gnarled lips lifting slightly to his right.

"But...but, Sarge, they told us to live there, until we came out here," said Hatzinger.

"That does not entail utilizing one's belongings and partying in their room," replied Parsons.

"Who said that we were partying? Why would we be partying?" I asked.

"Get down!" Parsons screamed. "Get down now!" Without pause, we both dropped to the wet ground and assumed the push-up position. I could feel the soupy mud oozing into my pants and through my cotton underwear. "Push up!" screeched Parsons. "Push up!" We squirmed, pushing up with all of our might, facedown in the mud.

Parsons bent down to our level. I felt his hardened face draw near. "You two listen to me," whispered the sergeant, "your word means nothing around here...nothing. A private's word means nothing. If I ever hear that one of you was caught fooling around with one of my soldier's belongings, I am gonna kick your little ass. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sergeant. Yes, sergeant," we answered, lying in the mud, unable to lift ourselves.

"Now get out of my face and go make yourself useful!" bellowed Parsons.

With new orders, we made our way down the hill behind our tent to the tank-training site. A monstrous tank on rubber tracks drove in circles around the site as a group of soldiers looked on intently. Parsons stood in the middle of the group, narrating and explicating tank operations. As we approached the group, Parsons began to get technical, wielding his extensive knowledge

of military jargon. Hatzinger, my pal, stood, mouth wide open, dumbfounded.

“Private Hanson, what did I just say?” asked Parsons, attempting to catch me off guard so that he could have another valid reason for hating me.

All eyes fell upon me. “You said...Sergeant, you said that the boom of the Combat Engineer Vehicle is used to breach a mine field, mines that have the ability to tear apart tank tracks. You also said that the boom could withstand up to three explosions before it is rendered unserviceable. Lastly, you said that in order to breach a wire obstacle, the boom must be lowered and a mound of dirt must be bulldozed over the wire so that a convoy of vehicles can drive over the wire, Sergeant.” I said it with confidence and nerve.

“Good job, private. We’ll make a soldier out of you yet,” said Parsons.

For once, he acknowledged me in a positive light. I stood tall. I felt a smile coming on; I could see it in his face. As his cheeks swelled with color, his lips began to rise and separate, unveiling his unfamiliar teeth. They were as twisted and gnarled as his lips! Each tooth pointed in a different direction. The front ones were a dazzling white, while the back ones were a shady gray. His blissful expression lasted but a few seconds. To my right, Hatzinger appeared dreadfully speechless and disheveled, an easy target for the next question. We all knew there was no hope for him. Within seconds, Parsons’ lips began barking curses. Without being told, Hatzinger found his place, belly deep in mud.

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