

## Gypsy, the Pill and Me

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"Has anyone heard of Gypsy Rose Lee?" a woman, garbed in civilian clothes, asked the patients in an Army hospital ward.

I sat up in my hospital bed which was crowned with dark, green mosquito netting, raised my hand and answered, "I saw the musical *Gypsy*' with Ethel Merman." The woman heard several other responses, teasingly smiled at us and then disappeared into the hallway.

It was the summer of 1969, and I was in my third Army hospital. In Vietnam, I received surgery for a bullet wound. I was then sent to a Japan-based hospital for healing and rehabilitation. When I was ready to return to duty, the Army asked: "Do you want to go back to 'Nam or we can put you on a plane to Korea?"

I chose Korea. Unfortunately, I didn't anticipate what would happen with the duty change. While in Vietnam and Japan, I was supposed to receive two pills a day to counteract Vietnamese malaria. When patrolling in Vietnamese tropical rainforests, often unreachable by supply helicopters, malaria pills were not dispensed on a daily basis. So, when I got to malaria-free Korea, the Army no longer dispensed the pills, and the malaria parasites latent in my blood hit with a vengeance. That's how I ended up in an Army hospital in Korea. The doctors knocked out the malaria with one injection. But, they quarantined me for a month, drew blood tests every other day and made me sleep under mosquito netting. It was late in my hospital stay when the woman asked if anyone knew of Gypsy Rose Lee.

"Why would anyone ask that?" I wondered, since none of us are old enough to have seen Gypsy Rose Lee perform. Maybe our fathers did, but certainly not us. I recalled the play *Gypsy*, first musical I attended. After seeing it, I bought the soundtrack and listened to its many wonderful songs: *Everything's Coming Up Roses* and *Small World Isn't It*. I remembered getting ready for college dates and singing the play's lyrics to myself: *Got my tweed pressed. Got my best vest. All I need now is the girl.* And, then, there was Gypsy's version of the song, *Let Me Entertain You*, which in the play put her in the spot light.

I was suddenly brought out of my recollections when the woman reappeared at the hospital ward entrance and announced, "Here she is everyone, Gypsy Rose Lee!"

Gypsy appeared as if making a stage entrance but primly garbed in a dark dress with the required military authorized pass draped around her neck. She strutted down the middle aisle, smiled at everyone and glanced at me. Then, she theatrically lifted her right arm, pointed her extended finger at me and said, "You didn't take your pill." Then, she continued down the ward to entertain other troops.

I understood the double meaning behind "the pill" but I wanted to call out, "No, wait! I can explain why I didn't take the pills." Then, I realized she had done what she does best. She had me wanting more, and after agonizing long minutes, she delivered.

As Gypsy sashayed back to the ward entrance, she strolled over to my bed. "Scoot over, Hon," she purred, "It's time to take some Polaroids." She sat on my bed. With one arm raised, she lifted up the overhead mosquito netting. She draped her other arm over my knee. Then, one of the USO aides accompanying her took the Polaroid photograph and gave it to me. Gypsy also gave me one of her autographed publicity photos. I was too tongue-tied to do anything but mumble "Thanks!" And, she was off to visit other hospital wards. I sent the pictures home. I didn't think to explain the picture of a woman sitting in my bed with her arm draped over my pajama knee clad. I just instructed my parents to keep them in a safe place because they meant a lot to me.

Several weeks later, I got a letter from my Mother. I opened it expecting to read about her reaction to the picture with Gypsy Rose Lee. But, that wasn't so. I may have been a young adult male, a combat survivor, a wounded war vet but I was still subject to maternal admonishments.

"I hope you are not taking up with an older woman," she wrote.