

ON THE HOME FRONT

By Marie Coady

His backpack no longer makes a soft landing on the dining room carpet while his keys jingle and clunk on the table, freeing his hands to pet our dog, Katie, who was always first to greet him. That nightly ritual won't happen again for at least two and a half years now that my son Sean has left for China with the Peace Corps.

Up to the actual moment of parting, it had been a wonderful experience having a son accepted for a choice assignment as part of the Peace Corps' China III group. There was a continual string of parties, dinners, long distance phone calls and surprise visits for Sean. So you can see why I thought having a son join the Peace Corps was a piece of cake.

Not even the arrival of a booklet entitled, *On the Home Front: A Handbook for the Families of Volunteers*, with its table of contents that listed: Civil Unrest, Natural Disasters, Personal Safety, Health Matters, and No Word for Weeks as topics for concern, dampened the excitement.

But mostly, it was Sean's enthusiasm that kept my spirits buoyed. He rattled off impressive facts about China that made it sound like a mythical wonderland. He was especially impressed that China's written history scanned thirty-five hundred years, and as a nation on the verge of entering the twenty-first century, he felt privileged to become part of its current history.

He also seemed prepared to cope with the severe winters of a south central China with no central heat. To dispel the chill on China's vast, open plains, Sean purchased an expensive sleeping bag and some state-of-the-art long underwear that promised to keep him warm at night, even if the temperature dipped below zero. But due to weight restrictions, he was unable to pack them or any of his winter clothes for that matter. Instead, he left me the responsibility for getting them to him.

This responsibility weighs heavily on me. I am left with the unsettling reality that it takes a month for a letter to get to him, if it arrives at all. That can only mean that a package has an even slimmer chance with a Chinese postal system that makes ours look like a Pentium chip.

Since every mother makes an unspoken contract with her children at birth that they will never be hungry or cold, I live in dread fear that I won't get his warm things to him before his first cold night.

Not only do I have to get warm clothes to him on time, I also promised I would provide him with slides of everyday life in America; that is, pictures of people shopping at supermarkets, malls, kids playing baseball and other sports, playgrounds, hospitals, barbecues, restaurants, etc.. This has proved to be a more difficult task than anticipated. People become hostile and suspicious when I line them up for a close shot while they're ordering cold cuts at the deli.

Our time together continued to tick excitedly away, until the night before he left when reality began to set in. I made chicken parmesan (his favorite) and we popped the cork on a good bottle of red wine, sipping, eating and chatting---a memory to treasure. Morning came like lightning, and before we knew it we were at the airport.

As the time grew irrevocably closer to the actual good-bye, his father, twin brother, Philip, and I sat looking out at planes taking loved ones away and returning them again as Sean relished his last cup of Dunkin Donuts hazelnut coffee. We laughed, took pictures, cleared our throats a lot and headed for the gate, the last stop before he would disappear into another culture worlds away from us.

Finally, we had to face the actual hug that is supposed to last two and a half years. It was then we realized---that it won't.

Since that moment, the chapter on "No Word for Weeks" in the *On the Home Front* booklet became very real for me, until late one Saturday night the phone rang. When I picked it up, I heard two wonderful words: "Hi, Mom!". He had a lump in his throat and so did I, but he sounded well and happy.

He couldn't talk long. He was on his way to a meeting but wanted to give me a phone number where I could reach him at Sichuan Normal University. His instructions were to dial the number, then say "Woo chi ling si." which is supposed to mean: the phone on the fifth floor.

So far I've been unable to get through to him. I guess I don't say "Woo chi ling si" correctly, because they keep hanging up on me. But I'll keep trying. China's going to learn it has one determined mother on its hands.

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