

삼심일

Chapter Thirty-One

Anne's hooch lay at the western end of Changpa-ri, off the main road that bisected the village on a route indelibly fixed in my mind: Turn right into an alley and follow it to its end, then right again along the cement wall topped with shards of glass that bordered the back of the village—the Imjin River tearing along on a parallel course only a hundred yards distant, an enormous August moon illuminating the dirt path as you unconsciously counted past the first and second courtyards to the third, its gate barred like a medieval castle after curfew, but just now unlocked, swinging open on its rusty hinges with a modified screech that blended with all the other night sounds of a Korean village along the DMZ, circa 1970.

Inside, you were greeted by a babble of voices from the inner courtyard, an unroofed square open to the sky, around the perimeter of which stood the doors to the single-room habitations of the clan or family group. Anne's hooch was at the back of the courtyard, which took me past a group of older men in an adjacent room, sitting or squatting intently around an elaborate board game. This activity took place nightly and proceeded in studied silence with brief mutters—suddenly punctuated by violent eruptions in rapid Korean and

exclamations of elation or dismay—whereupon the players would seize new pieces and begin all over again. The game resembled Scrabble, with each player selecting an array of white square pieces engraved with Korean letters or symbols, which they arranged on their individual slates, then placed them, in turn, on the board. But here all resemblance ended, as they would sometimes reach over and plunder each other's pieces, arranging them on their own slates, gabbling at one another—the game proceeding by a logic completely incomprehensible to me, the air inside the room blue with smoke, cigarettes dangling from the lips of the players as they squatted intently over the board. All this as I reached Anne's door, where she stood waiting for me, the local grapevine having instantly communicated my presence the moment I entered the village.

One of us would greet the other: "*Ahng-ya-ha-shuh-meeka!*"

The other replying, "*Ahng-ya-ha-say-oh!*"

Spoken in the animated tones of a beginner's language lesson, our conversations always started off in Korean until my limited vocabulary broke down, at which point we would revert to the pidgin shorthand employed by American soldiers and Korean girls. I took off my shoes to enter Anne's hooch, which consisted of a single room containing a wardrobe and a bed, the latter taking up most of the interior.

"Egg sammichee?" she would inquire in her light, high voice, earnestly intent on feeding me as soon as I made an appearance.

There were only a limited number of things I could eat in the village, and a whole host of things that had to be avoided—these included water (unless boiled for tea), meat (frequently dog), and a variety of vegetables. Eggs, for some reason, were

perfectly okay. Anne knew the dietary strictures better than I did and vigilantly monitored everything I ate.

The gang from Headquarters Company immediately



Anne ("Hyon Mi"), Changpa-ri, South Korea—1970

adopted her as a member of the battalion. She would cheerfully orchestrate the conversation when a group of us gathered in a local bar—but increasingly our excursions took us away from the bars into other avenues of Korean village life. There was a solitary quality, a consciousness of aloneness that she carried with her always, and I soon discovered why.

“They call me ‘*Japan* woman,’” she said with a sweep of her hand, indicating the collective inhabitants of Changpa-ri and, beyond that, all of South Korea. Her father was a Japanese officer she’d never known, her mother, a Korean woman who had stayed with her soldier for a time, then raised Anne on her own. To other Koreans, Anne looked Japanese.

She loved going to the movies. In Changpa-ri, this involved crowding into a single community room with a bed sheet hung on the back wall, an arrangement used principally for public-service shorts produced by the government. Munsan-ni, however, had a small movie theater, and we routinely went to matinees—which involved getting into a taxi. These were rattletrap cars held together with chewing gum and spit, parts routinely flying off as they hurtled down the pothole-filled dirt roads at breakneck speeds, driven by young men apparently selected for their insane driving habits and suicidal urge. The Korean taxi drivers would frequently turn off their engines when descending a mountainside or steep incline in an effort to save gas—thereby minimizing their ability to control the bucking, swerving vehicle—immediately turning a scenic cab ride into an appointment with death. The first time we went to Munsan-ni for a movie, we were late leaving the village, the rain just beginning to fall, the roads a complete mess.

“We’re going to be late,” I explained to Anne, showing her my watch. “We’re not going to make it.”



Taxi stand in Munsan-ni, South Korea—1970

“No sweat-tee-dah, GI!” she replied, vigorously waving a cab over and pushing me inside. We made it with five minutes to spare, and it took me half the movie to get my heart rate back to normal.

The afternoon movies in Munsan-ni tended to be Korean melodramas, with a smattering of cheap action flicks imported from around Asia. I remember an evil Korean landlord or minor city official with exaggerated eyebrows and a Kabuki grimace who spent the better part of the film making life miserable for an attractive but chaste widow with small children—the dramatic climax depicting the evil official foundering in the mud during a driving rainstorm having been deprived of his title and riches, to the immense satisfaction of the Korean audience. Anne didn’t watch these movies as much as she



Movie theater, town of Munsan-ni, South Korea—1970

lived in them, her dark eyes fixed on the screen, lips slightly parted, and our most intense conversations involved her passionate post-film commentary on the story we'd just witnessed.

This was my first experience living with a woman—of waking up next to someone else on a regular basis. American soldiers were strictly forbidden to spend the night off-post in the village, but the forty-eight-hour exemption from duty for the NCOs who ran the Tactical Operations Center made

it possible, if slightly risky. I was having trouble throttling down after nighttime duty on the DMZ (the barracks being a lousy place to sleep during the day), and Anne's hooch was a sanctuary from the constant noise and jacked-up pace of the battalion.

Her bed smelled faintly of spice. She rose quietly in the morning, bound up her hair, slid the door aside, and went outside to cook rice. This was mingled with the muffled sounds of the courtyard inhabitants doing domestic chores, all of it overlaid by the muddy smell of the Imjin River, omnipresent in the morning, as it rolled past the village on its way to the Yellow Sea.



Village of Changpa-ri, South Korea—Fall 1970



Bill with village friends, Changpa-ri, South Korea—1970

When I was off-duty, I regularly hooked a ride to Changpa-ri with Steve Rothstein, doubling as his medical assistant rather than waiting for the evening Pass Truck. My medical-assistant duties were to get the canvas awning set up as quickly as possible to create a dry space for Steve to see patients (usually mothers and kids), hold his medical bag, hand him stuff, and be helpful. Anne knew Steve, but was always slightly in awe of him, given his status as the de facto village doctor. The first time I brought him to Anne's hooch

for tea, the people in her courtyard stood up and bowed to him—in response to which Rothstein (who was now used to it) modestly nodded his head and sat down for tea.

All of this took place during the monsoons, in weather that was hot, humid, and breathless, with semi-constant rain, which, rather than cooling things off, created conditions so steamy it felt like you couldn't breathe. We were sitting under the overhang outside Anne's hooch, the three of us talking—Anne alternately fanning herself with a large straw paddle, then fanning us—when I announced my plan to go swimming in the Imjin River. She looked up with concern, and the fan stopped.

“*Never hop-shee-dah, GI!*” she told me (“Never going to happen!”).

There were two reasons why nobody swam in the Imjin,



The Imjin River in flood, south of the DMZ, South Korea
(photo courtesy of Sp4 Julio A. Martinez)

the first being the torrid pace of the river during the monsoons, which sent water cascading down the mountainsides, widening the Imjin till it was bank-full, its current ripping past the village with tremendous force. The second was the presence of the guards stationed on Libby Bridge with automatic weapons—all of them vigilantly on the watch for North Korean infiltrators in the river. We were downstream from Libby Bridge by a couple hundred yards, however, with most of the guards looking upstream, and I reasoned that the current would take me swiftly out of range. In addition to which, it was insufferably hot and I was determined to swim. I'd transformed an old pair of fatigue pants into cutoffs for the occasion.

Out of the courtyard gate we marched and down the path to the river, Anne, her arms crossed in disapproval, speaking volubly in Korean as we approached the southern bank. Rothstein, who'd been in favor of the plan, changed his mind when we got to the edge, where you could see tree branches caught in the current, tearing past. All along the river bank, women were kneeling and doing their laundry—but had now halted and turned to look. We'd suddenly become the center of attention, and I wanted to get off this stage, concerned that the guards on the bridge would be alerted. There was a small point of land jutting out from the bank, and I broke into a run along it and dove headlong into the river.

I was immediately seized by the muscular grip of the current, tumbled around underwater like a doll—managed to fight my way to the surface and discovered that I was already a hundred yards downstream and moving at the speed of a freight train. I have a snapshot in my head (or, rather, a momentary video clip) of the village of Changpa-ri racing by and



Han and Imjin River estuary, South Korea—1970

disappearing as I was borne around a bend in the river; and I took a split second to absorb this, then struck out as hard as I could for the shore. I was half a mile downstream before I was finally able to reach the bank and pull myself out, and it took me ten or fifteen minutes to jog back to where Anne and Steve were waiting. Anne was still standing with her arms crossed, the very picture of disapproval, as I came panting up to them.

“No sweat-tee-dah, GI!” I said, and she rolled her eyes.