

삼심오

Chapter Thirty-Five

At some point during the autumn, there was a trip to Seoul—an overnight pass, organized by Andy (Sgt. Anderson) of the Commo Platoon, so that his duty schedule, Gibby's schedule, my schedule, and that of another Commo sergeant all meshed, permitting the trip. Andy knew some business girls in Seoul who laced their happy smoke with opium, and we were all interested in giving this a try. Four of us spent a hallucinatory night in a bordello in Itaewon—which I remember as a languid evening on an embroidered divan, crowded with dreams in which NCO Academy tests somehow consisted of economics questions to which I didn't know the answers.

As it turned out, my TOC schedule gave me an extra day of freedom, and I stayed in Seoul, securing a room at the USO Club while the other three guys headed back to the DMZ. A buddy in the Recon Platoon had recently scored a pair of Frye boots in a street market in Seoul, and I wanted a pair for myself. Just the thing to be wearing, I thought, when I returned to college (a private scene, replayed in my head, in which the other students admired my boots and nobody noticed my short hair).



The weekend trip to Seoul (from left): Sgt. Hedeem, Sgt. Anderson, Sgt. Winship, Spc-4 Gibson, Seoul, South Korea—Fall 1970

Accordingly, I hit the street, looking for the open-air market.

“Easy to find,” the Recon guy had told me, “just a couple blocks around the corner from the USO.”

But the elusive street market was nowhere in sight, no matter which direction I explored, and I’d begun to feel like I was back on the Advanced Compass Course, wandering in the wilderness, when a Korean businessman stopped me on the

street and inquired if I needed help finding my way.

As a matter of fact, I did, I told him—explaining about the street market and the Frye boots while he listened sympathetically. He was forty-ish and neatly dressed in a suit and tie. He interrupted my narrative with a question.

By any chance, did I belong to the 2nd Infantry Division?

Yes, I did, I told him—currently stationed on the DMZ north of the Imjin River.

His features expanded into a broad smile. *He* had served with the 2nd Infantry Division during the war, and this made us, in effect, brother soldiers. *He* would assist me in finding the elusive street market. For the next twenty minutes, we wandered around neighborhoods adjacent to the USO Club, getting farther and farther afield and finding nothing.

“Not to worry!” he told me. He had a friend in the shoe industry who would help us locate the desired footwear. He would call him immediately. I stood outside a phone booth while he had a short, animated phone conversation with his friend in the shoe industry.

“All settled,” he told me, sliding open the door of the phone booth with a smile. His friend knew all about these popular boots and would meet us at a nearby establishment. He hailed a cab; we climbed into the back seat; and while he delivered curt, clipped directions to the Korean driver, I had a moment to reflect upon my companion’s allegiance to the 2nd Infantry Division and my good fortune in encountering him.

The cab dropped us in an area of Seoul I had no familiarity with—which, frankly, looked like a slum, as I stepped out of the cab and took a quick survey. A partially demolished building stood next door, with several crumbling tenements



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further down the block. In front of us was a multistory building, fronted by a gaudy, paint-chipped door inlaid with a red plastic dragon. The businessman swung the door open, and I discovered, to my surprise, that we were entering a geisha house. A chubby Korean matron in a kimono bowed us into an anteroom where we removed our shoes. Following the example of my host, I kicked off my loafers and followed the proprietress up a bewildering, serpentine series of stairs and hallways, until she slid open a wooden door covered with rice

paper and we entered a small oblong room. I hung my coat on a hook on the back wall and took a seat around a miniature circular table, the sole piece of furniture in the room.

The door slid open again, and the proprietress reentered followed by a very pretty Korean girl carrying a tray and dressed in a traditional Japanese geisha costume—clad in a kimono with a pillow tied at her back and pale makeup, which accentuated her features, her hair pulled severely back. Expressionless, she knelt on the floor, placing a carafe of liquid and two china cups on the lazy Susan.

“A celebratory drink!” announced the businessman, rubbing his hands together, his face wreathed in smiles, nodding at the girl to pour. I had about twenty bucks with me, just enough to cover the cost of the Frye boots, and I was concerned about



Seoul, South Korea—Fall 1970



Christian proselytizer, Seoul, South Korea—Fall 1970

the mounting expenditure for what was, after all, a fairly pedestrian errand to acquire some footwear.

“No, no!” declared the businessman, waving me off. A brother soldier wasn’t going to pay for drinks: *He* would foot the bill. The geisha girl obediently filled our cups.

“*Saki!*” exclaimed the businessman, and he raised his brimming cup with a flourish.

“*To the Courage and Bravery of the 2nd Division!*” he cried—and as we drank, I noted an apparently indistinguish-

able similarity between the taste of saki and that of raw gin. Brushing the geisha girl's hand away, the businessman immediately seized the carafe of liquor and re-filled my cup, proposing yet another toast to the 2nd Division.

However ridiculously long overdue, a warning bell had begun going off in my head as to the unlikelihood of this entire scenario. For the life of me, though, I couldn't imagine what he might be after. I wasn't carrying enough money to justify this elaborate scheme—if it was a scheme—and who knew, really, about the depth of gratitude among the citizenry regarding America's wartime rescue of South Korea. I wasn't skilled enough to read my host's persona, whether native Korean warmth or cunning mandarin duplicity, and while all this was running through my head, the businessman earnestly begged my pardon, rising to his feet (he would just see what was keeping his friend!), and departed the room.

At a gesture from the Korean matron, who was still hovering in the background, the geisha girl once again refilled my cup and produced some kind of three-stringed instrument, which she began to play, filling the room with atonal music. I was sipping more cautiously, but after several shots of raw liquor on an empty stomach, I was partially intoxicated—and I knew it. At some point during this strange atonal concert, the businessman reentered and the proprietress departed, sliding the door shut.

The geisha girl completed her performance, and the businessman led the applause, clapping loudly and enthusiastically, while I joined in—the Korean girl receiving this appreciation with downcast eyes. The businessman turned to me with animation:

“Is she not a very talented girl?”

“Very talented,” I agreed.

“And do you not find her attractive?”

“Very attractive,” I concurred.

“Would you not like to go with her?” he asked, with an expansive gesture.

Uncertain as to whether this was an actual offer, or merely a hypothetical appreciation of her beauty, I concurred again.

“Very much,” I said.

“Then, go,” he said.

He addressed a sharp, peremptory command in Korean to the girl, who promptly rose to her feet and slid open the wooden-framed, rice-paper door, where she stood passively at its threshold.

“Go!” he enjoined me warmly, and without further speech, I stood up and followed her out the door.

I was relieved to be out of that small room—relieved to have a moment to begin to collect myself and figure things out. The Korean girl led me down the hall and around the corner into another small room, silently sliding the door closed behind us. She disrobed and knelt on the sleeping mat, naked and remote, her face averted. Determined to make a real connection in what had, thus far, been a completely unreal afternoon, I leaned toward her and recited the nursery rhyme Anne had taught me. She glanced at me with an expression of abject terror—and this, more than anything, finally sobered me. I rose to my feet, slid out the door as quietly as possible, and stood in the hall for a moment considering my options.

My first impulse was to find my way downstairs and depart immediately. My coat, however, was back in that small, oblong room, hanging on a wall hook—and in it were my wallet and military ID. I gathered myself and started back down



Street gamblers, Seoul, South Korea—Fall 1970

the hall. Rounding the corner, I picked up the sound of two male voices speaking rapid Korean in sharp, guttural accents, the voices dropping as I approached and ceasing altogether as I reached the doorway.

There was the businessman in his wonted spot, his face now in a savage scowl, all friendliness erased from his features. Seated across from him was a street thug, his clothes in rags, shoes filthy, fingernails black with grease, a prominent scar adorning his face. The businessman gestured curtly for me to

sit down, and I took a quick glance at the back of the room—where my coat hung, undisturbed—before seating myself at the low table. My heart began to race. My coat was beyond my immediate reach, and two adversaries now effectively blocked my exit from the room. We sat in total silence for several seconds before the proprietress appeared with the bill, which she deposited emphatically on the circular table then withdrew, sliding the door shut.

The businessman picked up the bill and studied it with elaborate interest—then tossed it contemptuously to me. I picked it up. Written in red ink, in large figures, was the tally: 50,000 won (roughly \$165), and I studied it expressionlessly for a long moment, before leaning over and tossing it back to the businessman.

“*WHO IS GOING TO PAY THIS?*” he shouted, waving the bill in my face, his voice rising to a shriek: “*WHO IS GOING TO PAY FOR THE ALCOHOL, FOR THE MUSICAL ENTERTAINMENT, FOR THE SEX?*”—and I recognized, in his vocal histrionics, the voice of Sgt. Major Kang in the midst of a shrieking tirade while disciplining a Korean soldier back at Battalion Headquarters.

While all this was occurring, the street thug removed a switchblade from his pocket and began methodically flicking it open—the razor-sharp, six-inch steel blade springing open and slicing past my face, as he rhythmically folded it shut and flicked it open again.

I fought to keep my voice level and, with a very dry mouth, addressed the businessman.

It was a great pity, I told him, that he’d gone to such lengths to stage this charade because it was going to get him exactly nothing. I only had enough money for the boots, as I’d

already explained. Hadn't he been listening? And he wasn't even going to get that. "*Mee-uh-hum-nee-dah!*" ("Sorry about that!") This was *his* party and *he* could pay for it!

"*YOU HAD DRINKS!*" shrieked the businessman, now completely livid. "*YOU HAD SEX! MULTIPLE WITNESSES WILL ATTEST TO THIS! YOU THINK YOU CAN SIMPLY WALK INTO KOREAN ESTABLISHMENT AND HELP YOURSELF WITHOUT PAYING? THERE ARE LAWS! THE POLICE WILL BE SUMMONED! DO YOU EVEN HAVE A SINGLE PIECE OF I.D.—SUCH AS A PX CARD—THAT WILL GUARANTEE YOUR REPAYMENT OF THIS ENORMOUS SUM?*"

And there it was: They wanted my PX card, access to a trove of modern American appliances, unavailable to Korean nationals and thus infinitely valuable on the black market. My PX card, at the moment, was sitting in my wallet in the pocket of my coat not ten feet away.

At the same time, the switchblade, still slicing past my face, was coming perceptibly closer as its owner leaned in and flicked it out—the knifepoint suddenly pricking my nearside cheekbone. I could smell his foul breath, and I batted his arm away and shoved him hard. We leapt to our feet, he with his arm drawn back, knife clenched in his hand, ready to thrust, the businessman frantically interposing himself between us.

"*YOU WANT THE POLICE? IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT? YOU WANT THE POLICE TO BE SUMMONED TO TAKE YOU TO JAIL?*"—the Korean businessman shouting this over his shoulder while he struggled to control his ally, the street thug, the latter's knife hand poised, his lips drawn back in a snarl, ready to fight.

"*LET'S GET THE FUCKING POLICE!*" I said. "*LET'S GET THE POLICE HERE, RIGHT FUCKING NOW!*"

The businessman gripped his confederate and, issuing a torrent of rapid Korean at him, ordered him out of the room—the latter resisting at first, then slouching balefully through the door.

My only thought was that the odds were now finally in my favor, and I whirled to the back of the room, where I grabbed my coat and began pulling it on. The next moment, I found myself thrown bodily against the wall as the businessman leapt on my back, seized me around the neck, and began yelling at the top of his voice.

I had a moment of wild, panicking claustrophobia, trapped in the folds of my coat and unable to move. I spun back toward front of the room, bent at the waist, and hurled the businessman to the floor—he was high up on my back, and he went down like a ton of bricks, headfirst, onto the circular table, taking my coat with him. My arms were suddenly free, I was in the flow, moving now, just as the street thug came racing back through the doorway, digging in his pocket for his switchblade—and I was glad to see him. I'd been a wrestler in high school and college, and here was my enemy running at me with one hand jammed in his pocket.

I met him, clamping his hand inside his pocket and pivoting—and using his momentum, ran him right through the wall, employing his head as a battering ram. We went straight through the barrier of rice paper and lath, landing in the next room in an explosion of dust and wall particles, both of us prone, me on top. Kneeling up, I seized him by the hair with my left hand, yanked his head back, and hit him ten or twelve times on the hinge of his jaw at pointblank range, as hard as I could.

When I stopped, his jaw was dislocated, hanging to the

left, and his eyes were jerking in his head. The sudden silence was broken by a scrabbling sound, and I looked down to discover his right hand in his pocket, still digging for the switchblade—at which point I completely lost it and attempted to break his arm. In the midst of this effort, his eyes rolled up and he lost consciousness.

It suddenly flashed on me that my other enemy was unaccounted for—might, in fact, be standing right behind me—and I whirled again, my heart in my throat. No sign of the businessman (it felt like I'd been in this adjoining room for half an hour), and I cursed myself for this lapse of attention.

Springing to my feet, I raced out the door and back into the original room, and there halted. The businessman lay atop the broken circular table, his head and neck twisted at an unnatural angle, eyes closed, breathing stertorously. I took an extra moment to absorb this—standing before a tableau of mayhem, the room completely wrecked, a big hole in the wall, the body of the businessman splayed out against the broken table—as panic began to build in my chest. I recalled the dictum about committing a crime outside Army jurisdiction and being confined in a one-room cell in a Korean jail, eating fish heads. Reaching down, I yanked my coat from under the body of the businessman and fled.

Racing down the hall, I found the stairs and made the turn, leaping headlong down the steps, taking three at a time—only to be brought up short as the staircase suddenly ended in a truncated hallway. All wrong. Had I missed a turning? I tore back up the stairs to the scene of the crime, found another stairway that led to a median hallway below, breathless now, turning corners I had no memory of, plunging into empty rooms—trapped in the labyrinth of the geisha house

and unable to find my way out.

When I finally reached the lobby, I fought to get my breathing under control and took stock: *No police sirens as yet. Get my shoes on . . . get out of this place . . . get somewhere far away.* I plunged into the anteroom where I'd removed my shoes and found—nothing. No shoes in evidence, no closet in sight. I darted back into the lobby and began searching its environs. Nothing behind the reception desk.

“*WHERE ARE MY SHOES?*” I bellowed—and another geisha girl peeked in from the hallway. She glanced at me and hesitated, then sprinted into the lobby, opening a hidden closet as she flew by, disappearing through another doorway. I strode to the closet, grabbed my loafers, and jammed my feet into them, noting the businessman's black dress shoes sitting primly beside my own—and the sight of them threw me into a fury. I grabbed his shoes and hurled them through the windows of the lobby, glass breaking in all directions as I emptied the closet of its footwear, sending them through every available first-floor window.

Out the front door, with its red plastic dragon, glancing into the street, which was completely empty—not a car or taxi visible in this slum neighborhood—and I started running, sprinting three or four blocks before I finally encountered signs of urban life. I flagged a taxi, jumped in the back, and, trying hard to control my hoarse, ragged breathing (nothing unusual here, just an American out for a casual stroll), gave directions for the USO Club.

Alighting at the USO, I made my way upstairs to the room I'd been assigned (the USO provided free lodgings to American servicemen), threw my clothes and toothbrush into a bag, and headed for the door. Trying to control my racing heart and

slow myself down, I glanced into the newly furnished music room on my way to the front desk. There, lying prominently on one of the stereo speakers, was the just-released *Woodstock* album, the cover displaying longhaired young people in pastoral scenes of idyllic serenity.

On the outskirts of Seoul, I got lucky and hooked a ride with a deuce-and-a-half heading back to the DMZ. I changed into my fatigues and combat boots in the back of the truck, balling up my civilian clothes and stuffing them into the bag—recalling, as I did, the frightened face of the geisha girl who had peeked out at me in the lobby.

Jesus Christ, I thought, what a horrible place. Everybody in there was terrified.

It didn't occur to me until much later that she might have been frightened of me.

By midweek, the knife-blade slice on my cheek had gotten infected, and I went to see Rothstein in the Battalion Dispensary.

"How'd this happen?" he asked me, and listened without comment while I told him the story, nodding briefly as I swore him to secrecy.

Steve cleaned out the cut, put a couple stitches in it, and gave me a tetanus shot.

Two days later, I was finishing my overnight shift at the Tactical Operations Center when I saw my buddy from the Recon Platoon. He was saddling up in the TOC bunker, preparatory to rolling into the DMZ on a "First Light" patrol.

"Hey, man," he said. "You score you some of them Frye boots when you were down in Seoul?"

"No, man," I told him. "Never was able to find that street market."