



*Hearts of the
Morning
Calm*

Galen Kindely



HEARTS OF THE MORNING CALM



GALEN KINDLEY



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In memory of my mother

Lois Kindley

who loved to read and write,
and who lovingly passed those gifts to me.

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If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw
thy breath in pain
To tell my story.

William Shakespeare
Hamlet, Act V, Scene 2

CHAPTER 1

His sole remaining photograph had aged gracefully. The left edge was slightly tattered. A long-ago corner-crease was barely perceptible. The once-white border was only now turning a mature shade of ivory. Even the old colors remained — New England-autumn bright. Seemingly, the remarkable snapshot was inoculated against the bacteria of time and touch.

Saunders held the picture with both hands, and again marveled at the stunning landscape. In the background, dark saw-toothed mountain-tops sliced sharply across a cloudless horizon. Closer in, afternoon sunlight reflected from a wide river in a thousand silver sparkles. The bright water flowed slowly across the paper, finally disappearing through a narrow gap in rocky, precipitous cliffs. In the left foreground, two gigantic statues were, like the lost city of Petra, carved into the reddish-brown rock of a vertical cliff face.

The panoramic scope, nature's magnificent touches and man's bold artwork were a breathtaking display. Even so, the picture would never be considered a landscape. A single, powerful presence made it an accidental portrait.

At the far left stood an apparently reluctant unintended subject—a young Asian woman. Without effort, she muted and subdued her dramatic surroundings. A simple white blouse accentuated her short black hair. Faded tapered jeans emphasized her long legs. There was a supple, almost athletic look about her. She was attractive, but not striking, yet she was absolutely compelling.

Saunders knew the woman's commanding presence stemmed from her character. She possessed in full measure the gifts of strength, grace and compassion. They radiated from her like powerful searchlights, guiding, comforting, redeeming.

Leaning his considerable bulk toward the large bedroom window, he squinted and adjusted his bifocals. Gray December twilight seeped through the rain-streaked glass. Tilting the photo to catch the diluted light, he tried again to capture the woman, to grasp her elusive multi-

stream essence, as on a hundred previous occasions. She faced the photographer, chin raised, head tilted, leaning against a metal railing, the sparkling river hundreds of feet below. In contrast to the nonchalant pose, her earnest expression was almost humorous. Saunders shook his head in warm bemusement—no matter time or distance, she remained what she was, very much like her nurturing Asia, a wonderful, contradictory enigma, an elegant, intricate, delicate paradox.

With a rueful half-smile, he turned the photograph over. On the back was a promise, its faded characters carefully and methodically doled out by a steady hand. It was a melancholy pledge, sufficient to bind a wound but not stay the bleeding. Feeling like an emotional Peeping Tom, he was nonetheless compelled to read the words. The simple phrases brought her to life, illuminated her humanity and, without fail, moved him. They'd never met, but he'd all too easily fallen under her spell. Secretly, he wished the pledge were for him.

Remember my promise—
I will hold you in my heart, always.
You will never be far from me.
We will be together.

Y.

He thought the message was oddly mixed. The inscription didn't close with "love," but love was clearly present. The promise held strong commitment and connectivity, but hauntingly—in absentia. Most interesting was the final, equivocally clear sentence. Did it mean "together" in some future reality, or was it tied to the preceding phrase, and meant metaphorically? No one would ever know.

Saunders gazed wistfully across his sick friend's bed and through the window at the storm-enraged breakers and the coastal gloom.

"It's really amazing. We've looked at her, thought about her, talked about her, every day for months. But, even after all that, the more I focus on her, think I know her, the more she becomes..." He hesitated, searching for a word, finally settling on, "...obscure."

"Yeah, she..." A retching cough strangled Wilson's sentence, forcing him partially upright. The spasm passed. Grimacing, he eased back against the pillows. "She was like that," he finished weakly.

Saunders nodded, leaned forward and returned the picture to the frail man, who placed it on the nightstand between the water glass and the pill jars. The wind-driven rain tapped louder against the cold single-pane window. In defiance, the fire popped twice; the wet wood sizzled. The scent of burning pine wandered about the room. The old Oregon coast house, like most of its day, was built with a fireplace in each bedroom. When the December rains sprinted in, cold and unrelenting, from

their anonymous northern Pacific birthplace, a fire's warmth soothed primal fears, and the firelight dispatched the demons.

Saunders picked up a woolen afghan from the scuffed oak floor, shook it open and draped it across his knees. Settling back in the wicker chair, he looked briefly at a small faded print of a Parisian street corner hanging above Wilson's brass-frame bed. He noted absently that the glass was chipped and the plain wooden frame rather nicked and in need of replacement. Though it was one of Wilson's most valued possessions, its repair, like most chores in his recent life, would probably go uncompleted. Finishing the novel had been an exhausting trial. He had little energy — or now, time — for extras.

"So. Can you believe it's done?" Saunders asked, affectionately fingering the manuscript in his lap.

Wilson rolled his head listlessly toward the rain-streaked window-pane, looked out at a distorted, disturbed ocean, but didn't respond.

Saunders rubbed his chin and struggled with how to broach the next subject. They had covered this tender ground before. Wilson, the final authority on story line, consistently objected. Saunders, the vigilant editor, called it "full-circle information" and believed it was material readers would want. If Wilson could be persuaded, the novel could still be modified without postponing publication.

"Uh, Keith?" Leaning toward the bed, he tapped the manuscript with two fingers. "Look-it, just one thing. We oughta rethink the Korean Air Lines stuff." He hesitated, then added softly, "You know, the double-oh-seven incident."

"Christ, Bill, not again." Wilson looked wearily at the ceiling. "I'm a sick man here. How 'bout giving me a little peace on this, huh?"

"Hey, I'm just trying to improve it, make it better. I've got a...you know...a feel for this kinda thing. I do it for a living. It's why I get paid, remember?"

Wilson closed his eyes and grunted.

Undeterred, Saunders continued. "Listen, I just think it'd give the readers closure. I guarantee they're going to want to know what happened to her. To him. It just closes the loop, that's all."

"No." Wilson raised an emaciated hand, the skin almost translucent. "Why can't you get this? It's fiction...or mostly fiction." He picked up the photograph and, holding it toward Saunders, continued in a subdued, almost regretful tone. "I just used her as an example, a model. It's all made up, all, uh, make-believe. The people in there don't exist, not then...and certainly not now." He looked at the picture briefly, then placed it on the blanket near his side.

"Well, readers won't think so."

"Tough. Readers can think what the hell they want. It's my last book, and it's fiction. Period. Besides, that other stuff ain't germane! It hap-

pened years later, and's got nothin' to do with the story. And most important? Bill? You listening? Uh? Most important? I don't know the details. I don't want to know the details. I just plain don't want to think about it! So...no. Let it go."

Saunders sank back in his chair but looked up in time to catch Wilson's wicked smile.

"The only way you'll include KAL double-oh-seven is over my dead body." Wilson laughed loudly. The sound was bitterly sarcastic and surprisingly robust in the small, dim bedroom.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that. Besides, you approve all the changes."

"Yeah? Well, I don't approve this one...again, and hopefully for the last time." Wilson pulled the blankets to his neck. "Always so goddamn cold anymore."

The rain slackened. The fire waned. The darkness intensified. The white ceramic table lamp, always on in Wilson's near-sleepless world, cast an unhealthy yellow glow. In the downstairs hallway, an antique wall clock slowly chimed five times, the sound muffled and weak. Saunders shifted his weight and placed both feet on the floor. The tan wicker chair squeaked loudly.

"You gotta go?"

"No." Saunders looked up quickly, ashamed he'd been thinking of an excuse to leave. He cleared his throat and said, a little too emphatically, "Not at all. You need something?"

Wilson answered softly, "Yeah, can you read me some? Just a little."

"Sure, Keith, happy to." He pause and smiled. "I'm in love with her, too. What part you want to hear?"

Wilson turned toward the window. The world was dissolving, sharp images fading to soft edges; only the rain was audible. A silent minute passed, then two. Saunders had seen these lapses before, though they were now more frequent, and their duration longer.

Finally, his voice weak from disease and encumbered with distant joy, Wilson said, "The front. Start at the beginning." Pausing, he closed his eyes. "The world was...new then, brighter, unspoiled. Things seemed...possible. The future wasn't the past. Start at the beginning."

Saunders ran his hand across the manuscript. Melancholy tried to press against him, but he pushed it aside. Wilson was correct. The beginning was bright. Possibility was reality. Opening the maroon cover, he turned to Chapter One, smiled at what he knew was there, and began to read.

CHAPTER 2

The wide Seoul sidewalk teemed with Koreans who, like their emerging country, were a contradictory composite of the modern, the traditional, and the future. Businessmen in dark Western suits, women in silk Eastern dresses and teenagers in plaid-and-gray school uniforms jostled, bumped and pushed noisily past me as if I weren't there. A rush of rapid sing-song Asian words swirled through the bright October afternoon, falling in an incomprehensible jangle on my Western ear. Blond, a foot taller than the surrounding crowd and dressed in jeans and a denim shirt, I felt the dull sting of exclusion, as if I were a kind of cultural trespasser, unbidden, unwanted but impassively tolerated.

At the corner, a traffic light changed from green to yellow, slowing the current. The fickle light changed to red, and our babbling stream sloshed to a moving stop, pooling restlessly along the curb.

The jammed street was alive with overloaded buses, buzz-saw-noisy motorbikes and Asia's signature vehicle, the tiny, smoke-generating three-passenger taxi. Horns blared and engines revved as the vehicles edged forward, seeking even the smallest positioning advantage for the anticipated getaway.

Their restraining red light changed to green, and the drivers applied full throttle. En masse, the vehicles burst away from the intersection, leaving a peaceful ripple of decrescendo noise and a thin curtain of acrid, hazy blue smoke. However, like the false tranquility of no-man's-land, it was a deceitful serenity. Materializing from nowhere, a flash of equally impatient taxis, motorbikes and buses ripped loudly past in the opposite direction.

Glad to be afoot, I shook my head and grinned, bemused by the always aggressive, rarely rational Asian drivers, who were forever in a passionate rush to reach the next stoplight.

Through the blurry maelstrom of weaving traffic, I glanced toward the far corner, where a surprising remnant of old Seoul caught my attention. A single-story, Oriental-style wooden building stood in David-and-Goliath contrast to the surrounding glass-and-steel skyscrapers. The

building's gray tile roof swooped down and away from a peaked ridge to end gracefully in four upturned corners. Softball-sized green dragons' heads snarled from beneath white overhanging eaves. A small arched doorway and a pool-table-sized display window occupied almost all the red building's front.

A traditional Asian structure in 1978 Seoul seemed an impossible anachronism. Yet, there it was, a lost ghost from a forgotten century, standing with grace and patience next to its younger, bigger, flashier cousins. I smiled at the architectural counterpoint and wondered what the little building housed, and what miracle had allowed it to escape the city's Shermanesque march to the Sea of Modernization.

Traffic squealed to a stop. The street was temporarily safe. With uncanny synchronization, the surrounding river of Asian faces surged into the striped crosswalk. I, like unnoticed flotsam, was carried benignly along across the intersection and closer to the mysterious structure.

I drifted diagonally out of the main current to stream's edge and stopped before the little building. Tilting my head, I tried to read a small sign hanging above the doorway. Impossible—just a scrambled tangle of Pick-Up-Sticks letters and jumbled Korean symbols that made no sense. I moved to the window and, in typical bold American fashion, peered inquisitively through, unconcerned about decorum or the privacy of secrets.

I discovered muted lighting, accent mirrors tastefully hung on mahogany walls and, on three of four sides, polished glass counters holding pearl, gold and silver. The enigmatic little building was a jewelry shop.

I leaned forward, cupped my hands against the glass and looked more closely. Arranged tastefully in the display window were men's and women's watches, diamond rings, and bracelets made from Korea's famous white jade. I looked farther into the shop, across the emerald-green carpet to the small room's far wall. There, behind the counter, sat an Asian woman. She was alone, reading, totally absorbed.

I stood back from the window, surprised by an urge to step inside and browse. Hesitating, I checked my watch and sighed. Four-forty. The cusp of late. Dinner with my army friends was at five. I had little time for, and certainly no interest in, jewelry. I shook my head in self-questioning reproach—I wasn't a browser. Regaining my wits, I began to turn away.

The woman, unaware of my presence, arched her back in a long, feline stretch, all the while continuing to read. She relaxed and casually passed one hand through her short, styled hair. Pursing her lips, she turned the page, slowly, as if too rapid a movement would dislodge and scatter the words. Her movements were unpretentious, elegant and inexplicably captivating. I looked at the ground, smiled and shook my

head—perhaps just a quick look. I could, it seemed, spare five minutes after all.

I opened the door. A tiny brass bell jingled. The woman looked up, expressionless. Recognizing a customer, she placed her book on the counter, one finger marking her place, and stood. With her free hand, she smoothed the bottom of her navy blue jacket, assuring it fell neatly over her light-gray pleated skirt.

I approached her, noticing she was taller and thinner than the Korean bargirls I knew—only three or four inches shorter than my five-eleven. There was the vague impression of supple athleticism about her. Her face was narrower, and her complexion decidedly less ruddy than that of the saloon waitresses. Her chin was almost pointed, and she had just a trace of the classic Korean pug nose. She tilted her head slightly and seemed for a moment to smile, but as I got closer, I recognized the illusion. Her upper lip formed the top half of an elongated heart shape and, like the geometric French curve it mimicked, turned the corners of her mouth slightly upward in a perfect Mona Lisa taper.

I reached the counter and concluded my very male assessment. She was appealing, almost attractive, but not beautiful. Beauty was the sole province of Western women, the much desired “round-eyes.” The highest praise allocated Asian women was “attractive.”

Before I could pronounce further judgments, I met her gaze. Without warning, I was ensnared.

Her eyes were, of course, dark, but only as background. Shining through their darkness, they were dynamically alight, aglow with a fierce, steady fire that illuminated a glimpse of her power, intensity and intuition. She seemed to use her eyes like scientific instruments, tools to dissect, examine and evaluate. I sensed my thoughts—and secrets—were being methodically dredged up and dispassionately assessed.

But there was more, and like Asia, it was subtle—a second level of meaning, a divergent but parallel existence. Asian subtlety never dealt with an event but rather with what the event represented. Her eyes personified this subtlety, and just beneath the ferocity and flames smoldered a hint of sequestered kindness and guarded tenderness.

The net effect was a confusing, conflicting, at-odds set of visual clues. Was she the disinterested scientific examiner, or the understanding and soft comforter? Perhaps she was capable of the impossible—critical compassion. In either case, she suddenly seemed more than just another Korean woman.

I remained transfixed, my assessments and judgments about her surface characteristics forgotten. She continued to watch me with exclusive intensity. The sensation was disturbing.

I cleared my throat, tugged awkwardly at my shirt collar and, with effort, broke eye contact. Still, I felt each of her unasked questions: Who

was I? Where was I from? Why had I interrupted? Was I capable of coherent communication, or limited to simple noises and basic gestures?

The silence and my discomfort grew proportionally. Normally glib, I was surprised to find my vault of smooth opening lines empty. She'd spun me off-kilter. Disoriented, I glanced rapidly about for an anchor and spotted the thin book lying innocently between us, her finger at the spot of interruption. A bad idea struck me; naturally, I lunged for it.

"You can't read that," I blurted.

She continued to watch me without comment.

"It's English," I added in unsolicited explanation, as if the great unwashed of Asia were incapable of mastering "The International Language."

This approach was classic military humor—rough-and-tumble, sarcastic, and delivered without the important introductory "small talk" or other obligatory Asian social courtesies. Under duress, I'd displayed my best cultural ignorance, laced up my Army boots and trampled directly over her Korean sensitivities.

The woman, however, appeared unfazed, and I wondered if she'd understood what I'd said.

I tried a smile. Smiling was readily understandable, no matter the culture. She didn't smile in return, so I tried to simplify my insult.

"You speakee English?" I asked slowly in a slightly raised voice, the way Americans do when addressing foreigners.

She sighed wearily, sagged for just a moment, then canted her face upward—a posture she would later wonderfully describe as "playing high-nose."

"Yes, I can read the book, and I 'speakee' English. Do you?" Her confident tone was lightly indignant but laced with indulgent humor.

"Oh." I felt the warm blush of red cheeks but, firmly seated in a deck chair on the *Titanic*, pressed on.

"Well, then, prove it. Read a little...and let's just have me choose the passage," I said brightly, adding the insult of implied dishonesty to my growing list of Western blunders.

Without invitation, I took the thin red book from beneath her hand. She raised an eyebrow. I flipped randomly through the pages and selected a short passage. I turned the book toward her and tapped the chosen text, indicating she controlled the metaphoric dice.

Accepting the book, she lowered it to the counter with an expression of bemused disbelief. She shifted her weight to one foot and tilted her head. Apparently, this was a new game. Her manner suggested she was slowly fingering those dice. I could almost hear the ivory clicking and clacking as they rolled over one another within the boundary of her hand. Clearly, she was considering the odds, weighing risk versus return, deciding whether to pass or play.

Suddenly, she lifted the book, squinted briefly in concentration and began to read. She did so with a charmingly smooth, lilting cadence. Her diction was almost too good – pure textbook, none of the easy melting of word upon word she would eventually call “conversational English.” She read, of course, without error.

Laertes, was your father dear to you?
Or, are you like the painting of a sorrow,
A face without a heart?
Why ask you this?
Not that I think you did not love your father,
But that I know love is begun by time,
And that I see, in passages of proof,
Time weakens the spark and fire of it.

She paused but didn’t look away from the text. Her face clouded slightly as she appeared to consider the next sentence. After a moment, she began again, slowly this time, as if emotionally measuring the words.

There lives within the very flame of love,
A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it.

She lowered the book and looked up. Her head seemed to move in motor-drive photography freeze-frames, each picture sequentially different than the one preceding. Her gaze had lost its curious-examiner quality. Apparently, she, too, was moved by the words’ passion and touched by their timeless and universal power.

Free from the constraint of her gaze, I recovered first, cleared my throat and spoke, breaking the spell.

“Uh, okay. Not bad. Not bad. Lucky guess, probably.” I grinned sheepishly, thinking she surely could not miss my obvious appeal and charm.

Indeed, the woman seemed to refocus and return to the small shop, though she neither smiled nor gave any sign she’d been charmed. Yet, despite my cultural stumbles and her demeanor, I sensed she wasn’t angry or insulted.

She stooped slightly, bending gracefully at the knees. Reaching below the counter, she rummaged about in what sounded like a sack or wrapping paper. Standing, she produced a second book, this one much thicker than the first. She opened the cover. The print was in Hangul, the written script of Korea. The typeface was large, surrounding illustrations of children, dogs and cats. It looked like a child’s elementary reader of the “Dick and Jane” variety.

"This book is a gift for my small sister. She would, I think, uh...permit? Yes? Permit you to see this." She handed me the book and, at last, smiled. "So, now it is your opportunity to read the passage, yes? You," she conceded, pointedly twisting her embedded rapier, "may also choose *this* passage." In afterthought, casually: "With a loud voice, please." Pausing, she shook her head. "Loud voice is not correct. What is the phrase?"

"Uh, I think you mean 'out loud.' Actually, 'aloud' is best, but 'out loud' is, uh, normal."

"Yes, aloud, please."

I noted, with brief interest, she had chosen "best."

With a satisfied smile, she leaned back against the wall, folded her arms near her waist and, with head tilted, regarded me expectantly.

Touché. Payback. I'm sure she didn't know the English slang, but clearly she knew the universal concept.

I opened the book, hesitated and, looking down as if to read, bluffed, dredging up one of my few memorized Shakespearean quotation fragments. I began loudly, with bravado, as would an unskilled Victorian actor, then diminished quickly.

"NOW is the winter of our discontent made glorious spring by-eeee...sunshine," I blurted, laughing, the correct quotation lost. The woman joined me, surrendering at last to laughter.

"This is not correct," she exclaimed, playfully snatching the book. "This is the children's book." She waved it in the air before my nose.

"Are you sure?" I sparred. We shared more laughter—crisp, clean and connected, with no Eastern or Western border.

"Of coors I am sure." Her emphasis was on *sure*, and *course* was charmingly pronounced as if it were the Rocky Mountain beer.

"Also, uh, it is 'glorious summer,' not 'spring,'" she corrected gently.

"Spring. Summer. Close enough for this test."

"Well, perhaps it is you need the more study and less examination," she suggested with an easy smile.

"Study. Right. I'll start this evening. But I need a teacher. Maybe you're available?"

The question was not intended to be suggestive. To my Western ear it sounded fine, fitting nicely in the flow of give-and-take just where it should. This was how it would have developed at Sears or K-Mart back home in Alabama.

However, in a small shop in the heart of downtown Seoul, Korea, the effect was absolutely different. The idea ricocheted sharply off her Asian heritage. Her mood darkened. She withdrew. The surprising warmth between us cooled.

"Well, there are many fine language tutors for this kind of thing. You will identify one without difficulty."

The entry bell rang brightly. A Korean couple entered the shop. Seeing me, they stopped abruptly and, demonstrating that least engaging of Asian characteristics, stared.

I nodded.

They stared.

Looking back to the woman, I noticed she seemed ill-at-ease, so suddenly and unexpectedly trapped between two worlds.

"Sir, is there something I can show you?" she asked. Her voice had lost its lilting cadence; the question was mechanically delivered as if scripted and awkwardly read.

"Well, uh, actually, no. I just happened in and, well..." I stalled, stymied by the intruding, gawking couple. "Perhaps I could just look around some?"

The woman bowed slightly. "Very well." After a moment's uncomfortable hesitation, she turned and walked to the couple.

I watched the trio with interest. There was general bowing, much smiling, several handshakes, more bows and an extended exchange of what I gathered were pleasantries. Finally, the man pointed to an article of jewelry, and a three-way discussion began in earnest.

Watching this ritual, I concluded these greeting protocols were routine Asian courtesies and conventions I'd overlooked. However, displaying a gracious good nature, the woman had excused my Western manners. She seemed to understand my handicap and the game at work between us. In the shop's quiet emptiness, she had accepted the dice and played along.

But players fold, games end. More customers arrived. My five minutes had long since lapsed. She could no longer gamble. I could no longer remain.

The woman returned and, with the briefest of bows, stood directly before me, hands clasped gracefully at her waist. Her previous familiarity remained in hiding. Her eyes were neutral. She was unreadable and inscrutably Asian.

"Soooo...I better go."

She remained silent and immobile.

Occasionally, life moves us to places of its choice without permission or explanation. For reasons I would never understand, I fumbled in my wallet and heard myself say, "But, uh, take my card." I shrugged. "It's got my phone number. I live on the American Army base at Yongsan. Perhaps we could, uh, talk sometime? Who knows, you may even decide to become my tutor."

I tried another winning smile. No reaction. I started to hold the card out but intuition cautioned discretion. The rules were different in Asia. I placed my card on the counter. The woman watched, but made no acknowledging comment or gesture.

I hesitated, unsure what to say or do. After a moment, instinct urged I leave. This had been fun, but we were finished. I smiled, nodded and left the shop.

Seoul's metropolitan skyline blocked most of the late October sunlight. To the west, dark clouds formed over the port city of Inchon. The afternoon had cooled considerably as it yielded to the deepening city shadows and the promise of rain. I shivered, zipped my jacket and, joining a thinner stream of passersby, walked about a quarter-mile to the perpetually bustling, open-air Seoul City Farmer's Market. Opposite the market was a taxi stand where, surprisingly, there was no waiting line.

My tiny beige cab scurried through the capital city's noisy and frenetic traffic to the Naija Hotel, where I met fellow army pilots for drinks and dinner. Following dessert, we enjoyed an old Abbott and Costello movie in the hotel's small theater. After the movie—and several night-caps—exaggerated tales of aviation derring-do and our growing laughter echoed about the hotel's bar. At eleven-thirty, with some gentle management prompting, we blearily and noisily agreed to leave.

I taxied the fifteen minutes across town toward my quarters on Yongsan. The little cab's threadbare windshield wipers scraped left and right in a losing battle to clear the glass of rain. Watching the hypnotic pattern, I fell into a contented stupor; unaware of the gathering forces, unsuspecting of what they would bring and unprepared for their lasting impact. Sadly ignorant but happily exhausted, it was a simple matter for the combined effects of fatigue, alcohol, camaraderie and laughter to supplant dim and fading memories of a tall, anonymous Asian woman with remarkable eyes.

By the morning, I had forgotten her entirely.

CHAPTER 3

Korea, "The Hermit Kingdom," lies quietly between the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan. The tiny nation is six hundred ancient miles of beautifully rugged mountainous peninsula. Across the Yellow Sea to the west lies China; to the north Manchuria, and to the east—but curling maliciously southwest toward Korea—lurks Japan.

Through the centuries, the Japanese and Koreans developed many blood-soaked animosities, the most recent concluding in 1945. At the close of World War II, the Allies evicted Japanese military forces from the peninsula. The expulsion ended a brutal thirty-five-year occupation marked by cruel subjugation of the Korean culture and unrelenting expropriation of Korean natural resources. Japan's departure also left Korea without a functioning government.

As a first step toward self-determination, the Allies politically divided Korea at its geographic midpoint. The Soviets administered post-war recovery plans north of the thirty-eighth parallel; America was responsible for reconstruction to the south. The Allied plan envisioned a nationwide election to establish a new government. However, due to Soviet intransigence, a national referendum was not conducted. As a result, rather than a unified country emerging, two antagonistic and philosophically divergent nations arose side-by-side, communist North and democratic South Korea.

In June 1950, North Korean forces crossed the thirty-eighth parallel and attacked the south, intending to force unification under communist ideology. South Korea resisted and sought United Nations assistance. The UN provided combat forces from sixteen countries, the largest proportion American. A bitter three-year war ensued.

In July 1953 an armistice was signed, initiating an equally bitter twenty-five-year peace. To help maintain the tense and tenuous cease-fire, American forces remained in Korea.

In the summer of 1978, I was assigned to Korea and Headquarters, Eighth US Army, as a helicopter instructor pilot and aviation staff officer. Eighth Army Headquarters was located on Yongsan compound, a major

military installation. Fenced and guarded, Yongsan's twenty square miles of hills, trees, office buildings and living quarters lay adjacent to Itaewon (E-tay-wahn) District, a busy shopping area catering to American soldiers.

The command's Aviation Office, in which I worked, was on the first floor of a three-story brick building. I shared aviation duties and responsibilities with my mentor and fellow instructor pilot Hugh Stevens. Hugh was my senior in military service by fifteen years and, at forty-seven, about twenty years my elder. He brought credibility, experience and professionalism to the office. To me, he brought friendship and humorously sarcastic counsel.



It was a late afternoon, at least two weeks after my long-forgotten jewelry shop encounter. I stood before a large plastic-covered wall map of Korea marked with aviation hazards and no-fly zones. I was inserting color-coded stickpins at various hazard points when the phone, which seemed to ring incessantly, rang again. I ignored it, hoping Hugh would answer, which, after needlessly clearing his throat, he did. I half-turned toward him and grinned.

"Eighth Army Aviation, Chief Warrant Officer Stevens." Looking vacantly at the two lockers opposite our desks, Hugh paused to listen, then said, "Uh, yeah, it is." Another, shorter pause. "You bet he is, just a second." Placing the mouthpiece against his shoulder, he looked across the top of his reading glasses. "Ohhhhh, Jaaaa-son?"

"Yes, Hugh?"

"Guess what?"

"Wouldn't even try."

"Well, it's for you, Sport. A woman."

"Christ, it's not Spiderwoman is it?"

"Nope, a Miss Lee. Now, *there's* a surprise."

Lee is a common Korean surname, something like the Asian version of Jones. Inevitably, all Korean women were known as "Miss Lee" to the culturally sensitive GIs.

I shrugged. "Who's Miss Lee?"

"How do I know? Your latest bimbo?"

I frowned but didn't move. After a moment, Hugh nodded impatiently toward my phone. Raising a calming hand, I maneuvered around the file cabinets to my desk and lifted the receiver.

"Warrant Officer Fitzgerald."

"Warrant Officer Fitzgerald? This is the same as..." She paused before continuing robotically, as if reading in dim light. "Chief Warrant Officer Jason Fitzgerald. Eighth United States Army. Instructor pilot. Yes?"

"Uh, yeah, close enough." Her appended *yes* seemed familiar.

"Very well. Good afternoon, I am Miss Lee."

I rolled my eyes. I didn't know a Miss Lee—I knew a *thousand* Miss Lees. I looked up, unfocused, toward the small room's only window and repeated slowly as if greatly puzzled, "Miss Lee?"

"Yes. From the jewelry shop. Do you recall?"

Still lost, I didn't immediately respond. A small, embarrassed laugh seeped down the phone line.

"Oh, you do not recall." A playful, disappointed pout surrounded her words.

I smiled, noting her vaguely odd but delightful choice of *recall* as opposed to *remember*. This certainly wasn't my favorite bar hostess, Spiderwoman. Her vocabulary was comprised almost entirely of vulgar phrases linked with an occasional conjunction.

"Miss Lee?" I offered blankly. Then, it struck me. "Oh, Miss Lee! Yeah, yeah, right. Of course. *That* Miss Lee. From the jewelry shop. Yeah. Sure, I remember. You bet. Well, uh...hi! How are ya? This is a nice surprise. It's good to hear from you."

It was the woman with the remarkable eyes. I sat on the edge of my desk and smiled furtively at Hugh, who, taking in the episode, shook his head in playful disgust.

I was on the verge of more gratuitous drivel when Miss Lee came directly to the point.

"I am shopping near your, uh, home. Would you enjoy to meet?"

There again was that engaging nonstandard syntax. Not quite correct, not quite flawed, just enticingly different, almost exotic.

Nudged off-balance by her direct, no-nonsense approach, I stumbled. "Uh, yeah, sure, of course. When? And where?"

"Do you know the Heavenly Gate Hotel? In the Itaewon District?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Very well. In that coffee shop at five o'clock. You can do this, yes?"

"Absolutely." Then, laughing, I mimicked, "Absolutely, I can do this. Heavenly Gate Hotel coffee shop. At five. I'll be there."

"Very well. Goodbye."

"Okay, great! Bye," I added to a buzzing phone line. Miss Lee was apparently not enamored of idle phone chat.

"So. Jason." Hugh uncrossed long runner's legs, smoothed his close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and leaned back in his swivel chair. He removed his reading glasses and studied them intently. "Miss Lee? Not original, but, methinks, new." He flicked an imaginary piece of lint from his fatigue pants, looked up at me with feigned hurt and added, "You, young lad, are holding out on me."

"Relax, Hugh, she's just a salesgirl I met downtown, nothing to get excited about, nothing to tell."

"Uh-huh. I see." He pulled his chair toward the desk, slipped on his glasses and looked down at an array of folders with a knowing, regretful smirk.

Unable to ignore his know-it-all attitude, I ventured, "Trust me, Hugh, this is all very innocent. I barely know the woman."

"Okay."

"Really!"

"Okay. Fine. Great. I believe you."

He picked up a pen and scribbled something on the top right corner of a document. Expressionless, he appeared to have no additional comment. However, as I walked back toward the map, he volunteered distractedly, "And with any luck, that's the way it'll stay."



After leaving the office, I hurried the two blocks to my living quarters, dressed in civilian clothes and started toward Yongsan's main gate and beyond, to Itaewon's shopping area and The Heavenly Gate Hotel. With summer gone, the subtle dry-leaf aroma unique to fall was in the afternoon air. The day's last warmth was draining away, encouraged in its retreat by the shadows of Yongsan's taller buildings. A southern breeze hinted at a cool evening. I slipped into my blue cotton jacket and increased my pace.

The Korean gate guard smiled and waved through the smeared window of his two-person guard hut. I returned his greeting, passed through the gate and turned right. The wind was noticeably stronger, and I zipped my jacket. I wondered if we'd experience a classically frigid Korean winter and grinned at the GI's gift for creating disrespectful word-play like "The Frozen Chosun." Frozen was clear enough, but "Chosun"? I guessed it was another name for the GIs "chosen" to be in Korea, but why the odd spelling? I vaguely remembered it was also somehow used in terms of Korea, though it made no sense in that context.

Picking a gap in the traffic between a passing overloaded bus and an oncoming set of speeding taxis, I jogged across Itaewon's main boulevard. The hotel was just minutes away. I slowed a bit and tried to picture Miss Lee. If it weren't for those eyes, I'd be unable to pick her out of a crowd—Koreans looked alike to me. I couldn't recall if she was attractive—unlikely, since she was Asian—so I decided I'd probably ranked her in the generously wide "Acceptable" category.

I had no trouble remembering her sharp sense of humor. Unlike most Koreans, she was willing to playfully use it in repartee with a foreign stranger. Her English was great. I wondered where she had learned to speak and, more incredibly, read it. Acceptable looks, witty *and* educated, Miss Lee was clearly unlike the other Korean women I knew.

What, then, was she, floating undefined about the world? Was she a new species? What rules surrounded her? Uneasily, I realized there were

no rules for women like her. She was undiscovered territory and un-mapped terrain. As an aviator, I liked order and predictability. Miss Lee's unknown nature troubled me, but I brushed aside the concern with a shrug. In the end, she wouldn't be so great a mystery. Though packaged differently, she was just another Korean woman.

One of the many Itaewon street vendors approached, pulled up his coatsleeve and offered me a choice of six "Rolex" watches, each reasonably priced at "Fibe dolla, GI." I waved him away and continued walking. Reaching this Heavenly Gate didn't require passing through the biblical "eye of a needle," only a brief walk through Itaewon, almost as harrowing a task.

Beginning adjacent the Yongsan compound, Itaewon District stretched two miles eastward along both sides of a busy four-lane boulevard. Colorful and vibrant, the district was alive with around-the-clock beehive activity emanating from a crowded honeycomb of tiny shops and bars, both finely tuned to attract young American soldiers. The average age of Eighth Army enlisted men was about twenty. For most of the soldiers, Korea was their first extended time away from home and things familiar. Lonely for family or girlfriends, bored by the monotony of barracks life, the young GIs were easily lured to the exotic adventures lying just beyond the Yongsan fences.

By day, the soldiers' Itaewon escapades were lighthearted: window shopping, haggling with street vendors, hassling the prostitutes, bolting down spicy Asian food, drinking maekju – potent Korean beer – kibitzing with the shop merchants, and generally finding frivolous ways to squander time and greenbacks. In the evening, however, Itaewon's sinister nature ruled, and there was but one diversion – the GI bars. These small, dimly lit nightclubs served Americans only and featured eating, drinking and dancing wrapped in a Western format. However, the clubs' primary attraction was women. Club women were either hostesses or pillow girls, each with distinctly different rules of association.

Hostesses were club employees who spoke fractured but understandable English and dressed in a provocative Western fashion. They were young, somewhat attractive, not averse to physical contact and schooled in the most effective methods of draining a soldier's wallet. Hostesses could be surreptitiously fondled but only with strategically granted permission, usually when they were attempting to coax "just one more drink" from a sodden GI. As a condition of employment, hostesses were forbidden to form relationships with the soldiers.

However, in a convenient coincidence, the clubs were also home to the euphemistically named pillow girls, the collective title for Korean women who were either prostitutes or camp followers. Prostitutes formed the lowest of Korea's social strata. They occasionally worked from Itaewon's lesser bars but more typically walked the streets, boldly

soliciting clients and charging free-market rates. They normally spoke only enough English to cover the essentials of cost, time, location and nature of services. Their business plan called for volume and turnover; relationships were measured in minutes.

Camp followers existed one rung higher on the social ladder. Their business objective was a longer term, live-in relationship. The best they could hope for was one year, the normal length of a GI's Korean stay. Camp followers spoke better English than prostitutes and had a less shopworn air about them. Generally, they remained off the streets, cruising the bars and clubs in search of GIs willing to live with and support them.

Korean society considered pillow girls outcasts. Censure was so pervasive that any Korean woman simply seen with an American soldier was presumed to be a prostitute and subject to scorn. To avoid embarrassment and hostility, GIs and their Korean girlfriends stayed in Itaewon, a twilight area where morality was not an issue and the American dollar salvaged cultural trespasses.

For the GIs, prostitutes and camp followers represented the total population of available Korean women—there were no other categories. The opportunity for an American serviceman to meet what my mother would have called a “nice” Korean girl simply did not exist. To the average soldier, pillow girls *were* nice Korean girls.

It was into this tangled and seedy jungle of ignorance, indifference, prejudice and hostility that Miss Lee and I were about to wander. For her, the twin tigers of taboo and risk would be quick, vicious and unmerciful. Unlike her, however, I had no sense of jungle, no understanding of taboo, no concern for risk. I was an American, safe and untouchable. Miss Lee, like all Korean women, would have to fend for herself. Those were the rules; that's the way it worked.

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