

## *Kimchi Kitty*

Martin Limón

When Ernie leapt on the mugger's back, I thought for sure we had him. I'd already landed a solid right uppercut to his gut and hammered him again with a left to the skull — and then Ernie pounced. It should've worked. Except we were on an incline on Hooker Hill in Itaewon and had underestimated the pull of gravity. As Ernie admitted later, he'd also flunked high school physics.

The guy leaned forward until his wool cap almost reached his knees and Ernie slid off, slamming into the ground, barely managing not to break his fool neck.

I tried to ram the guy against the dirty brick wall lining the dark passageway but instead lost my footing on the cobbled road. Maybe I slipped on spilled *soju* from the drunk GIs who paraded up and down this unlit alley, lined until the late hours of the night with desperate “business girls” peeping out from behind hinged lookouts like so many trapdoor spiders.

When I went down, the guy took off running.

After I roused myself, I hoisted Ernie to his feet, slapped his cheeks, and gazed into his green eyes.

“You okay?”

“Never better. Which way did he go?”

“Uphill. Come on.”

We huffed and puffed our way to the top of Hooker Hill where the road split like a crooked “Y.”

“Which way?” Ernie said, staring down the empty footpaths, lit only by the occasional yellowed streetlamp.

No sign of him.

I shook my head. “He’s either faster than we thought or he’s in there.” I nodded toward the flashing neon above the double wooden door that said “Sam’s Club,” the brand new country and western nightclub in the red-light district known as Itaewon.

“I’ll take the back,” Ernie said.

I took the front.

#

The guy's name we didn't know. He'd been active for just over a month and so far we'd interviewed a half dozen of his victims at the emergency room of the 121<sup>st</sup> Evacuation Hospital on Yongsan Compound, including a certain Specialist Four Tester who'd described his assailant.

"A big guy," he said, through lips stifled by gauze. "Huge. Over six feet and wide, like a pro football linebacker."

"White or black?"

"White, I think. But there wasn't much to see of him. He wore a dark nylon jacket zipped up to the neck and a wool cap pulled down low over his eyes. The main thing I remember is that big fist coming at me. The knuckles were about the size of ripe crab apples."

Tester was a farm boy from Oklahoma. The mugger had robbed him of the bulk of his end-of-month pay packet — only about 130 dollars. Not to mention pilfering his wallet which contained his military ID card, his weapons card, his chow hall pass and, most importantly, his 8<sup>th</sup> United States Army Ration Control Plate. All of which, during the early 1970s, could be sold on the Korean black market for a tidy sum.

So far seven GIs had been assaulted in the dark alleys of Itaewon, three of them suffering injuries serious enough to keep them hospitalized overnight.

After we left Tester, Ernie said, "This guy is smart. He works alone. Less chance of someone turning on him."

My name is George Sueño. Me and my partner, Ernie Bascom, were agents for the Criminal Investigation Division of the 8<sup>th</sup> United States Army, headquartered in Seoul, capital of the Republic of Korea.

#

When I pushed through the front door of Sam's Club a cloud of cigarette smoke hit me like a pungent fist. Still, it was less than what I usually experienced at the other dives in Itaewon, mainly because many of the denizens of Sam's Club preferred "chaw" to smoke. And the bulge in their cheeks and their constant spitting proved it.

I checked the men's room first. Nobody in there. Everybody was preoccupied with the Korean band who called themselves the Grand Ole Opry. They were just starting their set. Without knocking I surveyed the ladies room. An American woman with short hair stood gazing into the mirror. She wore blue jeans and a checkered shirt and cowboy boots and a Stetson woven from thick straw sat beside her near the sink.

"Wrong room, Charlie," she said, eyeing my reflection.

I flashed my badge.

"Anybody else in here?"

"Check for yourself."

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I did. Every stall empty. If I had been wearing a hat, on the way out I would've tipped it to her.

The band was composed of Korean men — a bass player, an electric guitarist, a drummer, and a fiddler — all wearing various types of cowboy getups. The lead singer and master of ceremonies had an acoustic guitar strapped over his shoulder. Both Ernie and I were city boys and didn't have much use for country music but this band was good enough to make us believers. Especially their featured singer, Kimchi Kitty, a voluptuous Korean woman who filled out the frilly country dresses she wore like nobody's business, and who could belt out a heartfelt country ballad as well as any female singer currently topping the stateside charts.

But Ernie and I weren't here for the show. We had to find this mugger before he did something more than just send his victims to the hospital. We had to find him before he sent somebody to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Morgue.

Ernie emerged from the door near the stage and slowly waded through the crowd; some customers around the edges were standing but most sat at tables with chairs crammed tightly into a small sea of excited humanity. The clientele were primarily GIs but there were also some female soldiers, a few huddled at tables amongst themselves. Also, sprinkled throughout the crowd were 20 or so Korean business girls. They too had caught the fever and were dressed as best they could in styles that they thought mimicked the American rural spirit. The Americans, on the other hand, wore old washed-out blue jeans and faded shirts that appeared to have been pulled like relics from the bottom of Army-issue footlockers. Their excitement was that of young people returning to their roots, home at last in the heartland of America's agricultural vastness.

When Ernie reached the bar he stood next to me and turned around. "I didn't spot him."

"Nobody in back?"

"No. Just a small warehouse, which I searched. Nobody. And the dressing room."

"Did you check it?"

"It was locked. When I turned the knob a woman inside yelled at me to go away."

"Kimchi Kitty?"

"Sounded like her. Plenty of lung power."

"So we missed him. He's probably a mile away by now. Or farther, if he caught a cab."

Ernie rubbed the top of his head. "I should've held on to his neck."

"If you'd done that, you probably would've flipped over and maybe killed him."

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“Good.” Ernie turned around, searching for the bartender. “You ready for a beer?”

“Might as well.”

He ordered two OBs and the young bartender brought us two frosty brown bottles and seemed surprised when I asked for a glass.

“That’s not the cowboy way to drink a beer,” Ernie told me.

“No. But it’s my way.”

“Why? What difference does it make? It all ends up in the same spot.”

“The difference,” I told him, “is the carbonation. When you pour the beer into a glass and allow it to form a generous head, the bubbles are evenly distributed, as intended by the brewmaster. But if you’re enough of a barbarian to imbibe straight from the bottle, for the first few sips your throat and your stomach are blasted with too much carbonation. Halfway through, the bubbles even out but at the bottom the beer is flat. An insult to the ancient Teutonic gods of hops and barley.”

Ernie glugged down half his beer. He burped and turned to me. “Where do you come up with this shit, Sueño?”

“I read.”

“Ugh,” Ernie said.

A particularly obnoxious musical number finally ended — I think it was the “Orange Blossom Special” — and then the MC started to introduce the highlight of the evening. In the background the musicians were playing the introduction to Tammy Wynette’s massive hit song, “Stand by Your Man.”

Speaking with an incongruous Tennessee twang, he said, “And now ladies and gentlemen, the lady you’ve been waiting for, the queen of Korean country western music, Miss Kimchi Kitty!” He waved his arm and the band ratcheted up the volume and the spotlight swiveled toward the door where Kimchi Kitty would emerge from her dressing room.

No one there.

The band, without being prompted, rounded into the intro again. I set my beer down. So did Ernie. We glanced at one another. The intro ended again.

Still no Kimchi Kitty.

Ernie and I sprinted toward the dressing room, shoving our way through the dense crowd, ignoring shouted insults and halfhearted backhand swipes.

The door was unlocked. Inside sat an extra guitar or two, a row of street clothes on wire hangers, apparently belonging to the musicians, a woman’s purse, and various makeup containers scattered in front of a mirror, but no Kimchi Kitty. Ernie and I hurried down the short hallway and out the back

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door into the dark alley. Twenty yards to our right, we spotted her, struggling with the shadowed hulk of a man about twice her size. We ran toward him; he spotted us, let go of Kimchi Kitty and took off running.

Kimchi Kitty collapsed to the ground.

There were plenty of people behind us to deal with the distressed chanteuse so we kept on running, chasing the guy who we were convinced was the same guy that only a few minutes before we'd been locked with in mortal combat.

#

Halfway down Hooker Hill, Ernie was gaining on the mugger when a group of five or six GIs emerged from a side alley. As if on cue, business girls popped out of their hiding spaces and scurried toward them. The mugger slipped through the women just before the assembly coalesced into a solidly packed crowd and Ernie had to swerve in an attempt to avoid the girls. It didn't work. More of them appeared like a swarm of arachnids weaving a web. Ernie bumped into one, grabbed her to keep her from falling, but then swiveled and knocked over another hapless business girl. I reached Ernie just in time to steady him and without stopping I kept running through the remaining women and continued downhill at what for me was top speed.

Neon flashed in the main nightclub area. The roads were packed with revelers, GIs and Korean civilians and women pushing carts with iron braziers heating up late-night snacks for the small army of drunks who caroused through the Itaewon night. Up ahead, I saw him, his dark blue wool cap bobbing to and fro, sometimes avoiding people, other times bowling them over like so many wooden pins. On the MSR, the Main Supply Route built by the US Army through the southern fringe of Seoul, the big man jogged out into traffic, waving his arms and forcing the kimchi cabs to stop. A three-wheeled lorry loaded with a mound of garlic slammed on its brakes and the mugger barely avoided colliding with its left front bumper and slipped past it and disappeared. When I reached the intersection, Ernie had caught up with me and we proceeded warily into traffic. The road cleared somewhat and the truck full of garlic rolled forward. We crossed to the far sidewalk.

"Where'd he go?" Ernie asked.

We glanced around. The big glass doorway of the Hamilton Hotel allowed a full view into their lobby. He wasn't there. And we didn't spot him on the sidewalk in either direction.

"A kimchi cab," I said. "He must've caught one when he was hidden behind the garlic truck."

"*There!*" Ernie shouted.

About 20 yards ahead, a big silhouette in the back window of a kimchi cab with a head and width of shoulder larger than any Korean man I'd ever seen. We ran after the cab, Ernie veering off into traffic, waving for the taxis and small delivery trucks to make way. We were almost there when the light ahead turned green, a traffic cop blew his whistle and the kimchi cab started to roll forward. Within seconds, the line of vehicles picked up speed and left us in the dust. Ernie made his way to the side of the road.

"Shit!" he said.

"My sentiments exactly."

Ernie paused a moment, hands on his hips, breathing deeply. "Two times this son-of-a-biscuit got away from us. Two times in one night." He pondered something and then turned to me. "No sense admitting that to anybody in the office."

I knew what he meant. Staff Sergeant Riley, Admin NCO of the Criminal Investigation Detachment, would ride us relentlessly for our failure.

"No," I agreed. "No point in mentioning it."

"Good." He stared into the distance after the long-gone kimchi cab. "We'll get the son-of-a-bee. That I can promise you. We'll get him."

I slapped him on the back. "Come on. Let's go check on Kimchi Kitty."

#

Sam's Club was in turmoil. Any thought of finishing the show had been forgotten and most of the crowd was agitated and surly. Some of them had left but more were drowning their sorrows in drink.

"Whatever happened to 'the show must go on'?" Ernie asked.

I didn't bother to answer.

At the door to the dressing room, one of the band members stood guard but I flashed my CID badge and he stood back, slightly frightened. The band leader knelt next to Kimchi Kitty. She sat at her dressing table, eyes closed, forehead resting in her right hand, long black curly hair hanging down. I introduced myself to the band leader and discovered that his name was Cho Young-gil.

"Have you called the KNPs?" I asked. The Korean National Police.

Kimchi Kitty straightened herself and looked up. Despite her disheveled appearance, I couldn't help notice how beautiful she was. Full cheeks, lips puffed and pouting, dark eyes blazing.

"No," she said. "No police."

"Why not?" I asked. "You make a report and the Korean police can help me and my partner here track this guy down."

She stared at Mr. Cho quizzically. He translated what I'd said. She told him in Korean that she didn't want any police involved, not Korean police,

not GI cops.

I understood and without waiting for Cho to translate, answered in Korean.

“You’re not the first person this man has attacked,” I told her. “Seven American soldiers have been robbed by him, three of them ending up in the hospital. We’re going to stop him, whether you cooperate or not.”

I’m not sure if she understood everything I said. She seemed amazed, even shocked, that I spoke Korean. This was not an uncommon reaction. Few GIs study the language. In a one year tour, most of them don’t see the point. And even if they volunteer to stay longer, the prevailing attitude is that since Korean is not an international language like Spanish or French, why bother? After you leave Korea, you’ll never be able to use it again. I’d already been here for three years and planned to stay for at least two more. And I’d taken every night course the education center on base offered. Now I studied on my own, by speaking and making mistakes and writing down words I didn’t understand and keeping my *Essence Korean-English Dictionary* dog-eared and worn. As such, I was the only GI law enforcement officer in country who spoke the language. Not that I received any credit from the brass. They just thought I was weird. Or worse, regarded me with suspicion. I often overheard the whispered epithet: *He’s too close to the Koreans.*

I noticed that the top right strap of Kimchi Kitty’s dress was torn. She clutched it tightly and after a few seconds of processing what I’d said, she responded. “I don’t want people to know what happened.”

“What did happen?” I asked.

She switched to English. “Not your business,” she said.

I didn’t press it. At Mr. Cho’s command, the musicians of the Grand Ole Opry acted in concert. The gear was gathered up and toted out back to a waiting van. A few minutes later, Mr. Cho and the bass player bundled Kimchi Kitty up in her cloth cloak and walked her outside and helped her through the side door of the van.

Once they were loaded, Cho stepped toward me. When he spoke English it was like listening to a good old boy from Nashville. “Are you gonna catch the son of a bitch?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Soon.”

“Good. We’ll be waiting.”

With that he climbed into the front passenger side of the van, the engine started, and the greatest country and western band in Asia roared off into the night.

#

The next morning at the CID office, Staff Sergeant Riley was ignorant

of any incident at Sam's Club the night before since it hadn't appeared on the MP blotter report. Instead he roared, "You owe me! Three, make that *four*, black market arrests. *Today!* We're way behind on our quota."

"Quota?" Ernie said. "I thought we didn't have a *quota* on crime."

"You *know* what I mean, Bascom," he said, slapping his copy of this morning's *Stars & Stripes* atop his desk. "The chief of staff reviews our black market statistics daily and if he doesn't see at least two or three black market arrests per day, he thinks we're falling down on the job."

"And the PX will soon be overrun with *yobos*," Ernie said. The Korean dependent wives of enlisted servicemen.

"Not to mention a plague of locusts," I added.

"You guys think you're funny," Riley told us, "but this is serious business. If you don't catch up on your arrests by the end of the week, you'll be standing at attention in front of the man." He was referring to Colonel Brace, the 8<sup>th</sup> United States Army provost marshal.

"And in addition to making these arrests during the day," I said, "at night you want us out in Itaewon searching for the mugger."

Riley straightened his narrow shoulders until the starch in his khaki shirt audibly rustled. "A soldier is on duty 24 hours a day."

"Except for those who aren't," Ernie said.

Riley glared at him suspiciously. "Who are you talking about?"

Ernie shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe some guy who hides a quart of Old Overholt rye whiskey in his wall locker and by about 2200 hours most nights is passed out stone cold blotto."

Riley lowered his voice. "And who would that be, Bascom?"

Ernie shrugged again. "If the shoe fits, wear it."

"Let's not quibble," I said. "We'll get you a black market arrest today, Riley. Maybe two. But in return you have to double our monthly expense account."

"From 50 dollars to 100," Ernie added.

"Each?"

"Yeah. Each."

"And why should I do that?"

"Because of this mugger," I said. "My hunch is that he'll be branching out soon, beyond the confines of Itaewon. There are only seven major nightclubs there, interspersed by a dozen or more small bars. But people are on the lookout for him now. He'll be searching for greener pastures."

"Like where?"

"Hard to say. With over 50 US military bases in country, we'll have to be loose and ready to travel. Which is why we need the extra money."

Riley thought about it. "I'll take it under advisement," he said.



“Take it to the colonel,” I told him. “He’s the only one who can approve it.”

Riley grabbed a pen and a stack of memos from his inbox. Pretending to turn his attention to the printed matter before him, he said without looking up, “Make it three black market arrests. *Today*. And then I’ll get you your expense account increase.”

“We’ll need it in cash,” Ernie said, “in *advance*. We’ll be moving, and moving fast. No time to be coming back to the office and filling out chits.”

“Get me the *arrests*,” Riley growled and Ernie and I were off before he changed his mind.

#

Actually, there was virtually no limit to the number of black marketers two competent investigators could arrest from either the Yongsan Main PX or the Yongsan Commissary. In the early 1970s, a burgeoning Korean middle class was crying out for quality consumer goods and there were jillions of stateside products cramming the shelves in both establishments, all shipped across the Pacific Ocean at US taxpayer expense and sold at only a nominal markup to our brave men and women in uniform and their families. And no sales tax.

Meanwhile consumer manufacturing in South Korea was still flat on its back as it had been in the 20-some years since the end of the Korean War. Heavy industry was booming, like shipbuilding, armaments manufacture and automobile assembly. Mainly because the authoritarian Park Chung-hee government supported the massive *chaebol* conglomerates who owned and operated the big ticket businesses. But if a Korean housewife wanted a refrigerator or a washer and dryer, good luck. There were very few Made-in-Korea appliances in those days, and those that did exist lacked anything approaching Made-in-the-USA quality. Even easier to move on the black market were perishable items, such as bananas or frozen oxtail or Folgers Freeze Dried Crystals or Tang or maraschino cherries or nylon stockings or any of the thousands of things that dripped like honey from the cornucopia that is the American consumer manufacturing behemoth.

The *yobos* often had family to support. Elderly parents, or grandparents, or a younger brother who had to pay tuition to get into high school, not to mention the expense of purchasing a new school uniform every time he grew a couple of inches. Buying desirable items from the PX or Commissary and reselling them for two or three times what was paid for them, was a temptation that was too much to resist for someone who came from a needy family. And there were millions of them in Korea, and no food stamps or welfare or social security to be had. People were on their

own. Sink or swim, and sinking was not an uncommon result. So many of the young women who had the ability to participate in the black market saw it as almost immoral not to do so. And to hell with 8<sup>th</sup> Army regulations.

Ernie and I sat in his jeep, in the back row of the Yongsan Commissary parking lot, sipping on Styrofoam cups of bitter PX coffee, waiting for a likely miscreant to catch our fancy.

“She looks nice.”

He was referring to a young woman who was helping the uniformed bagger load her groceries into the trunk of the big Ford Granada PX taxi in front of the line of them waiting for customers to exit the Commissary. As she bent over, her sack-like dress bunched up around her posterior.

“Yeah, nice,” I agreed. “But I haven’t finished my coffee yet.”

“Okay,” Ernie said, in no hurry to enforce the law. “We’ll wait for the next one.”

And two minutes later, out she came. This one tall and long-legged and sporting a fancy hairdo that must’ve set her back at least 5,000 *won*. Ten bucks.

“What do you think?” Ernie asked.

“She’ll do,” I said, and tossed the almost empty Styrofoam cup out the window and onto the blacktop.

“Litterbug,” Ernie said.

“So shoot me,” I told him.

The PX taxi headed toward Itaewon. After a few twists and turns it stopped in front of a wooden gate in the center of an eight-foot-high cement block wall.

“Auntie Min,” Ernie said. A black market dealer who was well known to us.

Ernie parked on a cross street at the bottom of a short hill where we had a clear view of the PX taxi driver popping open the trunk and unloading the half dozen or so paper bags and carrying them just inside the gate and setting them on the ground. When he was done, the long-legged *yobo* emerged again and handed him a few bills. Customarily a sizeable tip for helping her with the profit-making black market exchange. I noted the taxi number stenciled on the side but Ernie and I didn’t bother the driver when he put the black sedan in reverse and stopped and turned around and headed back toward 8<sup>th</sup> Army headquarters.

I climbed out of the jeep and trotted toward the gate. By now, it had been slammed shut. I waited outside, listening to murmured conversation but not being able to make any sense of it. No worries. I knew what was going on. Each item was being priced and then a resale value would be

agreed upon until the grand total was tabulated and Auntie Min would recede back into her hooch and come out with the requisite amount of Korean *won*. Later she would transfer the goods to their final retail destination, someplace like East Gate Market where they would be put on display in an isolated area of the huge open-air shopping emporium and sold at marked-up prices to browsing Korean housewives, women who didn't have access to the US military Commissary or to the PX.

Finally, the long-legged woman emerged. With an intake of breath she saw me, and I flashed her my badge and almost simultaneously the tears started to flow. Ernie pulled the jeep up and I loaded her into the back seat.

Auntie Min would be left unmolested. She was a Korean citizen and not a US military dependent and therefore we had no jurisdiction over her. We didn't bother to notify the Korean National Police because they were already well aware of her black market operation. And they not only didn't care, my guess was that they were on her payroll.

The long-legged woman was booked at the Yongsan Compound MP Station and we called her husband and when he arrived we turned her over to his recognizance. The scowl on his face said it all. Not only would he be reprimanded by his company commander but the family would have their ration control privileges rescinded. Goodbye PX. Goodbye Commissary.

Ernie and I hated ourselves for doing this work but we had taken an oath to follow the orders of the officers appointed above us. Even when they were goofballs. Still, we could resist in small ways. We gave Riley two arrests only, not the three he had demanded.

"He can take a hike," Ernie told me.

"A long one," I agreed, "off a short pier."

"Or a short one," Ernie added, "across a DMZ minefield."

#

That night we searched Itaewon looking for the mugger but stayed close to the MP patrol jeep that parked most nights near the main intersection of the bar district. I monitored the radio transmissions from the MP desk sergeant back on compound, asking periodically if any muggings had been reported here or elsewhere in 8<sup>th</sup> Army. So far, the reply was negative.

The night continued that way, with no signs of the mugger and no reports of any muggings. When the midnight curfew arrived, Ernie and I caught a ride with the MPs back to Yongsan Compound.

"Maybe the guy was hurt," Ernie said. "You smacked him pretty good a couple of times."

"Not so good that he didn't have the wherewithal to bother Kimchi

Kitty.”

Ernie’s eyes popped open wide. “*Wherewithal?* How in the hell do you come up with words like that?”

“From books.”

“What’d I tell you about reading books?”

“You didn’t tell me shit.”

“Not so. I told you they’re a waste of time.”

“Says Mr. Intellectual.”

“That’s right.” Ernie pointed to the side of his skull. “It’s all up here. Everything I need to know to get through life. How to catch criminals, how to catch women. It’s all right here.”

“Except the location of the mugger.”

“Can you do any better?” Ernie asked. “Maybe you can look up his location in a book.” He crossed his arms, pleased with himself.

I pondered a few rejoinders, all of them consisting of four-letter words, but in the end decided I was too tired to bother. Besides, I kept wondering about the mugger.

Where he was. What he was up to. No book could give me the answer but my intuition told me that he wasn’t through. He was out there, licking his wounds, waiting to come back, meaner than ever.

#

Two more nights went by with no reports of any muggings anywhere in the GI villages that sat just outside the US military compounds scattered across the length and breadth of South Korea: from the DMZ in the north, to the Port of Pusan in the south; from Kunsan on the west coast, to an amphibious landing site near Pohang on the east.

“He’s retired,” Ernie told me. “We put the fear of God into him.”

“Maybe.”

I kept thinking about Kimchi Kitty. About how brave she was and assertive but I could see deep in her dark eyes the uncertainty that this man had put into her. I hoped she was all right. I hoped she would recover and still be able to perform.

The next morning at the CID office, Riley told us, “Looks like you won’t be needing the extra money in your expense account.”

“You just come up with the dough,” Ernie answered. “This guy ain’t through yet.” Which was not what he’d told me.

“Get me some more black market arrests.”

“Hey, you think it’s *easy* getting a black market arrest?”

“As easy as kimchi pie.”

“Okay, you try it.”

“I don’t have a CID badge.”

“Here. Borrow mine.” Ernie tossed it on Riley’s desk.

As they quarreled I thumbed through the book I’d been reading: *Moby Dick*. I liked it right from the first chapter when Ishmael says he’s dissatisfied with civilian life and wants to see “the watery part of the world.” And then when he signs aboard the Pequod he and the other sailors form an immediate dislike of officers. I felt as if he could’ve been any of a dozen guys I knew who lived in the same barracks I did. I’d reached the part where Ishmael describes in detail the social life of a pod of sperm whales. I’d read that critics wondered about this section because it was like a boring biology primer and didn’t move the plot along. I disagreed. I didn’t find it boring and it seemed to reinforce Ishmael’s obsession with whaling in general. But even a high school dropout like me could realize that the core of the novel was Captain Ahab’s obsession with the white whale. And that got me thinking about obsession and, for some reason, that got me thinking about Kimchi Kitty.

She truly was beautiful. And talented. And I had to admit that I would love to get to know her better. Maybe we could take in their next show, check in on her and see how she was doing. Ernie would see through this and realize that I was trying to get close to her, and probably tease me relentlessly, but to hell with him. I wanted to see Kimchi Kitty.

Just the resolution made me feel better.

I called the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Entertainment Coordinator’s Office and asked where the Grand Ole Opry would be appearing next. I jotted down the info and told Ernie to make sure the jeep was topped off with gas on Saturday.

“Why? Where we going?”

“Osan,” I told him.

“That’s 30 miles to the south. And why would you want to hang out with a bunch of *zoomies*?”

“Airmen,” I corrected.

“Okay. *Air-freaking-men*. What do you want to go down there for?”

“The Grand Ole Opry is playing at the Officers Club.”

“And that has something to do with us?”

“Everything.”

Ernie studied me slyly. “Okay,” he said, awareness slowly dawning. “I get it. You’re sweet on Kimchi Kitty.”

“What if I am?”

Ernie nodded sagely. Don’t ever confirm one of his deductions because he’ll savor the victory and never let you forget about his intellectual triumph. What he didn’t know is that my motive for going to Osan Air Base was more than just to bask in the glow of the glorious Kimchi Kitty. I also wanted to confirm or deny a hunch. Was it possible that our boy, the

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Itaewon mugger, had taken himself and his crab apple fists out of the game because he too had developed an obsession for Kimchi Kitty?

If it made him go straight, good. But something told me that he wasn't the type to become a stage door Johnny, standing docilely outside holding a box of chocolates and a bouquet of flowers.

If I was right, Kimchi Kitty could be in danger.

#

The main ballroom of the Osan Air Base Officers Club was packed and the higher-ranking clientele didn't look much different from the enlisted men we'd seen in Itaewon at Sam's Club. They too wore faded blue jeans and checkered shirts and cowboy hats balanced atop clean-shaven heads. The female officers were similarly decked out although their jeans tended to cling more tightly to their posteriors. Line dancing was the craze here, led by a middle-aged man in fancy leather boots who seemed to know all the steps and was patiently demonstrating them to his row of acolytes.

"Probably the base commander," Ernie said, bored.

"That's why they got such a big turnout?"

"Yeah. If he liked soul music, they'd be boogalooing their butts off."

"You're cynical."

Ernie turned and gawked at me. "How long you been in the army?"

I treated it as a rhetorical question and we made our way toward the dressing room behind the stage. The Grand Ole Opry was on break and the enthusiastic line dancers were wriggling to piped-in country tunes.

After we made our presence known, Cho met us in the hallway.

"How is she?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Bad condition,"

"Why? What happened?"

"Two nights ago we played Camp Market in Bupyong. The NCO Club. Big crowd but in the middle of her set she became frightened. Finished her number but left the stage before singing 'Stand by Your Man.'"

"That's her best number," I said.

He nodded. "The crowd was pissed off but I couldn't coax her back out there. She wanted to go home right away. Because of a face in the crowd. The same guy, she said, who'd attacked her at Sam's Club."

"Did you tell the MPs?"

"None around. I told the club manager but he just said he'd have his MAs keep a close eye on her and he planted one of them outside her dressing room."

MA stood for master-at-arms. The off-duty soldiers who were hired by the on-base clubs to provide unarmed security during operating hours.

"Did she see him again that night?" Ernie asked.

*Kimchi Kitty*

“No. But she didn’t leave the dressing room and we escorted her to the van at the end of the night.”

“Is she okay now?” I asked.

He reached back and pushed open the door to the dressing room. Sitting there in front of the mirror, wearing Kimchi Kitty’s country dress, was another woman. Thinner than her, shorter.

“You replaced her?” I asked.

“No choice. She refused to come.”

“Is that it? Is she through with show business?”

“I don’t think so. I think she just wants to get this guy arrested. Then she’ll be okay.”

Ernie and I returned to the main ballroom and stood at the bar as the replacement female singer, Miss Jenny, was introduced. A moan of disappointment rippled through the crowd. When Miss Jenny tried to sing “Stand by Your Man” she flubbed a few of the lyrics and then missed the high notes, prompting a murmur of dissatisfaction to grow until there were catcalls and shouts to get her off stage. At the end of her number, the hapless woman smiled broadly and bowed but as she turned her back and hurried toward the curtain her face was grimaced in anger.

“That stunk,” Ernie said, ordering us another round.

“I’ll say.”

“So now we not only have to find the mugger but we have to save the honor of Tammy Wynette.”

“Quite the responsibility.”

Ernie sipped on his beer and turned toward me. “How we going to do it?”

“There’s one way.”

“What’s that?”

“We use our advantage.”

“Advantage? We have an advantage?”

“Yes. We have something the mugger wants.”

Ernie stared at me quizzically.

“We have bait,” I said.

When I put the proposition to Mr. Cho, he was reluctant. But he also knew that the fate of the Grand Ole Opry depended on it. The 8<sup>th</sup> Army enlisted and officers club circuit was his bread and butter. Without Kimchi Kitty they might not be on the approved 8<sup>th</sup> Army entertainment list much longer. And if you’re not on the approved list, you can’t play at any US bases, so you can kiss the Yankee dollar goodbye.

After thinking it over, he said, “I’ll talk to her.”

#

At the club entrance, we spoke to the head MA. He was a burly black NCO by the name of Anderson. Everybody called him Andy. I described the man we were looking for and he shook his head at first but then he paused, thinking it over.

“There was a guy,” he said, “just after the Grand Ole Opry took the stage. He tried to sneak past me. Made it as far as there.” Anderson turned and pointed at the double-doored entrance to the main ballroom. “I told him to get his butt back here and show me his identification and his club card.”

“Only officers are allowed,” Ernie said.

“Of course,” Anderson replied.

“What’d he do?” I asked.

“He came back, shrugged, and kept moving back outside. I didn’t bother to follow. We get guys all the time who want to see what life is like for the elite.”

“He was broad-shouldered, like a linebacker.”

“Yeah.”

“Wearing any headgear?”

“No. Short hair. GI cut.”

“Big fists?”

“I didn’t notice.”

“Have you seen him since?”

Anderson shook his head negatively.

“If you do,” I said, “give us a call.” I handed him my card.

Absent-mindedly, he tossed it onto a shelf beneath the MA’s podium. As we left, he greeted a group of men and women who were dressed as if they’d just arrived in a covered wagon.

Ernie and I hung around the club, sitting in his jeep outside in the parking lot, watching the front entrance. Occasionally, one of us patrolled out back. At the open door to the kitchen, I asked a Korean cook if he’d seen any GIs trying to sneak in through the back door. He laughed, surprised that I was speaking Korean, but replied “*An boasso*.” Literally, I haven’t seen.

We waited until the show was over and most of the customers filtered out. When the Grand Ole Opry loaded their van and drove off, we followed them through the massive air force base and out to the main gate. The guards stopped them and inspected the equipment in the back of the van. After they were cleared to leave, we flashed our badges and got through quickly.

Without stopping, the van proceeded past the neon-lined streets of the bar district known as Songtan. When they reached the main highway



heading toward Seoul, we followed for a while but eventually lost them in the increasing traffic.

#

The next morning at the CID office, Ernie grabbed the MP blotter report off Staff Sergeant Riley's desk.

"Hey, I haven't looked that over yet," he protested.

Ernie ignored him.

"I have to brief the colonel in ten minutes," Riley continued. "Hand that back. *Now!*"

Ernie continued to ignore him, finally pointing to one entry. "In Songtan," Ernie said, speaking to me. "A guy beaten and robbed. Wallet missing. No money on him."

"Where is he now?" I asked.

Ernie tossed the blotter report back on Riley's desk. "The One-Two-One," he said. The 121<sup>st</sup> Evacuation Hospital, located here in Seoul. "In the ICU." Intensive Care Unit.

Without further discussion, Ernie and I headed toward his jeep outside.

#

The guy's name was Wainwright. An Airman First Class who'd been in the service eight years. Unmarried, his parents in Carlisle, Arkansas, had been notified because the medical staff at the 121 wasn't sure if he was going to make it.

"Massive concussion," the doctor told us. "Not only from being punched but also from a fall. Probably hit his head on something solid. Brick. Cement. Something like that."

"When will we know if he's going to live?" I asked.

A nurse in blue scrubs poked her head out the ICU door. "Doctor," she said.

He hurried toward her. As the swinging doors shut, equipment inside beeped.

Ten minutes later, the doctor reemerged. He shook his head negatively. As he did so, a gurney bearing a body covered by a long sheet was wheeled out, heading downstairs toward the morgue.

#

"That puts a whole different light on our Itaewon mugger case," Ernie said, as we drove through Yongsan Compound South Post heading back to the CID office. "Murder."

"Yeah," I agreed. "If it's our boy."

"Of course it's our boy. Same M.O."

"Probably."

"And he was spotted in the neighborhood."

“Maybe,” I said. “Anderson’s description was a little vague.”

Undeterred, Ernie said, “At a place where he expected to find Kimchi Kitty.”

I must’ve shivered because Ernie looked over at me. “You okay?”

“Okay.”

He glanced back at the road but then back at me again. “You were right about that obsession thing. Our boy’s got it bad for Kimchi Kitty. And when she wasn’t there at Osan it put him in a murderous mood.” He paused, thinking it over. “I wonder what he did to her in that dressing room at Sam’s Club.”

“Never *mind* about that,” I told him. Too loud.

Ernie’s eyes widened. “Okay,” he replied. “I’ll zip it.”

We drove in silence back to the office.

#

The statue of King Sejong the Great presided over the courtyard just 20 yards inside the entranceway to Deoksu Palace. Kimchi Kitty and I sat on a stone bench near a pond where we still had a side view of the great man. During the first half of the 15th century he’d presided over Korea’s Golden Age. The country had been prosperous and at peace and he promoted learning and science and economic advancement. Some of the things he came up with sounded modern even by 20<sup>th</sup>-century standards. He commissioned scientists to measure rainfall throughout the country and keep accurate records, he promoted the study of astronomy which led to a revised and improved calendar, he oversaw the issuance of loans to farmers to help them through the lean months of the planting season, and he adjusted tax rates depending on the waxing and waning of the economy. During hard times, food from royal granaries was issued to the poor. Most famously, he appointed a team of scholars to study the known languages in the world and to come up with an improved Korean writing system. The result was *hangul*, a logic-based phonetic alphabet still in use today.

I explained these things to Kimchi Kitty, using my broken Korean, her smirk widening as I prattled on. Finally, I pulled out a copy of the album she and the Grand Ole Opry had recorded and asked her for her autograph.

Fed up, she waved the album away.

Using English, she said, “Okay, Joe. What do you want?”

I laughed, nodding my head and letting the album dangle between my fingertips. I reached in my jacket pocket and pulled out a Polaroid that one of the ICU nurses had shot during Wainwright’s last minutes of life. His face was barely visible beneath the oxygen tent and wires. Tubes protruded everywhere.

Kimchi Kitty pushed it away violently, saying in Korean, “Are you

trying to scare me?”

“The same man who attacked you, did this to him.”

Her eyes widened but she didn’t get up and march away.

“We can catch this guy,” I told her, “with your help.”

She paused, staring at me as if I’d just hopped out of an interplanetary aircraft. Finally, she seemed to gather herself and said, “What do you want me to do?”

“Just perform. Rejoin the group. Go with them to their next date. Sing.”

“What good will that do?”

“If you appear with the Grand Ole Opry, he’ll be there.”

“How do you know?”

“I believe it to be so.”

“But you’re not sure.”

“This is our best chance.”

She hesitated.

I continued. “I will be there, with my partner. We will make sure no one harms you.”

She laughed. “This man is fierce. You cannot be sure.”

“I’m sure,” I said, placing my open palm atop her hand.

She stared down, studying my fingers as if pondering something. Finally, she said, “You foreigners have so much hair on your bodies, even near your knuckles.”

“It keeps us warm,” I said.

She gazed at me, eyes sparkling, wondering if I was serious. Then she laughed. “You’re different,” she said.

“Everybody’s different,” I replied.

She pulled away. “Maybe.” She gazed around the park; at the quivering leaves of the trees, the magpies flitting from branch to branch. It took her awhile. Finally, as if deciding something, she turned back to me and stuck out her hand. “Give me the album.”

I did.

“And a pen.”

I did that too.

She signed the album with a flourish, handed it back to me, and stood.

“Where do we play next?” she asked.

“Camp Howze,” I replied.

“I’ll be there,” she told me and walked off, past the great king, into the overcast afternoon.

#

Camp Howze was the headquarters of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division’s 44<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion that supported the Western Corridor. What the US

Army called the Western Corridor was an ancient invasion route that ran from Panmunjom to Munsan and from there straight down to Seoul. It was a fertile valley between parallel lines of hills that the military also called “the bowling alley.” Chinese armies had invaded repeatedly through here as had the Mongols and the Manchurians. Howze itself sat on a steep incline and was surrounded by high-peaked mountains that supposedly would help protect it from incoming North Korean artillery if war broke out again. After more than 20 years since the Armistice was signed in 1953, nobody expected that to happen but the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division didn’t have the luxury of assuming anything. They had to be prepared to “fight tonight” as they liked to say and as such the combat engineer battalion at Camp Howze was a pretty tightly run military outfit.

When Ernie and I rolled up to the front gate, armed MPs checked our vehicle dispatch and our ID cards and when they asked for the name of our assigned unit, Ernie and I flashed our badges. Immediately one of the MPs grabbed the field phone and informed his superiors that a couple of rear echelon 8<sup>th</sup> Army CID agents were invading their compound.

“Territorial,” Ernie said to me.

“Very,” I replied. Which was typical of these isolated combat units.

The MP waved us through. Just beyond the gate was a wooden sign saying Welcome to Camp Howze, Home of the 44<sup>th</sup> Engineers. And below that, held up with tacks, was a poster with a picture of the Grand Old Opry, including Kimchi Kitty with her hands on her hips and looking defiant, announcing that they’d be playing tonight at the All Ranks Club at 1900 hours.

Kimchi Kitty looked good even in that faded poster but I kept the thought to myself, not wanting to give Ernie any more clues than he already had. Was I chasing a futile obsession? Probably so. And up here near the DMZ with 700,000 Communist North Korean soldiers on the far side of the line and 450,000 South Korean soldiers on this side, it did seem that we were somewhere close to the end of the earth. It seemed an unlikely place to charm a lady. But I had to try, knowing it wouldn’t be easy. Not after what she’d been through a few days ago.

The Camp Howze All Ranks Club was one big tin-roofed L-shaped building with a kitchen and a bar and an enormous ballroom comprising the rest of the building. At the top of the L was a generous-sized dressing room and a huge wooden stage large enough to hold a small orchestra. Apparently the base commander supported tonight’s morale-building performance because somebody’d brought in bales of hay and tossed them on either end of the stage and the Grand Ole Opry had already set up their drum kit and amplifiers and microphones in the center between them. On

*Kimchi Kitty*

a big wooden backdrop someone had even painted a barn and a windmill and what appeared to be a field full of amber waves of grain.

When Ernie and I walked in, two Korean men were testing the sound system.

Long rows of tables stretched toward the stage, many of them with the straight-backed chairs tilted against them to indicate that they were reserved. A few GIs were already here, wearing battle fatigues, and setting up the small flags and wooden icons that represented their respective units: a tiny howitzer for the Camp Howze artillery unit and a welded-together bunch of gears for the Motor Vehicle and Maintenance Company. Even a red cross on a tiny white flag for the Medical Dispensary and Dental Detachment.

“Everybody sticks together in their own clique,” Ernie said.

“Yeah. Clannish, suspicious of strangers.”

“But delighted that a little bit of magic is being plopped down in their midst.”

“Let’s check backstage.”

Kimchi Kitty was locked in her dressing room and the musicians out front were changing into their cowboy outfits — slipping on blue jeans and cowboy boots, dusting off Stetson hats. They seemed surprised to see us and none too happy. Maybe because we brought unpleasant memories. Mr. Cho greeted us and we walked over to tattered old curtains hanging from 12-foot-high rafters.

“How is she doing?” I asked.

“Okay,” he said. “Better. That guy really scared her.”

“How far did he go with her?” Ernie asked.

Cho shook his head. “I don’t know. Not for sure. She won’t talk about it.”

“How did her family react?”

“I don’t think they know. She’s not close to them.”

“Who is she close to?”

Ernie and I both stared at him.

“Not me,” he said. “She doesn’t have a boyfriend. I believe she’s waiting for something.”

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe a better life. Meanwhile, she can sing.” He glanced at both of us. “Is it true he killed someone?”

“That’s what we believe.”

He nodded and returned to his band.

#

By 1830 hours, the ballroom was packed with GIs dressed in combat

*Kimchi Kitty*

fatigues. At least a dozen Korean women in modest waitress outfits hefted trays filled with bottles of beer and cheeseburgers and fries and the Korean club manager kept everything humming. Ernie and I sat at the bar, each nursing a can of Falstaff.

When the lights were lowered and the Grand Ole Opry took the stage there was a stir of anticipation from the crowd. And then, without preamble, the bass player launched into his rendition of Freddy Fender's hit number "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights."

The roar was so loud that the musicians were momentarily frightened. Sam's Club was a hell of a lot smaller and here at the All Ranks Club the crowd was at least three times as large. And 100 percent male. They seemed hungry. Voracious. Some of them stood and waved, applauded, cheered. Through the shouts it even seemed as if a few had tears in their eyes. Black, white, Hispanic, they were all country and western fans tonight. Isolated up here, the rest of the world not knowing or caring about the twenty-four-seven duty they endured, or about their daily ration of slogging through mud and snow and abuse, the mob of soldiers were determined to inhale any particle of joy the Grand Ole Opry could throw at them.

Sure enough, about 20 minutes later, when Kimchi Kitty finally made her appearance, the rattling walls of the All Ranks Club actually reminded me of an earthquake I'd lived through as a kid. She belted out her tune and paced the stage boldly, leaning forward, staring into their eyes, daring anyone who was man enough to come up on stage with her. No one did. Mainly because of the half-dozen armed MPs who stood at parade rest in front of the stage. Kimchi Kitty continued to shimmy in the puff-shouldered lace dress that covered her from neck to knee and even though she wasn't exposing much of her soft flesh, it was as if her entire curvaceous body was on naked erotic display.

After three numbers, when she finally went off stage, perspiration beaded her forehead and there wasn't a GI in the crowd who wouldn't have gladly offered himself as her eternal love slave.

The band immediately launched into some fast-moving numbers and when the crowd had quieted somewhat, they set down their guitars and acted out a skit about a "Command Sergeant General," a rank that didn't actually exist, chewing out a private. Cho had slipped on a fatigue shirt with an impossibly long row of stripes that reached up and down his sleeve. The bass player took the part of the slick-sleeve buck private who was being reamed out for one goofy indiscretion after another. When the "Sergeant General" threatened to banish the private north to the DMZ and told him he was going to have to stare into the eyes of the North Korean

army and patrol the Military Demarcation Line, the private started to cry. To stanch his tears, he reached in his breast pocket for a handkerchief but instead pulled out a pink pair of ladies' underwear. The language Cho used was unadulterated GI slang, accusing the young GI of being a "brown-noser" and "*dingy dingy*" — crazy — and him responding "*moolah* the hell out of me." Damned if I know.

The crowd loved it, booing the Sergeant General, cheering the spunky private.

After picking up their instruments and playing a few more country hits, including Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, and Johnny Cash, the Grand Ole Opry took a break, promising they'd be back for a second set.

Ernie and I went outside to patrol the building. It was dark but illuminated by the occasional firelight at either end of a row of Quonset huts, not to mention a surprisingly full moon that seemed to balance atop the jagged peak of the mountain just north of us.

"Did you see him?"

"No," Ernie said. "And I studied every face. Not to mention that if some stranger tried to sit at a table occupied by one of those units, they would've rejected him like a kitten wandering into a litter of pups."

"I studied every face too," I told him. "He's not here."

"So we wasted a night."

"Not wasted," I said. "Come on, you enjoyed it."

"Yeah, especially that song 'Wasted Days and Wasted Nights.' Sounds like the story of my life." After we completed a circuit of the building, he said, "You ready to go?"

"No. Let's wait until they're done. Only one more set. I want to interview Kimchi Kitty."

"I saw the way you looked at her when she was on stage," Ernie said slyly. "You like that, don't you?"

"What's not to like?" I asked. "Talented. Beautiful."

Ernie was silent for a moment and then he said, "That's the real reason we're here. You don't actually expect this mugger to show up."

"You never know," I said. "Besides, Kimchi Kitty didn't tell us much that night at Sam's Club. Maybe she'll open up more now."

"Yeah. That's what you want. For her to *open up*."

Then he laughed. I tried to ignore him but it wasn't easy.

After the second set, I went backstage. The Grand Ole Opry band wasn't there. I heard a commotion. They were outside, beyond the big double doors. I joined them in the brisk night air.

Cho turned to me. "She's gone."

"Christ. Anybody see which way she went?"

The fiddle player spoke up. “I did, when I went backstage to get some more rosin for my bow. She wasn’t in the dressing room. The back door was open. When I looked outside I saw her walking with a man in an army uniform. He had ahold of her elbow. I wasn’t sure what was going on and it was my cue to get back so I did and I couldn’t leave until the end of the show.”

“How long?”

He thought. “Maybe ten minutes.”

“Was she struggling?”

“Not much. I couldn’t be sure but it seemed as if his other hand was being held near her neck.”

“Was he holding a knife?”

“It was too dark and too far away but I don’t think so. It was more as if he had ahold of her. As if he were caressing her.”

Or strangling her, I thought. “Point to exactly where you last saw them.”

He did. It was near the tree line on the far side of the base headquarters, just below the stone-walled promontory that held the flagpoles and the ceremonial cannon that was fired to indicate the start and close of each business day.

I ran.

#

The metal poles were naked now but during the day they held the flags of the United Nations Command, the United States of America, and the Republic of Korea. I touched the cold breech block of the 75mm howitzer mounted on rubber wheels that was chained to an iron ring imbedded in the cement flooring. I stood perfectly still. Listening.

Below, behind the All Ranks Club, I heard GIs starting to gather. Flashlights were switched on. I looked away, trying to allow my night vision to adjust. Wind rustled through the pine trees covering the side of the mountain. And then I heard it. Just a whimper, high-pitched, ending abruptly. And then angry words, muffled as if by a big fist. A woman’s voice. Kimchi Kitty’s voice. I entered the forest and groped my way blindly toward the sound.

In the shoulder holster beneath my jacket sat a loaded .45 automatic. I wanted to hold it out in front for rapid use but the mountain was too steep. To make any progress, I had to use not only my feet but also both hands to grab limbs and roots and pull my way forward, not to mention shove springy branches out of my way.

I was making too much noise, I knew that, but I didn’t see what choice I had. If I hesitated, who knew what would happen? This mugger was already an attempted rapist — at least — and probably a murderer and I



didn't want him to turn into a two-time killer on top of that.

Considering the fiddler's description — big, broad, American — it had to be the same guy. Add in his obsession with Kimchi Kitty, and that clinched it. But the moment I thought of the word obsession I realized, with a nauseating twinge, that this mugger and I had something in common. We were both obsessed with the same woman.

The sounds grew louder. Not whimpers but cries of rage, muffled as if with a sock in the mouth. Had he tied her up? Was he lurking nearby? Waiting for me?

Finally, I reached a small clearing where I could stand upright, and there she was; lying on the ground, tied up, writhing in rage. I pulled out my .45 and rotated quickly in a 360 degree arc. No movement in the shadows. I knelt and untied her, having to set my .45 on the grass in order to use both hands.

In Korean I said, "Where is he?"

"I don't know," she said, gasping for breath. "When he heard you coming, he disappeared into the woods."

I was just reaching for the .45 when something huge and dark leapt out of the trees. I got off one round, completely wild, and then I felt him on top of me, big arms grabbing for my throat. I rolled forward, forcing him to adjust his grip, and then I elbowed him in the ribs and twisted to my side and shot a straight left up into his ugly face.

Kimchi Kitty had completely freed herself now and she sprang to her feet and started to run. The guy tried to punch me a few more times, but I mostly warded off the blows and then he was on his feet, heading into the woods after Kimchi Kitty. I shook my head, briefly searched for my .45 but I had dropped it in the fight and couldn't find it in the dark. No time now. I jumped to my feet and ran after the mugger.

When I emerged from the trees, the full moon seemed to have doubled in size. It hovered now, over the three flagpoles. Kimchi Kitty stood behind the 75mm howitzer, rolling it on its rubber wheels, pointing the barrel at the mugger who stalked her like a wrestler in a ring. She cussed him royally in Korean, although I doubt he understood any of it, and she kept the small cannon rotating in a circle as large as possible given the chain that anchored it, positioning the howitzer between her and the mugger. He saw me coming and took his last chance to charge Kimchi Kitty. As he ran straight toward her, he crouched as if to spring at her and at the last moment, she shoved the howitzer forward until its iron barrel jabbed the mugger right between the legs. Right where it hurt. He grunted and groaned and leaned forward, grabbing his crotch. With long strides, I covered ground quickly and in a few seconds I was close enough to slam

him with a combination to the back of his ugly head. As he fell I reached behind to the small of my back and pulled my handcuffs off my belt and within seconds had one cuff around his left wrist and the other locked through the iron ring in the cement.

I stood up and kicked him and wanted to do more but resisted the urge and went to tend to Kimchi Kitty. She was scratched pretty badly by all the brambles and branches she'd run through and when she looked up at me the moonlight glistened off her pretty face and very briefly she smiled. Then her eyes rolled up in her head and I caught her before she collapsed. I hoisted her in my arms, her head lolling against my shoulder, and asked the first GI who reached us to guide me to the aid station. He did.

"Can I help carry her?" he asked.

"No," I told him. "I got her."

And my intention was, at that moment, to never let anyone else carry her again. Just me. But, as I was to learn later, she had different ideas.

#

Kimchi Kitty's injuries were relatively minor and only one gash in her calf required stitches. After she was patched up, Mr. Cho had her carried into the van and once she was settled, the band made their way out the main gate and then over to Tong-II Lo, Reunification Road, heading south toward Seoul.

Ernie quickly determined that the man we'd been calling the Itaewon mugger was actually Specialist Four Rudolph Krakendorfer. Rudy K to his friends. He was a mechanic working out of the 35<sup>th</sup> Maintenance Battalion at Camp Market near Bupyong. His fists were indeed like crab apples, a bunch of them, and it took us a while to convince him to climb into the paddy wagon that would transport him to 8<sup>th</sup> Army headquarters. Using the blunt ends of their nightsticks, the Camp Howze MPs finally managed to reason with him. Bruised, and maybe with a couple of broken ribs, he climbed into the army transport and submitted to having his ankles shackled to the floorboard.

#

The real problems began later, when his parents hired a stateside lawyer, someone versed in dealing with the UCMJ, the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The 8<sup>th</sup> Army JAG demanded that we parade a lineup, including Rudy K, in front of all seven Itaewon mugging victims. Not one of them could identify him since he'd worn a face covering and a wool cap pulled down lower over his forehead and the guys we lined him up with were similarly stocky and strong. As far as blood samples or other types of forensic evidence, we had none.

The investigators at Osan Air Base were similarly stymied. Airman

Wainwright had died alone in a back alley sometime after the midnight curfew. And the Korean residents of the area had their doors locked and their windows shuttered and no one remembered hearing anything untoward. Rudy K must've taken him out quickly and surgically.

Our ace in the hole was Kimchi Kitty. From a distance we'd seen her struggling behind Sam's Club with a man who we believed to be the same Rudy K and of course I and some of the band members were witnesses to her abduction from behind the All Ranks Club at Camp Howze.

Everyone was stunned, not least of all me, when she refused to press charges.

#

A week later, Ernie and I sat with Mr. Cho in the coffee shop of the Hamilton Hotel in Itaewon. We made him repeat what he'd just said.

"She has him working for her now."

Ernie was incredulous. "Wait a minute. Let me get this straight. This guy who attacked her in her dressing room at Sam's Club and mugged seven GIs and maybe murdered another, she has him *working* for her now?"

"Like a faithful dog," Cho said. "He follows her everywhere. Does whatever she tells him to do." He paused, sipped on his coffee, set the cup down. "In fact it's sort of handy to have him hoisting the amplifiers and other heavy equipment."

"Why does she take the risk?" Ernie asked.

Cho shrugged. "I think she likes the power. Punishing him for how he embarrassed her."

"But he could be dangerous," I added.

"Don't I know it," Cho replied. "What can I do? She insists that he accompany us everywhere when we're performing and she's the star of the show. So, you know show business, the star gets what she wants."

"She saved his butt by not pressing charges," Ernie said, "so I can see why he's grateful. But what does she get out of it?"

Cho didn't answer.

I was almost afraid to ask the next question but I did anyway. "Are they sleeping together?"

"Not that I can tell. After the show, we drop him off at 8th Army compound so he can catch the military bus back to Camp Market. We drive her home after that."

Ernie shook his head. "I don't get it. He attacks her and she takes pity on him. Even gives him a job."

"A part-time job," I said. "He's got a full-time job with the army. She's keeping him near for some reason, maybe for something more than just a power trip."

*Kimchi Kitty*

Cho nodded in agreement.

“Then what is it?” I asked.

“*Moolah* the hell out of me,” he said.

#

That Friday night the Grand Ole Opry were playing at the Frontier Club on Yongsan Compound South Post. Ernie and I arrived early and sat in the jeep as the van rolled up and the band members climbed out, along with Rudy K, and they carried the equipment in through the back door of the club. Mr. Cho helped Kimchi Kitty out of the van and walked with her toward her dressing room. Rudy K, as far as we could tell, was doing duty as nothing more than a coolie, unloading heavy equipment, carrying it inside. He never said a word to Kimchi Kitty.

“Odd,” Ernie said. “Something’s going on here.”

“Something we’re not seeing,” I added.

An hour or so later, Ernie and I sat at a back table in the dim light of the main ballroom as the first set commenced. The Grand Ole Opry would be doing three sets tonight and the band would take the first warmup set but Kimchi Kitty wouldn’t appear until the second and third sets, when the ballroom would be fuller. Conserving star power.

The musicians had just left the stage at the end of the first set when someone swooshed up to us in a swirl of taffeta and lace. With a flourish, Kimchi Kitty sat down opposite us, the translucent puffed shoulders of her blue dress catching the glow of the stage lights behind her.

She gazed into my eyes, smirking. I was about to say something when she reached into a pocket hidden somewhere within the folds of her petticoats. With a flourish she pulled out a fistful of plastic cards, stacked them on the table, and then, like a dealer at the World Series of Poker, she fanned them deftly across the white-linen surface.

She leaned back and crossed her arms.

Ernie and I gawked at the cards. Ernie grabbed the red candleholder and tilted the flame so we could see more clearly. I picked up one of the cards.

“Specialist Four Tester,” I said. Then I set it back down, awestruck. “This is his Eighth Army ration control plate. The one that was stolen from him when he was mugged.”

Kimchi Kitty just smiled more broadly.

Ernie shuffled through the cards. “They’re all here,” he said. “All seven of them belonging to the guys who were mugged in Itaewon.” And then he found it, the eighth card. Reverently he handed it to me and as he did so hoisted the candle higher so I could read.

“Airman First Class Wainwright,” I said. “The zoomie who was

murdered outside Osan.”

“We got him,” Ernie whispered.

“Who gave these to you?” I asked Kimchi Kitty.

She answered me in Korean. “You know who. If I had pressed charges against him, he would’ve gone to prison, maybe, for attacking me. But not for too long. Men attack women all the time. And maybe then you could’ve charged him with robbing the seven GIs in Itaewon. Still, how long would he be in your army prison? A year? Maybe two? But if I don’t press charges, if I let him get close to me, then he becomes mine. I own him.”

“He gave these to you?”

She nodded, almost laughing now. “Yes. He asked me to help him sell them on the black market.”

I translated this for Ernie. After it soaked in, he said, “What an idiot.”

“Criminals aren’t known for their brains.”

Ernie rose from the table. “I’m going to find the manager’s office, call for some MP backup.”

He hurried off.

I reached forward and took Kimchi Kitty’s hand. “He might’ve hurt you,” I told her.

“He’s already hurt many people,” she said. “Now he will not hurt anyone anymore.”

I wanted to ask her something, I’m not sure what, but she seemed to sense that I was working up to another question. Maybe a question she didn’t want to hear. Instead of waiting, she patted my hand, rose from her seat, and gazed down at me.

“Find yourself a good woman,” she said in English. “Someone who will stand by you. Someone who will stand by a good man.”

“Not you?” I asked.

She smiled kindly. “Not me.”

Then she turned and walked away. I clutched the pile of RCPs until they bent and started to slice into my flesh.

*Martin Limón is a full-time writer having published 15 novels set in Korea’s modern past, featuring CID detectives Sueño and Bascom. He spent 20 years in the military, 10 of which were in Korea on three tours: 1968-69, 1973-76 and 1977-80. This story was first published in the March/April 2023 edition of Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine.*