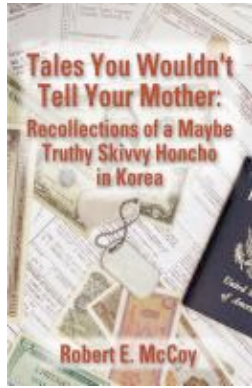


Tales You Wouldn't Tell Your Mother: Recollections of a Maybe Truthy Skivvy Honcho in Korea

Robert E. McCoy



Tales You Wouldn't Tell Your Mother is an outlandish read. It uniquely chronicles American airmen and their relations with the Korean people from the mid 1960s to the early 1980s. Thoughtful, with poignant reflections on life, it is peppered with humor from the dry to the slapstick. There is inspired drinking, creative pranking, and sex - even some romance. Tales You Wouldn't Tell Your Mother is a must-read for those who have ever spent time in Korea or the U.S. military.

Tales You Wouldn't Tell Your Mother

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Tell Your Mother**

**Recollections of a Maybe
Truthy Skivvy Honcho in Korea**

Prologue

It was drizzling rather insistently – not quite a full rain – in the dark early morning hours in mid August 1964 when I finally landed at Yokota Air Base in Japan after a long and uncomfortable flight from California. The seats did not recline and they faced the rear for safety reasons on the Air Force C-135, the military version of the Boeing 707 commercial airliner. The meager passenger accommodations were located inside the cargo hold where it had been cold and noisy. Now, I was a bit groggy from not getting enough restful sleep, but I knew that my journey was nearly over.

On the ground, the monsoons were making their presence known, and the low clouds and misty surroundings were captivatingly surreal. Tendrils of fog wound themselves among the tall conifers along the sides of the narrow two-lane road that led from the airport terminal to my intended assignment just a few miles away. Lights were beginning to come on in the small thatched-roof wooden houses visible from the narrow highway that already had traffic. It was a shock to be riding on the “wrong” side of the road, and even more disconcerting to look down from the bus window into the deep concrete ditch right next to the narrow-shouldered road. Japan was certainly different from the States.

Truth be told, I was both ecstatic and dismayed to be in Japan. It was exciting to be in a foreign country and to finally arrive at my first operational assignment in the Air Force. I had just concluded two years of intensive academic and then military training in the Korean language and culture. After all that, I should have been in Korea. Instead, I was assigned to bloody Japan.

Everyone told me that getting Japan was better duty: it was more modern and more open to Westerners, plus married guys could have their families with them. Then there was the siren call of Tokyo and its fabled Ginza, sort of like the Strip in Las Vegas! Well, be that as it may, I thought, why in hell study about Korea only to wind up in another country?

It was a strange series of events that caused me to be in Japan. I was supposed to be assigned to Korea along with my language school classmates, but I had requested a delay after all my training in the States in order to take care of some pressing personal business. I was granted a deferment for a few weeks, only to have the Air Force personnel office screw up and lose track of me. This was back in the day when humans did a lot of the paper work without benefit of computers, and the military paper jockeys were always overwhelmed. After waiting several weeks, I requested an update on my status since I did not get my assignment and travel orders at the expected time, only to learn that I had no assignment at all. Finally, when everything got sorted out and my travel orders came through, I was going to Japan instead. Geezus!

To make matters worse, I was an unexpected arrival at my new assignment. It seems that the unit to which I had been assigned was an airborne squadron that had only recently been relocated from Korea to Japan. Somebody at Headquarters must have assumed that the extra time I had spent taking care of personal business during my deferment in the States had actually been devoted to the additional training required for airborne linguists. Well, you know what the military says about assume: "Just look at the word. It makes an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me.' Do! Not! Assume!" What a bunch of dumb asses!

In any case, there had been no announcement of my

impending arrival until the very last minute. Fortunately, individual finance and personnel records back then were sealed up in packets to be hand-carried by airmen as they moved from one assignment to the next. Even though I had arrived relatively unannounced, I had all the necessary field records with me and things got squared away within a few days. But I still had no idea how a lack of airborne training was going to work out for me at an airborne unit.

There were other surprises in store for me – starting almost immediately. I had landed at Yokota Air Base because it was the only military runway in the immediate vicinity that was capable of handling large jets. That should have been great, for Yokota was my base of assignment. But no, due to budget restrictions, the Air Force had not been able to build a passenger terminal there, even though large military cargo and transport jets had been landing at Yokota for years. If anybody ever tells you that the military can move fast, you can chalk him up as a lying asshole. So now, under the glowering eyes of military guards since passengers had not yet cleared Japanese Customs, we were herded aboard military buses to be taken to the Tachikawa Air Base passenger terminal where that was handled, even though it was roughly ten miles away. While it was still dark, the day was becoming long already.

Once there, I had to surrender all of my U.S. currency. I soon learned that military personnel in Japan – Korea and Taiwan, too – were not allowed to have real U.S. paper money, instead being required to use Military Payment Certificates. Using MPCs was intended to prevent black marketing on the local economy and to stop illegal trafficking in U.S. dollars by communist sympathizers in Asia. Yeah, well, I would certainly ask someone about this when I had the chance. Awful damned strange!

Each denomination of MPC bill had a different color and came in a different size, the largest being the twenty-dollar certificate. All, however, were smaller than a standard U.S. note. The fronts of each were intricately engraved, usually with the face of some female beauty, with the backs featuring meticulously rendered famous battlegrounds or impressive military equipment.

Due to their colorful nature, everyone usually referred to them as funny money or Monopoly money. I was told to shut up and not complain by the gruff military cop guarding the currency exchange area. At least the military in Japan could use real coins, whereas the U.S. military in Korea had to use MPC for everything down to the nickel. Only the penny was exempt. Geezus, who wants to walk around with a wad of almost worthless paper coins in his pocket?

By the time all of us passengers had cleared Japanese Customs, changed our money, and collected our baggage, it was beginning to show daylight. Takeoff from the States had been delayed for several hours due to some unspecified mechanical reason, and once airborne I discovered that the aircraft had few of the amenities common on civilian airliners. It made for a lousy flight. We had landed in the middle of the night and now it was already day. I had been traveling for nearly 24 hours and I was exhausted, ready for some Zs, so I was grateful that my sponsor met me as soon as I got off the bus at Yokota.

Upon arriving at a new base, every airman has a sponsor who shows the new person where to go for all the logistical things such as quarters and chow, the finance and personnel offices, laundry facilities and mail room, and so on. Most sponsors also augmented that duty by introducing the new guy to the more interesting stuff such as the Base Exchange, the

appropriate on-base military Club, and the USO Center – as well as the various offerings of interest that were available off base.

My sponsor Harry did an outstanding job, particularly regarding the latter. I took an immediate liking to Harry, as he seemed to be an eccentric kind of guy always looking for a way to have fun or make a score. That he turned out to be a bit of a devious character did not alter my appreciation of his nonconformist spirit at all, and I suppose that it was only karma that Harry would figure prominently in many of my Asian escapades.

The first instance occurred only a few days after Harry got me squared away on base and situated at work, when he took me to a Japanese show house off base near another village some distance away. The place seemed to be just a normal American-style theater that had nice fold-down cushioned seats and padded armrests. The only difference was that a short and narrow catwalk extended a few feet out from the center of the stage into the audience. I thought I was about to see a Japanese movie or stage performance, and since I spoke absolutely no Japanese, I was wondering why Harry would take me here. He told me to be patient as we took seats in the very back row, just in time for the curtain to go up.

A scratchy recording of a Japanese song began to play as a Japanese lady in full geisha costume and stage makeup came out from behind the curtain to perform a classical Japanese dance. The unusual and colorful costume coupled with the dancer's highly ritualized movements were interesting, I thought, but I really had no appreciation for the art form at the time. Then a second record began to play, more Western in composition, heavy on the beat with a brassy melody. The young geisha appeared again, but this time to perform a tantalizing strip.

Completely naked at the conclusion, she posed very briefly in the demure posture of a woman caught coming out of her bath before scurrying off stage.

The third song was bump and grind with very little subtlety and not a whole lot of dancing. It was then I became aware of an undercurrent of animal-like noises emanating from the audience, nearly all of whom were well-dressed, middle-aged Japanese men. Before the song ended, the naked woman proudly strutted down the catwalk to squat down at its very end with her legs canted wide open. She invited the men to examine her most intimate parts, and they did so with gusto. One man got in so close between her thighs that his wire-framed glasses were bent in the barely controlled melee that ensued.

This three-record set continued with other women for more than an hour, by the end of which I knew that I was in a different world. Harry noticed my astonishment and remarked that what we had just seen was what Japanese “salarymen” typically do on a payday night. He further explained that, if this sort of thing appealed to me, this particular show was for Japanese only, but that similar entertainment was available near our base in a part of town that catered to the American military. Harry chuckled, however, saying that I really ought to experience Korea, for the “attractions” there were cheaper – as well as being far more “fulfilling.” Well, no shit, being a healthy young man and believing that I knew enough about the Korean culture and language, I heartily agreed as I mentally began to make plans for a leave of absence to Korea as soon as I could manage it. Little did I know what was in store for me as my career-long involvement with Korea would soon begin.

And so begins the series of adventures that I narrate here as *“Tales You Wouldn’t Tell Your Mother,”* absolutely and positively

without any exaggeration or censorship whatsoever and as truthfully as one old skivvy honcho can manage. I would not lie. Well, maybe just a little, but really not much – I swear by the three holy Hans.

Chapter Five: Life on Base

It was now summer of 1968, and all of us were still working long hours and flying too many missions at Osan, those frequent deployments from Japan to Korea continuing. Sleep became a most welcome luxury for most of us. On one occasion, though, I was rudely awakened by a loud commotion accompanied by a tirade of profanity coming from the other end of the barracks wing. The overhead lights came on even though it was still in the middle of the night. Through my sleep-induced daze, I was able to figure out that Cooper – usually we just called him Coop – had made a serious mistake involving a laundry bag that did not belong to him.

Laundry bags are large sturdy cotton bags with pliable rope for drawstrings. They are issued to all airmen during basic training and most of us hang on to them for their intended use of storing dirty clothing. We usually tied our laundry bags to the ends of our bunks. Since the heads of bunks usually abutted the wall, the other ends jutted out toward the aisle that ran down the center of the barracks wing. Having laundry bags at that end made things handy for the houseboys when laundry day arrived.

Coop had come back to the barracks marvelously drunk just before midnight. He quickly crashed into his bed and was almost instantly out for the count. However, he had failed to do the two things that any experienced drinker knows to do before going to bed. The first is to down some anti-hangover potion and the second is to drain the bladder. Coop had evidently been roused from his stupor in the middle of the night by a bladder clamoring for relief.

Most laundry bags are olive drab green, but a big beefy guy named Johnstone – nicknamed “Stoney” for his toned body as

well as his name – had an oddball white one tied to the end of his bunk. In the dim light provided by the emergency exit signs at either end of the wing, Coop saw what he thought was an extraordinarily convenient urinal. He staggered to it and began relieving himself all over that white laundry bag.

Stoney came awake to the sound of a liquid splashing onto the floor near the end of his bunk. It was a few moments before Stoney realized what was happening and then he came unglued. Fortunately, the intervention of several other guys prevented a still woozy Coop from getting thoroughly pounded by a steamed up Stoney. The mess on the floor was left for the houseboys to deal with when they came to work in the morning.

Probably due to an interrupted night's rest, I had slept too late that morning for the chow hall. As I headed for the latrine to clean up, I noticed that the mess on the floor from Coop's misadventure had been cleaned up and that Stoney's laundry bag was missing, it and its contents presumably being washed by the houseboys. Once I was presentable, there was still time to get to the NCO Club for breakfast. At the club, I saw Charlie, a co-worker, with another guy whose name I didn't know, and I joined them at their table.

While what I really wanted was a BLT, the prospects for that weren't good since the breakfast menu was still in effect. The waitress crew that morning was supervised by an older Korean woman that somebody way back when had christened "Ruthie." Ruthie was both efficient and cordial, but she was not known for her patience or sense of humor. Charlie and his friend had just beaten me to the club so all of us needed to place our orders.

Before a waitress arrived, I mentioned that I could really go for a BLT, a sandwich item that officially was not available until after the breakfast run. Charlie was one of the augmentees that

had been recalled to Korea from another assignment. He had been in Korea before and he knew how to get around seemingly ironclad rules. Just as a waitress came over, Charlie told me to watch and learn how to get what I wanted.

Charlie requested a bacon and egg sandwich to which the young waitress apologetically replied that sandwiches weren't available until after breakfast. Without hesitation, Charlie said that wasn't a problem and to please give him one egg over hard – break the yolk please – with an order of bacon and two slices of white bread toast with butter – but keep each slice in one piece. The waitress wrote all this down dutifully. Understanding fully what had just transpired and believing that the young waitress had fallen into the trap, Charlie's friend and I decided to have the same thing as well.

Soon enough our food arrived and Charlie cautioned that now was the time to be a bit discrete. He quickly built his bacon and egg sandwich while keeping a wary eye out for Ruthie. It was all for naught as Ruthie had been watching us from the kitchen door when the young waitress set our orders before us. Just as we were about to chomp down on what I knew was going to be the best damned breakfast sandwich ever, Ruthie appeared standing hip-shot and arms akimbo next to the table right where a fourth person would have sat.

To say that she was agitated would have been an inadequate description of her demeanor. Ruthie opened her mouth to say something, but then realized that we had done absolutely nothing wrong. Indeed, all of the things that we had ordered were standard *a la carte* items on the breakfast menu. But we had challenged her strict administration of the NCO Club dining room, and that was an affront requiring some sort of response.

For a few seconds, she appeared to be ramping up for an all-

out, full-scale verbal assault as she glowered at us. But just as quickly as she had materialized, she strode off, leaving in her wake a litany of Korean curses that were master-level invective. Anyone who thinks that military personnel know how to swear has never heard a pissed-off Ruthie. One of us eventually realized that our poor inexperienced waitress could very well be in for a hard time because Ruthie might be tempted to vent her spleen on any available target. To rectify that as best we could after the fact, the three of us left exorbitant tips.

For the next couple of days, we were not very welcome at the NCO Club when Ruthie was on duty. Eventually she calmed down enough to explain why she was so angry. It seems that some ignorant club members would ask for sandwiches that could not be assembled from the breakfast menu – turkey or roast beef, for example. The poor waitress, and then Ruthie, would have to point out that something like that was not part of the breakfast menu. When that happened, Ruthie and her staff often had to deal with arrogant and ungracious patrons.

I figured out that, if I intended to build a sandwich from the breakfast menu, I needed to sit in an inconspicuous spot, and I should ask the waitress to inform Ruthie about what I was doing. That seemed to resolve the issue, as Ruthie and I developed a friendly relationship over time.

We all need to be reminded at times that kind words and positive attitudes can make great differences in our life experiences. I believe that to be true – but I also know that there are exceptions. Sometimes nothing can make a nice person out of a hard-ass. A case in point was an experience I had at the Osan Snack Bar one evening during one of our early deployments there.

One night in the squadron lounge, a bunch of guys were

clustered around the black and white TV watching something that was of no appeal to me. I hadn't gone to the mailroom yet that day, so I announced that I was going to check my mail, wondering if anyone else needed to do so and walk along with me. Immediately somebody hollered out asking whether I would make a Snack Bar run since it was right next to the post office. I normally don't like being anyone's mule but there was no graceful way out of the request.

My only condition was, since I had been burned before on this kind of errand, that I had to be paid upfront for each and every order before I go. Donny said that he didn't have any money and that he would pay me later. Donny was one of the jerks who had burned me in the past, so I told him my condition specifically applied to assholes like him. I pointed out that he seemed to have money for the beers he was buying and that I was not going to be owed and never get paid.

Donny grudgingly dug a five out of his pocket and shoved it impolitely into my outstretched hand. I told him to watch it or I would deliver his food in the same rough way. I got everyone's order written down before I set out for the five-minute walk. After checking mail – nothing – I got in line at the Snack Bar, which was doing a lot of business at that moment. Nobody was answering the phone and that was probably why the guys in the barracks hadn't just made a telephone order.

When I finally got to the order station, I pulled out the list and went down the several orders. The older Korean guy taking the orders ridiculed me for having to write all that down, saying something about Americans not having much smarts. I decided to show him up by asking him if he had memorized the orders exactly as I had spoken them. He closed his eyes and repeated the orders back to me exactly as I had read them, even getting

the various condiments for the different sandwiches dead-on.

I was impressed but I still wasn't pleased that he obviously saw me as a mental defective or a lazy ass. Thinking to knock him down a notch or two and using the Korean term of address for an older person, I asked him, "Uncle, if you are so smart, why are you just taking orders at the Snack Bar?" As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted them, thinking that I had no need to prove myself to this guy. I quickly found out that I had taken pity on the wrong person.

Evidently, Uncle had skipped a couple of lessons in the Dale Carnegie handbook on *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. With absolutely no hesitation, he shot back with a bit of a sneer, "You Americans so stinky rich, I get all I can before you go." That shut me up. With no good reply, I merely moved on to the order pickup station to wait.

An airman behind me said that if the old piss-colored midget had spoken to him like that, he would have reached across the counter to smack the guy. I pointed out that the old Korean guy had heavy callouses on his knuckles, that he was likely quite skilled in some form of Korean martial art, and that he would probably have tied both of our skinny asses together in a bow. But the larger thought in my mind on the way back to the barracks took the form of, "Well, whaddya know, there are assholes in Korea, too!" That should not have been a surprise to me, but it nevertheless was.

The food from the Snack Bar was acceptable when right off the grill, but by the time I got back to the barracks, some of the sandwiches had gotten soggy. Even so, the smell of the bacon on some and the aroma of the French fries made me hungry, but unfortunately the chow hall wasn't open that late. Since my stomach was now informing me that it didn't give a rat's ass

what time it was or where it was fed, I decided to go the NCO Club.

On the way over there, I had an idea that would get me in Ruthie's good graces for sure. In the past, I had overheard her talking in Korean with some of the other waitresses about how she really loved mandarin oranges. I knew that Japan grew fantastic tangerines and that the two species were very close, with some people actually saying that they were the same thing. Whatever the case, I thought I would bring Ruthie a small crate of tangerines the next time I returned from Yokota. The investment in good relations would be worth it.

At my next meal at the NCO Club when Ruthie was on duty, I called her over to ask whether the club had any tangerines for dessert. Holy citrus fruit! Ruthie began to rhapsodize about how she wished that were true. Then she looked at me quizzically to ask whether I could get her some the next time I went back to Japan. Well, her frank question caught me a bit off-guard. I had wanted to make the offer, not respond to any request, although the outcome of such a deal would likely be the same.

As I digested her rather forward request, Ruthie slowly began to realize that she had just propositioned me. Many airmen offer goodies from Japan or the States in order to wangle dates with the young ladies working on base, and for Ruthie to ask me outright for something would be seen as a very unsubtle indication of her desire to go on a date with me. She actually blushed and I began to grin widely at the incongruity of the situation. Ruthie was not unattractive, but she was about 10 years older than me. If it were a day when she was not grumpy (already fed up with stupid customers or something), and if I were feeling in need of an adventure, it would have been easy to take her up on such an offer – had it been made in earnest.

As it was, I told her in my best Korean that I knew her intended meaning and to not feel any embarrassment. That I recognized her blunder added to her consternation, but Ruthie calmed down when she realized that I had no designs on her nor was I going to give her a hard time about her rashly expressed wish. I explained that I brought the subject up to see if I could show my appreciation for being able to get breakfast sandwiches without a big fuss when she was working.

So, after they came into season, I brought Ruthie small crates of tangerines on a couple of occasions, much to the amusement of others. To the waitresses that teased me about it, I simply explained why Ruthie and I were friends. To the guys who they were less polite about it, I simply said that Ruthie was one fireball of a woman – and that they ought to ask her out themselves. No one ever did and the jeers eventually stopped, but had anyone ever made a play for Ruthie, I would have laid heavy odds against his surviving the act of just asking.

As for me, I always got the fastest service, often with more generous portions, than other guys, even friends at the same table. If someone complained to Ruthie about the inequity of it, she would snap, “You should be more like him,” gesturing abruptly at me while walking away. I’d just shrug and nothing more was ever said.

No one really ever thought that I was doing Ruthie, but some of the guys wanted to get back at me for the benefits of my being her friend. It just so happened that there was a fad at Osan at that time, one akin to the streaking craze that hit the States several years later. This one, as is the case of many military pranks, was quite a bit cruder, a lot more personal, and rather appropriately termed “catching the red-eye.”

In one room in the Operations Building, the one with the

aisle between two lines of operator consoles, some of the guys had prepared a deception for me. The story was that one of the operators must have lost the last page of his typewritten work at a console when the technical support crew had kicked him off the position for some PMI – a preventive maintenance inspection.

I left my desk to look for the missing sheet and saw that the console had indeed been shut down with its typewriter gone, all of the electronic gear removed from its front panel, and a large piece of cardboard covering the hole where the gear would have been. As I peered about for the missing sheet of paper, I heard a noise coming from within the console. Thinking mice or something similar, I pried the cardboard away from the hole to be faced with – more accurately, to be reared by – the quite naked and very close buttocks of Roger. Holy hemorrhoids! Mooned at a distance of less than two feet, I had just caught the red-eye. The entire shift erupted into howls of triumphant laughter as a bent-over Roger bellowed from the depths of the console, “Gotcha, you dumb ass! And you can’t say I didn’t!”

Chapter Eleven: The Ugly, the Bad, and the Good

Not everything about hanging out with Koreans involved makkölli. After all, no one can go about just drinking the cheap shit and having a good time. On rare occasions, the group of us would go to the Venus Club, a nightclub of sorts but with a decidedly Korean twist, to drink beer. At first, I thought the name of the club was “The Penis Club,” for that is exactly how the neon sign had it. I was confused enough to ask Mun-nam why we were going to a club named after the male organ. After a several seconds of laughter by all of the Koreans, I was reminded that the Korean alphabet had no “V” sound. By convention, a “P” was used instead. Being reassured that it really was named after the goddess of love, I had to smile at my failure to recognize the name for what it really was.

The Venus Club was located on the second floor of a building that used to house a club that catered to Americans. For an unknown reason during my year back in the States, the American club had moved to another location, leaving a perfectly good barroom open for a Korean enterprise. The room itself was a rectangle with a disco mirror ball hanging from the center of its high ceiling. Around the perimeter on three sides were large curtained booths that could hold up to eight people in four wide upholstered chairs set around a table. The entrance with a manager’s station and a service bar were on the fourth wall, all of this surrounding a modest dance floor.

Bar girls populated the club to serve not only as waitresses, but also as dance partners and coquettish booth companions – for a price by the hour. I never understood why men would want to hang out with bawdy ladies, only to be told, “Sorry, fella, time for you to go home – alone” at the end of the evening.

However, Mun-nam and the others always wanted to go there when they were flush with money. Perhaps they were able to arrange something on the side with the bar girls, but I never saw anything to indicate that.

Anyway, after a couple of visits to the Venus Club, I knew that it was time for me to foot the bill. I expected the cost to be quite high, perhaps as much as \$40, so I cashed a check at the NCO Club to have enough Korean won. In the taxi on the way to the Ville, I discovered that in my haste I had left the won at the cashier's cage of the NCO Club.

I was confident for a number of reasons that I would be able to claim it the next day, so I explained my options to my Korean friends. Everyone could wait while I went back to get the won or I could ask the manager at the Venus Club to allow us to drink on credit until the next day. They all thought that it wouldn't hurt to ask, so we continued on to the Venus Club.

I led the group into the club, pausing at the manager's station to inquire about credit. We were known, I was confident, because this was the group that always had an American with them. The manager's response was a hearty "Of course!" I wouldn't have to return to the base to retrieve my money after all, so we picked a booth and began to enjoy the evening, including a few of the bar girls.

I usually declined to have a booth companion for myself for a number of reasons. I don't like being led on, and I was aware that being seen with an American on the dance floor could be detrimental to a bar girl's desirability. After all, "good" Korean girls do not as a rule associate with skivvy honcho Americans. I also did not enjoy spending the money for empty promises.

At the end of the evening, the bill was presented to me and I inquired as to how I would sign the IOU for credit. Following a

moment of stunned silence, all hell broke loose. The bar girls scattered like leaves in the wind as the manager came over to loudly berate me for being a deadbeat. I felt insulted, for I had taken the manager at his word that the club would extend me credit. He contemptuously retorted that he thought I was joking and he had answered in a like manner. There was no credit at the Venus Club.

My character was under attack. Being somewhat fortified by liquid courage, I told my Korean friends to leave and that I would handle this on my own. Mun-nam reluctantly followed the others down the stairs and out the door. A bouncer was about to roughly escort me out when I got him to stop directly in front of the manager to indignantly declare in Korean, "I pay my debts. You did not tell me the truth. I will sleep here on this floor until you allow me the credit I thought was offered in good faith. I pay my debts." With that, I broke free of the bouncer's grip to lie down in the middle of the dance floor and close my eyes. I thought that everyone was being extremely shortsighted, since it would be better to receive payment a little late rather than have to write the bill off as being run up by a stupid American.

Within minutes, a rough-looking older Korean man in a wheelchair prodded me with a wooden rod. He identified himself as the owner and demanded in an angry tone that I explain myself, insisting that I use English. I restated my case and added that our group had been patronizing his club on and off for some time. I also added that in my hurry to not delay the group in starting the evening, I had forgotten my money at the NCO Club. I thought that we would be recognized as good customers and that was why I had requested approval to run a tab.

After consulting off to one side with the manager, the owner

returned with the list of charges for me to sign, stating gruffly that I had until the next military payday to wipe the debt clean. "Yeah, now he realizes that I intend to pay," I thought. I told him that it would be paid well before that, most likely by the end of the day tomorrow. He bade me a brusque goodnight as I left.

Right after work the next day, I hustled to the cashier's cage at the NCO Club. As I expected, my money had been set aside for me. Mun-nam and the head cashier were close acquaintances and as a result, I always received preferential services from the cashier and his subordinates. I also made it a point to tip those Korean workers there, knowing that doing so would always be to my advantage.

After a relaxing dinner at the NCO Club and with a wad of won safely stashed in my pocket, I headed to the Ville and the Venus Club. When I entered the club, the manager showed surprise as I presented myself to ask for the owner. He curtly told me to take a seat in one of the booths but to leave the curtains open. I did so and soon an extremely attractive woman probably in her late 30s slid into the chair opposite me. Although this woman was perhaps a decade older than me, under different circumstances I would have made my appreciation known in a heartbeat.

Such thoughts fled my mind as she explained that she was the wife of the owner. He was not feeling well and she would be handling this affair on his behalf. She spoke nearly perfect English in a soft voice saying, "My husband is well-known in some areas and he has unusual business partners that you would not want to meet. It is good that you are here to pay off your obligation so soon. It shows that you have honor."

I was quite taken aback to suddenly realize that I had unwittingly gotten myself into a part of Korean culture that I

had only heard about and never wanted to experience – the Korean underworld. After only a brief hesitation as I digested the import of what the lady had said, I asked for the bill that I had signed. She readily produced it for me to see, not letting it out of her hand until I handed over the won in exchange.

As I excused myself to leave, she admitted that she did not think an American would have had the courage to do what I had done last night, let alone show the integrity to follow up on the obligation today. She got up to accompany me to the exit. Her last words to me were, “You now have credit here, but do not abuse it. Do you understand?”

Holy hoodlums! All I could think was that the situation could have turned out really ugly. If I had not insisted on paying, I might have been jumped in some alley by some of those “unusual business partners.” When I relayed my experience to Mun-nam and the others the next time we met, they were absolutely amazed that I had pulled it off, saying that I must be the luckiest dumb ass in the world. I just laughed – and did not tell them that I agreed with their evaluation of my mental capacities.

On the way back to the base after resolving my credit predicament at the Venus Club, I stopped off at the Camellia House to see if any of the regulars were there for me to sit and drink with. Once inside, I was disappointed to see that the only people besides Mom were two old men at a table in one corner arguing and a Korean woman sitting by herself along the back wall.

Since Mom had seen me, I was obligated to stay and have something to drink. Before I could sit, however, Mom came scurrying over to me to quietly suggest that I sit with the woman who was alone. Mom actually gave me a push

whispering in English, "You and she talk, go now!"

What the hell, I thought, the worst that can happen is that the woman tells me to take a hike. I can't get blamed for any ruckus because Mom would be the one who started all this. I took a better look at the woman and was surprised to note two things. First, she was not dressed as a business woman but was outfitted in conservative but casual Western clothes. Second, she was a very presentable woman roughly my own age.

I could not think of a good line as I approached her table, so I just blurted out the truth. I said that I often came to the Camellia House to practice my Korean with some of the other customers who were willing to talk with an American. I continued that it was Mom that suggested that I ask if I could sit with her.

She politely gestured to the chair opposite her without a sound. As I sat down, I told her my Korean nickname of Dragonfly and asked for hers. In lightly accented English, she replied that her name was Son-hŭi but that everyone called her Sony. I took a chance and said, "If I were a Korean lady, I would not want to be named after a Japanese radio." She paused and then gave a short laugh, looking at me with interest for the first time.

Reasoning that I was on a roll here, I continued by declaring that, as pretty as she was, she should be called Myŏng-ja for her brilliant smile. Her face lost its warmth as she quietly but intensely announced, "Do not bullshit me. I don't need any bullshit tonight." I quickly apologized and asked if she would be willing to speak Korean with me.

She agreed and then hesitatingly inquired, "Do you really think that I have a nice smile?" I grinned in return, responding, "No," and hesitated just a bit to toy with her before continuing, "Your smile is nice, truly, but it is your eyes that I find lovely."

Sony laughed without reservation and, for the first time since I had approached, I could see her begin to relax.

Sony had an empty glass in front of her but since she did not seem intoxicated, I suggested that perhaps we could have some conversation over another round. She accepted, and Mom, who had evidently been observing our interaction, quickly came over with two O.B.s and fresh glasses. As she left the table, Mom looked at me over her shoulder and winked as she grinned.

Sony and I talked at the Camellia House for more than an hour. Although we consumed only the two beers, Mom did not pester us to buy more. Long before midnight, I said that I had enjoyed our conversation very much but that it was time for me to get back to the barracks. Without making eye contact as she touched my hand briefly, Sony murmured that we could continue to talk where she lived. Of course I thought that was a splendid idea.

It was a short distance that we easily covered in silence. As I followed Sony into her place, I was surprised to see that it was not one room in a house but a nice apartment with a curtained archway between the front and back rooms. In addition to a small Western-style couch and a table with two chairs, the first room had a modern refrigerator, a hot plate, and a small TV. The room in the rear was obviously the bedroom. I was impressed. I knew from her speech and behavior that she was no business woman, so I concluded that she was a very successful shop owner.

Now that we were together and out of the public eye, I wondered at her sudden quietness. Since I didn't think she had changed her mind about me, I guessed that it was likely that she was waiting for me to make the next move. I felt a bit awkward, for there had been no flirting or other courtship behavior back

at the Camellia House, other than the invitation to her home. Fortunately, the processed beer chose that moment to make itself known. She excused herself to the back room to use the chamber pot and then asked me if I knew how to use it.

That appeared to break the ice a bit, for she then looked at me to say with a bit of defiance that she needed someone to talk with her tonight. Given her earlier comment about not wanting any bullshit, I realized that something must have upset her before I arrived at the Camellia House. It seemed that somehow I had been chosen to comfort her. Not quite sure how to go about that, I slowly approached her and gently gathered her into my arms just to hold her.

Speaking so quietly that I had to listen closely, Sony asked me to tell her again that I found her attractive. I did so with honesty and restrained ardor. Sony was looking for reassurance, as it seemed that whatever had happened was causing her to question whether she was appealing. That night, I did my best to convince her that she was the most desirable woman in the world. Sony was a willing and very active recipient of my efforts, rousing me two more times to finally conquer her insecurities on that point. When we finally slept, I was exhausted.

In the morning, Sony was again quiet and I felt it best to leave. She said that she would walk with me to the base. That was fine with me, but I mentioned that I wanted to stop at a drug store for some Bacchus-D.

After experiencing its recuperative powers before, I had since taken the time to read the ingredients on the back label. Bacchus-D contained Vitamins A, B, C, D, E, and K. It also had significant amounts of nicotine and caffeine. My depleted body demanded caffeine. I got a bottle for Sony as well and we both quaffed them with relish.

Once at the main gate, I thought that we would say our good-byes, but Sony proceeded through the checkpoint right with me, flashing a military spouse ID card. I was shocked to realize that Sony was the wife of some military guy. As soon as we were out of earshot of the gate guards, I straight-out asked her if she was married. She looked away for the briefest of moments before turning to face me with an unrepentant look as she said, "I am married, yes, but that no longer matters. Does this bother you?"

I was indeed bothered, but not for any religious reason. I was trying to formulate a delicate reply when Sony, seeing my hesitation, interjected that she understood if I was concerned about having broken one of the Ten Commandments, she herself being Catholic. I was about to deny any concern for Christian taboos when it struck me that Sony had unwittingly provided me with the only non-judgmental explanation for any worries I might have.

I falsely confessed that I needed time to think about what we had done, that while I enjoyed our time together and wished we could see each other again, that was probably not a good idea. Sony seemed to accept that. We gave each other a brief friend-like hug and she walked off toward one part of the base while I continued on to the Skivvy-Nine barracks.

The real reason I was uncomfortable was that I did not want to get in the middle of some domestic difficulty. I had heard of too many American-Korean relationships in which a minor spat became a very major problem when one or the other was found to be cheating during what could have been just a temporary breakup. I also knew that one of the most dangerous places for a guy to be is in a bedroom that is not his own.

I never saw Sony again, and I never told Mom of the Camellia

House or anyone else about what had transpired, but no man could ever forget a night like the one I had spent with a woman like Sony.

After my escapade at the Venus Club, I told Mun-nam and the others that I wanted to avoid the place for a while. They all understood and decided that we would revert to the House of Truth and drink makkölli even though they all liked beer and I preferred whiskey.

There were a couple of differences between the makkölli house where Mun-nam and the rest of us normally gathered and the House of Truth. The first is that the House of Truth was in much better repair due to its newer construction. Everything just looked better, neater, cleaner, brighter.

Another difference was that the kisaeng girls at the House of Truth were even less skilled in reciting poetry or singing. That really wasn't a problem since the only truly talented songstress at the other place had been the proprietress. Unfortunately, one could not request only her to perform for that would have been an insult to the less-gifted girls. Consequently, the relatively unskilled girls at the House of Truth weren't an issue.

Perhaps in compensation though, the House of Truth girls were willing to try out new ways to entertain their customers. I had the idea to introduce everyone to the game of Thumper. As we traditionally sat on the floor with legs folded under a low table, establishing a rhythm by slapping our thighs or stomping our feet was not practical. Instead, we used chopsticks to beat out a cadence on the table. Instead of using names, though, everyone just picked a number.

Another difference was that the House of Truth did not mind if its kisaengs got a little tipsy as they entertained. The girls were quite willing to play Thumper since it became as much fun

for them as it was for us guys, and the management sure as hell didn't seem to mind. More people drinking more makkölli had the benefit of causing us to buy more, and that was good for business.

However, the most significant difference was that the Truth kisaengs were more pragmatic in their relationships with the customers. That is not to say that the women were for hire, but they occasionally were coaxed into becoming mistresses of customers they favored. Before that could happen, though, the ladies expected some sort of relationship involving friendship and respect to develop.

There was one woman there, a Miss Yang – somewhat older than the rest and with a slightly crooked tooth – who interested me. More than anything, it was her spunky personality and her outgoing demeanor that caught my attention. She also seemed more curious than the others about the American who was making an effort to understand whatever he could about Korea and its culture.

After I had cautiously and mildly flirted with her a few times during our patronage of the House of Truth, Mun-nam uncharacteristically brought things out in the open. He and the others evidently had noted the verbal back-and-forth between the two of us. He teasingly questioned, “Why don’t you and Miss Yang go talk in the corner over there?” I was embarrassed – but not nearly as much as Miss Yang who dropped her gaze and covered her face with her hands. She would not even look at anyone. The other kisaengs giggled like schoolgirls, while the guys just grinned. Shit, I had to do something.

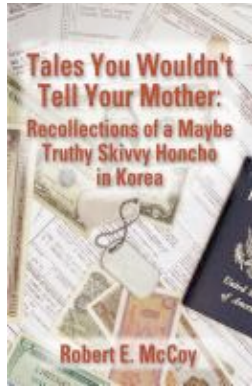
I summoned my dignity as best I could to declare, “I came here to consume makkölli with my friends and that is all I will do.” Realizing that Miss Yang could take my words as a rejection,

which would be the very last thing that I wanted, I hastened to add, “I do not say that Miss Yang is not appealing. She is that indeed! However, I mean to say that if Miss Yang desires my attention, it will be as she wishes.” With that, I looked directly at Miss Yang, who had dropped her hands from her face to stare at me during my proclamation.

After I finished my short sermon, I drained the remains of my makkölli cup in one swig to set it down emphatically. In an attempt to break up the seriousness with a bit of humor, I assumed a pompous tone of voice to query, “Well, who will fill my cup?” Mun-nam reached for the makkölli but Miss Yang stretched out to take the pot from him. As she poured, she gave me a look to make sure that I was watching her serve me. I was flabbergasted – and then delighted – as the meaning of her action washed over me.

Later, as we left the House of Truth, Miss Yang drew close to me and daringly admitted that she would not be offended if I showed her attention. I asked her when she was free and we agreed to have lunch at a nearby tearoom in two days when I was off duty during the day. This exchange did not escape the attention of my drinking buddies who razed me mercilessly for a while. I did not care one bit as I just grinned.

Miss Yang and I settled into a comfortable and caring intimate relationship that lasted for months. When the end of my assignment in Korea approached, she presented me with a gift, a hand-crocheted under garment. I was very moved by her offering, knowing that I would always remember our relationship with deep affection.



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