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The Investigation

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## THE INVESTIGATION

Ford lay with his eyes closed, positive that he had heard some one moving in the room. His head was on his extended right arm, his right ear against his shoulder. With only one ear listening, he couldn't be sure of sounds, but there was no mistaking the soft flesh that hit against and then moved quickly away from the curled fingers of his extended arm. Or the dusty, fish and vinegar acid smell of Koreans. A slicky boy, so close he could grab him. As he tensed to spring, he heard, from the other side of the room, the sound of a barefooted person moving and the muted click of metal on metal. There were two. He could smell and feel the presence of the one on his right, but he could neither smell nor feel the one to his left, only hear him.

He tried to figure out how to take both of them. Kim Chee lay on his left, wrapped in a blanket, and her breathing was quiet and just a little raspy. The room was small and didn't have much furniture. The bed took up most of the room. Next to the bed on the right was the night table with the Luger in the drawer. The belt and holster with the .45 hung from a nail in the side of the chest of drawers across the room. He heard a drawer in the chest open, and whether he heard it or imagined it, he sensed hands reaching into the drawers, searching out his camera, his watch, his wallet, his ball point pens, his cigarettes, his underwear, his socks, his fatigues—anything that could be sold on the black market. Even the .45. The one who brushed his outstretched arm had dropped down, and he saw a head or shoulder, he wasn't sure, over the foot locker at the foot of the bed. He saw darkness pass before darkness, and wondered at how silent they were.

He realized that one had gone outside, and the other was handing him stuff.

He groaned, then turned over, mumbled a little, and reached for the end table. He slowly opened the drawer. He grasped the Luger, then moved his hand slowly. The one in the room froze, and Ford couldn't place him. Then he heard the scraping across the floor. The slicky boy was dragging the foot locker across the floor.

Ford sat up quickly and fired.

Wood splintered.

In a second, hardly more, Kim Chee was screaming, while he kicked away the blanket and leaped off the bed, throwing himself through the already cut open wall, rolling on the damp earth, coming up on his knees to see both figures already on top of the stone wall that surrounded the house, the one almost lined up with the tree that hung wearily over the wall, its leaves black in the darkness. He fired first at the one on the left, close to the

tree, knowing that he could swing down and be gone, blocked by the trunk, if he missed, then at the other, who, at the moment he fired, took a flying leap off the wall to get as far away as possible. He jumped up and started for the wall, but fell over the foot locker and sprawled, his shin aching, the Luger thrown away. "Goddamn it," he muttered, and looked for the Luger. From the other side of the wall he heard the sound of bare feet slapping the earth and echoing in the darkness. He found the Luger, ran to the wall, climbed it, and looked out. In the black, moonless Korean night, he saw nothing. He went back to quiet the screaming Kim Chee.

In the morning, Ford dressed and got ready to go to the police station. He was a short, stocky man, no more than five-five. But his face was long, sad looking, ruddy from drinking. His hair was pepper gray, white at the temples and sideburns. He looked close to fifty, but he was not yet forty. His horse face would have been better suited for a taller man, a six footer. He had inspected his belongings with Kim Chee, and found the camera and watch missing. The foot locker, with a bullet-hole in the side, had been knocked over and most of the clothing in it muddied, but except for some shirts, nothing else was taken. Not even his Scotch.

Kim Chee sat on the bed, holding her elbow, her hand up to her mouth. "Uh muh," she kept saying, "uh muh."

"You know anything about them slicky boys?" Ford asked.

"Slicky boys number ten."

"Yeah, well them slicky boys were almost number one. You know anything about them?" He knew he had the wrong tone with her and she'd probably hate him.

"Me know nothing. You speak number ten."

"All right, I'm just asking. I find out you know anything about this and I'll knock your goddamn teeth out."

"Aaiiigh, you speak number ten."

"Don't give me any of that crap. I'm seeing the police this morning, and you better not have had anything to do with them, or you'll be in *tock san* trouble. You know the NP?"

"Creh, I know, NP," she said with that slight sing-song peculiar to the Oriental. She pulled her pajama top closed at the neck. "You think, you, me and slicky boys, same-same?"

"I didn't say you and slicky boys same-same, I just asked you if you knew anything about it. I'm just asking, and I'm doing you a favor of believing you. You know, I think *tang shin chu mal*."

*"Creh. Chu mariah. An kuji mal."*

"All right, you say so, and I believe you. I was just giving you a break in case you had something to do with them."

"No like slicky boys," she said, turning her face away and shrugging.

"O.k., Kim Chee." Talking to women always left him feeling a little helpless.

Ford drove to the headquarters of the National Police and reported the theft. Then he drove to the battalion BOQ for breakfast. As a Warrant Officer Junior Grade, a WOJG, he had a kind of in-between quality: a little lower than the officers, a little higher than the enlisted men. He was saluted and sirred, he ate and could live at the BOQ, but he was called Mister. The Army was his life. Drafted during World War II, he decided that without a college education—before the war he had dropped out of high school and worked for half-a-dozen years in a garage—he couldn't make the Army a career. But after the war there was the problem of civilian readjustment, and he reenlisted as a sergeant. But he had to become an officer. He tried for OCS, but there were too many ROTC boys, too many college boys who either went to OCS and got through or signed up and then dropped out just in time to have their cycles botched up. And there were the cutbacks in the defense budget. Then his automotive experience served him in good stead; when Korea erupted, he made WOJG. Later he tried to convert his Warrant Officer's commission into an RA commission, but that was still pending.

In back of everything was his divorce, which hurt him more than he ever said. He still paid Georgianne a hundred and twenty-five a month alimony, and kept hoping Georgianne would get married and get off his back. Otherwise, he had to extend his overseas TDY to live respectably. She just never fit into Army life, that was the trouble. It wasn't his fault, he was sure of that. He always told her, she knew it as she knew nothing else, that even more than the Army, he loved her. But knowing that she came first still wasn't enough for her. Besides, she couldn't adjust to stateside peacetime Army life. So when that business with Captain Withers came up, there was nothing to do but settle it quietly and divorce her. Only she didn't want it that way, and started bringing up things he had told her, and she acted the bitch. She swore she'd write to the DA—not the district attorney, but the Department of the Army—and screw him up and down the line, inside and out. So she won, and she got the divorce, and he paid the alimony. The bitterness he kept inside, but the acid had etched its lines into his face.

At the BOQ he spent most of breakfast telling the battalion officers what had happened. Then he drove

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Lieutenant Masters to company headquarters and finished the story. He sat on the corner of Masters' desk, while Masters leaned back with his hands behind his head, and Mayhew the First Sergeant and Thrubbs the company clerk listened in the doorway.

"I could of taken one," Ford said, "but there were two, and they were on different sides of the room. So if I took one, the other was behind me. And I couldn't see them. Even when they got outside, I couldn't see them because there was no moon and they were under the wall. But when they got on top the wall, I got a couple of shots, but I didn't hit them. The one guy went over in a crouch, and the other bastard jumped. If I had a burp gun, I could of cut them down."

"You told the NPs?" Lieutenant Masters asked.

"First thing this morning. They said they'd keep me informed. Listen, you know what those bastards did? They cut the paper wall out with a knife or a razor and left the flap hanging so you couldn't see any light from outside. When I saw that razor business, I was glad I didn't start anything in the dark." For a moment his memory filled with dark images of New Orleans and Harlem, of darkness and warm blood and silver flashes of slashing razors, and he felt a tingle through his genitals.

"Did they take much?" Lieutenant Masters asked.

"They got my watch and my camera, the Nikkon. But you know what they did?" he said with admiration in his voice. "They had the foot locker outside." He rolled up his pant leg and showed a bruised shin. "That's where I skinned it when I fell over it. They would of taken the chest of drawers. I'll bet you they would of taken the bed if we weren't in it."

Lieutenant Masters smiled, then he changed the subject. "What about that busted axle?"

"Well, I told the corporal if we don't get an axle off a line jeep coming back, I'm gonna dock him for it."

"You don't think it was line of duty?"

"Hell no. He had it up the hill, restricted, off-limits."

"That's getting pretty rough, isn't it? He had a trip ticket."

"But it wasn't authorized for the hill."

"You want to commence a court martial?"

"No, but it'll scare the hell out of the wise guys, they won't fool around with government property."

"Why don't you tell him to hire those slicky boys to steal him an axle?"

"They'll do it, by God. You know, down at the 568th last week, they caught a papa san with a transmission on his A-frame?"

The phone rang and Lieutenant Masters answered. He handed the receiver to Ford. "It's for you."

"Mister Ford speaking. Yes. Yes, Colonel. Yes. I'll be there in . . ." he glanced at his watch . . . "give me fifteen minutes. Fine. Thank you, Colonel." He hung up and rubbed his hands together. "That was Colonel Cho, chief of the NPs. He says he got two guys, he wants me to identify and watch him investigate." He took a trip ticket from his shirt pocket and filled it in. "I'll be back by twelve."

"How can you identify them?" Lieutenant Masters asked. "You said it was dark."

"I can't. But I want to see what happens when he investigates."

It was a large building, one of the relatively few concrete and steel structures in Seoul. Over the double doors of the main entrance was a plywood sheet with Korean writing and, printed in blue block letters: HEAD-QUARTERS, KOREAN NATIONAL POLICE. A girl in a khaki uniform stood at attention outside the door and saluted him as he went by. He walked through the large room filled with desks and secretaries in khaki uniforms. He stopped at the information desk and waited for the receptionist to look up.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Where's Colonel Cho's office?"

"What is your name?"

"Mister Ford."

"Oh, yes. You go . . ." she said, pointing down the hall, "then you . . ." she made a right angle with her hand."

"O.K.," Ford said and went down the hall and turned. It was like any other official building he'd ever been in. Bulletin boards were covered with papers, typists typed, people walked and talked, yet underneath it all was the feeling of seriousness, as though despite whatever happened outside the bee hive, the most significant parts of life were being lived inside. It was the feeling he had for the army, and may have been his reason for loving it, despite, or maybe because of the orderliness, the neatness, the lines of command and chains of responsibility, making a tight knot of security against the outside, where there never was much sense of order or respect for him. Even the corridors down which he walked took on meaning as corridors in civilian buildings never did. To be a civilian meant floating in a formless sea, sinking or swimming in a pond full of bigger fish that snapped and pulled you down. They could never understand that feeling. They could never know what the Army or the bars on his shoulders meant to him. Georgianne never did. God, how they had laughed at him when he was an enlisted man: RA all the way, spit and polish and gung ho. They could laugh. But for him the Army was a home, a mother, a protection against the outside world. The ARs and SRs and officers' codes were a protection for him even against himself. What would I be, he wondered, if I had no rules?

The Colonel stood up from his desk when he entered, and came towards him. He was a crew cut little man, almost two inches shorter than Ford, with a broad, flat, oriental face of that orangish color he had seen on Koreans but nowhere else. "Ah, Mister Ford, I am Colonel Cho."

They shook hands, and Ford was surprised at the strength of the Colonel's grip. He wondered how old the Colonel could be. With orientals you could never tell about age. He looked about twenty-eight or thirty, but he could be forty. Ford was the reverse: he looked forty-five or fifty, but he wasn't yet forty.

"I have read the reports of your unfortunate night, Mister Ford. It is too bad. But if you did not sleep last night, we did not sleep this morning. We have two men you might be interested in."

"You're very efficient, Colonel," Ford said. He admired efficiency.

"More efficient than you, and yet, not so efficient as you."

"I don't understand."

"Do you remember your story this morning to Captain Lee?" He reached forward and took up a dossier from the desk. "You say, 'There were two of them, but I couldn't see them. When I got outside, they were going over the wall. I fired off a round at each, but I missed. I fell over my footlocker, which they had taken outside.' Is that your story?"

"As far as I remember it, yes. Is there anything wrong?"

"Nothing wrong. Then you say, 'I heard *them* running away.' Then, 'When I looked over the wall, *they* were gone.' Correct?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure you saw nobody?"

"Positive."

The Colonel smiled. "Mister Ford, how many men did you hear running away?"

Ford leaned forward. "I thought two."

"That is very strange. This morning my men found a man with a bullet in his head, lying no more than twenty feet away from the wall behind your house. He could have got that far if he jumped from the top of the wall and was hit from behind with a Luger bullet, don't you think?"

"You mean I killed that sonofabitch?"

Colonel Cho smiled. "It would seem that way."

"I'll be damned," Ford said, his long, reddish face glowing, his pale blue eyes looking like chips of glass. "I'll tell you, Colonel, I always thought I was pretty good with the hand weapon. I know I couldn't of hit him with a forty-five, but I thought I could with the Luger. Well, I'll be damned."

The Colonel dialed a number and spoke a few words into the phone. "I also have another man you might be interested in, Mister Ford. Come." He held the door open for Ford. They walked down the hall and down a stairway and into the basement. They entered a large dim room with a dirt floor, a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling, and a prisoner sitting on a chair. Three uniformed NPs stood behind the prisoner, who was thin, blank-faced, dressed in the white pajama suit found everywhere in Korea. His face was lined, thin, almost chinless.

"This man," Colonel Cho said, placing his hand on the prisoner's left shoulder, "was brought in this morning, just before I called you. Do you recognize him?"

"No," Ford said.

"That is a pity," Colonel Cho said. He patted the man's shoulder, and the man bit his lip, his face white with pain. "Sit, sit," the colonel said, and the man fell

back against the back of the chair. "*Mool, jom ji sayo,*" the Colonel said, and one of the NPs went out and returned with a pitcher of water. The Colonel poured some over the man to wake him. Then he stepped behind the man and put his hand on the left shoulder again, and drummed his fingers while the man bit his lip and grabbed his elbows. "Yes, this man was brought in with what seems to be a bullet hole in his left shoulder. I find that very interesting, don't you?"

"You mean I hit both them sonsobitches?"

"It would seem so, wouldn't it?"

"Sonofagon!" The man in the chair looked at him with black, empty eyes. His face had the look of death in it. Suddenly he was no longer a poor Korean, probably a slicky boy, but a man he, Ford, had almost killed. The first one he had killed, there was no doubt about that. The bullet had been dug out and the ballistics checked out. But this was a man he had almost killed. Strangely, this man became more important than the other one, for this one was more like himself. This one still had to die, and he, Ford, had almost killed him. He and the prisoner were equal, and that equality, he felt, in some way degraded him.

He watched Colonel Cho's fingers dig into the man's shoulder, opening the wound and making the shirt soak with blood.

"How come there's no hole in the shirt?" Ford asked. "No bullet hole?"

"Oh, you see," said Colonel Cho, "they wore nothing when they entered the house. They even rubbed themselves with dirt and oil. The other one was quite naked, like a baby."

The Colonel said something in Korean to the prisoner, and he shook his head. The Colonel continued to speak, but the prisoner kept shaking his head, sometimes vigorously, sometimes slowly. The prisoner held his hand to his shoulder. Then he nodded, and looked up, his face white. Ford noticed that he had a very thin, stringy mustache, almost too painfully pitiful to be a meaningful mustache, and he became depressed over the sparsity, the weakness of the mustache. Ford somehow resented the feeble attempt of the mustache to be a mustache, when it was really only half-a-dozen strands of hair on either side of the man's nose, slightly below it, that hung down and curled a little at the corners of his mouth. The man's eyes, like all Korean eyes, were dark brown, but sunken, two extinguished coals. Ford didn't understand what the Colonel said, but he knew that the prisoner said no, not with any conviction, probably knowing that whatever he said, he wasn't believed. It was a listless no. What was the matter with him? Ford wondered. Didn't he know he was dead?

"He is a stubborn prisoner," Colonel Cho said. "Fortunately, we understand such people." He slapped the prisoner across the face and spoke quickly. The prisoner straightened himself and stood up. One NP took away the chair, and the other two moved to form a square, the prisoner on the inside, the NP who took the chair becoming the fourth corner. Colonel Cho pushed the pris-

oner to one of the NPs, who pushed him to another, who pushed him to the other, who pushed him to Ford, who had joined them, making the figure a pentagon, who pushed him toward Colonel Cho, who pushed him, now with a spin, caused by grabbing both shoulders and rotating him to the next, who continued the spinning to the next. It continued to Ford, who spun the man to Colonel Cho, surprised that the prisoner was so light. Colonel Cho steadied the man and smacked him across the face with an open palm, sending him spinning to the next man, who smacked him and sent him spinning to the next, and so on to Ford, whose slap knocked the poor bastard's head to his other shoulder and he thought he had put him out. Colonel Cho met the spinning man with a flick of his fist that sent him reeling to the next man, who stepped aside and hit him a left jab that sent him spinning to the next. And so it went to Ford, who waited a moment until the right moment and threw a straight right that missed the man's chin and smashed into his right shoulder, sending him flying into Colonel Cho. Both went down, and Ford ran over to pick up the Colonel and help brush him off.

"I'm sorry, Sir," Ford said, suddenly shamed at his failure. He had humiliated himself and his uniform. It would have been so easy to give a short chop, a jab, but no, he had to grandstand it. All he had to do was hit the man on the chin and send him spinning, and he had failed. He thought of the many times he had failed before. It seemed that he always struck out with bases loaded, that he always missed the point after touchdown, that he always made the error that cost the game, and a sudden sense of shame poured over him.

Colonel Cho stood up. "*Mool,*" he said, and one of the NPs brought the pitcher. The Colonel poured it over the prisoner, and said something in Korean.

The man got up from the muddy floor and stood, shoulders stooped, water dripping from his hair, the red stain spreading over his shirt. Standing before the prisoner, the Colonel rose slightly forward and struck him full in the face. The man almost crumpled, and for a thousandth of a second Ford looked into the blank eyes and bleeding mouth and felt a stirring in his bowels. Then he caught him with a left uppercut that straightened him, then sent a right into his nose, and he felt the bone crumple against his knuckles. It was a perfect punch, and he felt he was making up for his failure. The man's head snapped back, and Ford bit his lip and quivered as he fought back the desire to grind his knee into the man's testicles. He thought of Georgianne, and hit the man with a left, then a right, then a barrage of rights and lefts into the bloody mass of a face.

Then the man fell to the floor.

Driving back to the company, Ford clenched and unclenched his fists on the steering wheel. His knuckles hurt. Colonel Cho had told him they would keep an eye on the black market and would contact him if they found out anything about the camera and watch. Suddenly he was tired, so damn tired, he felt like sleeping off the afternoon. It was like a good night with a woman. He was just dead tired. He could tell them about it at supper.