

Chapter 9

Launched

*beginning on November 25, 1972
and continuing for 1 year, 4 months, and 15 days*

*“Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see.
(Ecclesiastes 11:9)”*

During my entire Korean adventure, I kept a daily journal, filling five notebooks over the course of 655 days. Journaling filled three needs. First, I anticipated my time abroad would be a watershed event so I wanted to record my experience, preserving a written record of this sojourn. Second, I lived an isolated existence, a big-nosed Westerner in a sea of Korean faces. Putting to paper my deepest feelings provided therapeutic release. Finally, journaling clarified my thoughts. As Flannery O’Connor once remarked, “I write because I don’t know what I think until I read what I say.”

My flight to Tokyo took about eleven hours. I talked and played cards with a businessman seated next to me. I was impressed with a stewardess in my section. She was good-looking and read her Bible in spare moments. I was too shy to speak with her, so I slipped her a note. Miss Brabant and I exchanged a few letters.

At the Tokyo Airport I passed through immigration, health certification, and customs then bussed into the giant metropolis. Downtown Tokyo was ablaze with neon, most of the signs flashing in English. I slept soundly in a small hotel room and almost missed the return bus ride to the airport.

Once again, I passed through immigration and customs at the Seoul Airport, this time greeted by American diplomats. My cohort of thirty-five PCVs boarded a bus for our training location, the city of Chun Chon, capitol of Kang Wan Province.

We arrived at the King Sejong Hotel where our training began the next day. I can remember mixing with four groups of people: fellow PCVs from K-25, American teachers and mentors who were mostly former volunteers, Korean language teachers, and Korean waiters and office workers. I was given a name tag with my new Korean name, “Oh-Song-Min”. The “Oh-min” sounded like “Foreman” and the “Song” translates as “Saint” or “Christ” or “Chris”.

The first few weeks whizzed by. Initially, my roommate was John Bell, but because he was such a heavy smoker, I asked for a switch. Jim McGuire became my second roommate and turned into

my best friend. Our schedule looked like this: Korean language from eight in the morning to noon; lunch to one; language again until three; followed by some kind of ESL training until dinner at six. On most evenings there was an optional cultural event.

As part of my classwork, an American instructor asked students to write down initial impressions of the Hermit Kingdom. My report filled one side of lined paper:

Before my arrival in Korea I had only a vague notion of what this strange corner of the world might look like. I was told in training that if I were assigned to a small village, I may not see another Westerner for weeks! *Wow*, I thought. *There's a place I can live untouched by American culture?*

I was rudely awakened in Tokyo when neon signs painted the skyline in English. Then on the bus ride from Seoul to Chun Chon, I saw field workers harvesting a cabbage crop, oxen pulling a cart. I was exulting in how absolutely foreign this view was to my eyes. Then I noticed a smashed Budweiser can by the side of the road. Ugh.

I thought I'd experience something truly Korean so I went to a local tea room. As soon as I sat down, the waitress dashed to the stereo to put on "Tell Laura I Love Her". America, won't you ever leave me alone?

I have mixed feelings of this American hegemony into Korean culture. I'm proud to see my own values being accepted. Yet, I wish Koreans would not be so gung-ho about discarding their rich heritage in favor of Coca Cola, white shirt with tie, and guitars. It is true I may go for weeks without seeing a Western face, but I can't pass an hour without seeing the Western influence.

I'm beginning to accept this—I think. Korea is a hybrid, a four-thousand-year-old culture that has decided it's better to bend to the West than to break to the East. The saturation of Korea with American influence is sad to me, but inevitable in a world where Seoul is only a twelve-hour flight from San Francisco.

The Korean language was difficult for me to grasp. I discovered my pronunciation improved as I mimicked native speakers. I would make Koreans laugh by sounding just like the tape recordings. Superficially my speech was good, but I could never develop much depth. I didn't apply myself enough.



After a few weeks of classroom drudgery, each of us volunteers went on an outing to visit an established PCV. I traveled to Seoul with some friends, then alone to the town of Kumsan. My Peace Corps host was Gus Stokes. He was my polar opposite, a want-to-be sports reporter obsessed with the Redskins, liquor, and escorts. He voiced a distaste for all things Korean and went through the motions of teaching. I observed his performance, then followed him to the

Roman Club where he wished to educate me in drinking and whoring. He bought us a few bourbons and explained I could procure a girl for just one-thousand won (\$2.50) for the night. I partook of the liquor, but no girls showed up. We returned to his guest house at curfew—ten o'clock.

The next day, December 22, was a national holiday, the inauguration of President Pak Chung Hee. After dark, we walked into the bar again. This is my journal entry:

Just after Gus and I sat down and ordered drinks, a young girl walked through the door and snuggled up to Gus. She was all made up with ruby red lips. Gus said, "Chris, let me introduce you to my girlfriend".

I politely bowed and she giggled. *Wait a minute*, I thought. *I didn't know Gus had a Korean girlfriend.*

Gus continued, "And I have a girlfriend for you too. She wants to go home with you." From out the shadows a young lady stepped forward and winked at me. She was so pretty. My heart leapt.

My mind raced between *yes* and *no*. Finally, I blurted "anyo" (no) and backed away. Gus stared in puzzlement as I fled from the club.

I later thanked God He enabled me to flee the Roman Club. If I had hesitated one more moment; if I had spent that one night in carnal delight, I can only guess how my future may have altered. Thank you, Lord, for provoking me to run the path of Joseph Bar Jacob as he fled the arms of Potiphar's wife.

When I returned to Chun Chon, I read accumulated letters from home. Along with my parents and the Zelens, Sunny had sent me a hand-drawn card complete with silly sayings. What could I make of it? Did silliness mean she was seeking serious relationship? Should I pursue her? I still couldn't figure out girls.

My twenty-third birthday came and went. With the Korean peninsula being sixteen time zones ahead of Ohio, I mused about when my birthday actually occurred. On Christmas day I attended a ten o'clock service at Chun Chon Holiness Church. I appreciated being in a throng of Christians as they sang familiar carols. I enjoyed bellowing the words in English

On the day after Christmas I taught my first ESL class, team-teaching with Andrea. Our lesson plan was based on the "May I" pattern: "May I stand up?" "Yes, you may stand up." I felt relaxed, but knew I could have done better. We spent an afternoon, evaluating our performance.

On New Year's Eve, several friends and I hiked to a local Buddhist temple. I didn't make it to the top. My big flat boots were too slippery on the snowy grass. After dinner, we gathered in the wedding hall—our activity center—for a party. I wandered around conversing with many and talking about Jesus to a few. I went to my room to pray-in 1973. I heard gongs and shouts announce its arrival.

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