My Side of the Fence

Somewhere tucked into the Hongdae neighborhood of Seoul, a sweaty mass of teens and twenty-somethings is packed into a grungy basement venue. The mostly Korean crowd dresses in skate shoes, band tees and buzzed hair. The room is tiny and dark; the walls and ceiling are lined with posters of long-past concerts. A small stage takes up a third of the room, and on nights like this, the crowd is shoulder to shoulder in the standing-room-only venue.

For the evening's headliner, the place is nearly overflowing. The band's biggest fans squeeze in toward to the chest-level bar separating the stage from the crowd. The band's Korean lead singer takes the stage in a basketball jersey: a style popularized by hardcore punk bands of the American Midwest. Canadians, Australians and Americans blend into the pack of outcast Korean youth and turn the mob into a capacity crowd.

Without warning or signal, the band launches into their first song of the night, one of many that blends both Korean and English lyrics. The crowd erupts. A group near the center is whipped into a swarm of jumping and kicking. Those of us near the front pump our fists and scream along with the verses.

As the anthem approaches, every hand in the room stabs skyward. The fists are Korean, and they are white. They are stamped for admission. The young ones are backed with markered X's. The lead singer places his booted foot on the amplifier at the front of the stage and leans toward us as we shout, in unison, a single line.

"CHEONG-JU CITY HARDCORE."

For a moment, we are one.

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This is everything that I had ever looked for in a social scene; everything I had wanted of the punk scene back in the U.S., but had missed by about a decade. We are a family of artists and politically-minded kids who for some reason or another, spend each weekend bound together. We are exiles.

After the show, the crowd spills back out onto the street. The venue's entrance is located on a near-vertical alley ascending from a main thoroughfare of this Seoul neighborhood popular among college-aged outcasts and expatriates of all sorts. The scene remains friendly and excited, but the dynamic has changed just a bit.

"You don't see any, I don't know, conflicts of interest being a punk and being in the military?" a young Canadian teacher asks me in the cool evening air amid a group of Western expats.

English teachers are among the second largest group of foreigners living in Seoul: most are recently out of college and eager for a year or two of adventure overseas. Most are progressive folks. All of them are quick to distinguish themselves from the largest group of Westerners living in the city: American service members.

The scene is, at least superficially, welcoming. When military members find the small cluster of clubs that host punk rock shows in this neighborhood, they are generally welcomed, assuming that we behave ourselves. Most of us fit in nicely though; the soldiers that make the trip out here – rather than the quick trip to the foreign district, where drinks are expensive and feminine company can be purchased cheaply – are here for a reason. We're progressives, or radicals, or nerds, or a combination of all three.

That is the real surprise though, not that U.S. soldiers rotate in and out of this scene, but that political, punk rock kids would join the Army in the first place. I'm not the only one, but being a K-9 handler for the Military Police makes me an uncommon case.

To the young man challenging my presence, I should explain the connection between poverty and enlistment in the military. I should tell him that the same hardships that led me to punk rock are the ones that led me to escape from Reno. I should admit that I was naive and knew nothing of the military, so my profession in the military was decided very much at the whim of an Army recruiter. I should say something about money for college. Of 9/11 knee-jerks.

"It's . . . complicated, I guess . . ." I stutter out, beginning before I've formed a response.

"Lay off him, it's just a job," a feminine voice interrupts us. "I should ask you what business a kid who went to a private college has in a foreign punk scene." A round-faced young woman with her dark hair buzzed short and a handsome Jewish nose interrupts the Canadian man's response.

The woman's name is Unity. I have no idea what her real name is (maybe Laurie or Laura or Lauren); since being introduced a couple months ago, I've never heard her called anything but this. She teaches English too, although she doesn't come across as the professional type. She's wearing lace-up boots that are spray-painted pink and a bomber jacket with sloganed patches pinned all over. She has a great smile too.

Unity is bright. She is much more intelligent than I, but doesn't come across as snobbish. She isn't dumbing herself down for anyone, she just isn't a braggart. I listen closely when she speaks, not just because I recognize that she is smarter than me, but also because I have a bit of a crush on her. She has shown me around town in the weeks prior: introduced me to the hip record stores and her favorite street-art spots and a place where we can get soy ice cream. She makes

sure to invite me to meet-ups that soldiers don't get invited to very often, and I make sure to come along and keep quiet.

Her challenge to my inquisitor tonight is enough to end the awkward line of questioning; he drops the subject and moves on to another cluster of folks gathered on the narrow street. Unity and I continue talking, and the scene around us becomes a bit of a bazaar. We trade CDs and vinyl that are hard to find in shops around Seoul. We trade books that we've been discussing for weeks. We trade patches and stories and ideas. We share cans of Foster's beer, which the Koreans hate, the Americans love and the Australians have never tasted.

"So did you hear about this protest next week?" Unity asks me from behind a chrome-colored beer can. "The one out near Pyeongtaek?"

I tell her that I had.

"We're going to be there, a group of us expats, sitting in with the local farmers." She's talking about a demonstration in the farm villages outside of Pyeongtaek where, for months, folks have been rallying in protest to the expansion of the nearby U.S. military base. The base is undergoing a rapid expansion to draw U.S. forces out of Seoul and into the more rural areas so as to reduce the visibility and social impact of the American military, a move which many progressive Koreans consider a consolation prize in lieu of their primary goal: getting the tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers who have occupied the peninsular nation since the 1950s out of Korea. The downside of this bargain is that a small farming village will be annexed and plowed over to make way for this expansion.

I know all this because I am stationed at this military base.

"I don't suppose that there is a chance you'll be joining us, huh?" She nudges me with her elbow and grins. She knows that I'm with her on a lot of issues, but that being a military

member overseas, I'm restricted on what I can say or do politically. These kinds of conversations normally end with me wishing her and the rest of the crew well, but the mood is a bit more uncomfortable this time.

"I'm going to be working that day," I tell her, my face hiding nothing.

I don't have to say more. Looking at me with a hurt (and somehow sympathetic) stare, Unity understands the implication. She knows what I do for the military; what it means that I am working on a weekend. She knows what the Army's working dogs are used for during protests. She doesn't know the acronym QRF, Quick Reaction Force, but she knows what the police response to a demonstration outside of a military base looks like. She understands immediately why my job isn't always *just a job.*

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From my position, the protest is an awfully boring affair. Over the course of a weekend, I spend two 10-hour shifts in the front seat of a Korean SUV, listening to punk rock blare from headphones plugged into one ear, and listening to police radio traffic with the other. In the back seat rests Rollie, a 100-pound German Shepherd in a large, plastic crate stenciled with DANGER, MILITARY WORKING DOG. His head rests on the floor of the crate and he is looking up at me with big brown eyes whenever I glance back. Rollie sighs; he is bored.

"I hear ya, buddy."

The Korean National Police come out in enormous numbers for these types of events. Nearly every protest that I've witnessed outside of a military base hosts a human wall of Korean police that outnumber the demonstrators by nearly two-to-one. This is especially impressive during large protests, or protests of unknown numbers (like today) when several busloads worth of men in black jumpsuits and shoulder-high shields are transported in from around the region.

This is a thoughtful bit on the part of U.S. and Korean authorities. These numbers are an effort taken to ensure that protestors rarely encounter U.S. military police forces during these events. Everyone from top commanders to the troops geared up with batons and shields know what kind of negative impact hands-on contact would have on international relations.

So we are hidden. In a parking lot far from the event, there are dozens of military police clad in riot gear; young men and women wearing helmets and masks and carrying batons and interlocking shields. They have been training in crowd control techniques all week, just in case something happens: in case someone breaks through. But we – both the troops in the gear and I, the guy with the dog – aren't a show of force; we are a contingency plan. We're in a parking lot a mile or so away from the side of the base that butts up against the village where the protests are organized. Down the road, there are a hundred or so Korean police with buses equipped to be used as barricades or bulldozers when needed. Beyond them, a 25-foot-tall, razor-wire-topped fence surrounds the base. Just outside the fence, several hundred more police with five-foot-long clubs stand shoulder-to-shoulder. There, just beyond the human wall of the national police, is a tiny farming community in its final days. On one side of the village is a dilapidated hovel, where Unity and a few other expats are working alongside hundreds of Koreans, helping to paint protest banners in English and doing interviews for the news outlets that want them.

I don't see any of this from my location. I see the interior of my Kia Santa Fe, and outside of my windshield, I see a handful of young military police, geared up, but resting on the asphalt in the parking lot where we wait, relieving their boredom by tossing pistachio shells at each other.

Life on the base proceeds as normal that weekend. The dining halls and the shopping center and the gym are all open for business. The liquor store is full and rapidly emptying. The

embroidery shop is abuzz. The protests make international news every time they heat up, but other than a small travel advisory notifying folks leaving the military installation on foot of an ongoing demonstration, few troops other than the Military Police even take notice that day.

I have played in my head a hundred times the scenario where Unity and I meet eyes from opposing crowds during a storming of the base. An alternate history where I am forced to make decisions between duty and friendship, where the crowd is not placid, but angry and whipped into a frenzy. Unity at the head of a wave of Korean protestors as they fell a fence and swell over the levee of armored police. Rollie and I rush from our vehicle, my hand on his collar, and I order the crowd to freeze. Rollie is transformed into a snapping, snarling war machine at the end of my arm. Unity and I lock eyes and we both shake our heads as if to tell the other, don't do this. "MILITARY POLICE," I shout. "Halt, Halt, Halt or I'll release my dog . . ."

This is fantasy though. On my side of the fence, the day is uneventful, and I am relieved. Unity will tell me later that she was proud of her work that weekend, although it is not so much as a speed bump when the time comes to raze the village and make way for expansion. In photos that I will later see of Unity, she looks teary-eyed, although I'm unsure whether it is because she believes that she can save the village, or because she knows it is doomed.

It is while driving home to my barracks room at the end of my shift that I see my first visual clue of anything out of the ordinary on base: a tattered red banner with a hand-painted message, affixed with plastic cable ties to the perimeter fence.

"Go Home."

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This is not where Unity and I part ways, although I regret to say that we do, in fact, part ways. It happens in a tiny apartment in one of the many unremarkably boxy high-rise buildings

in the suburbs of Seoul. Although I am a bit too intimidated by Unity to ever make a move, she has no such objection and asks me if I'd like to come over for dinner.

Most of the evening is agreeable and quaint: we order-in from a place that she is convinced is at least vegetarian, if not vegan. We sit on the hardwood floor of her tiny apartment and listen to American and British punk albums and we talk about Seoul and home and the scene and anything but politics. She invites me to stay the night, which I do. She is hoping that I will make a move, but I – as labeled by my brothers in uniform – "lack closing skills." We wind up cuddling in her bed, nothing more. Tonight she is uncharacteristically docile, and as we lie in the dark, she rests her head on my bare chest as I stare at the ceiling.

In bed we are close, close enough to discuss what had occurred a few weeks prior.

"It's wild what happened, us being on opposite sides of the fence and all," she says, breaking the silence.

"It really is. I hate these sorts of things, but I suppose that I understand both sides of the argument."

"You what?" she says as she lifts her head to look me in the eyes.

"I get both sides: the plight of these people and why they'd be mad, but also the need for relocating forces outside of Seoul."

"The U.S. is an occupying force stealing the ancestral home of these farmers!" she snaps, glaring at me with harsh, skeptic eyes.

"We are . . . The U.S. is here as a guest of the Korean people," I reply. (A standard talking point given to U.S. forces serving in Korea.) "The move is important to the future relations between the Korean government and the U.S. military." (Another.)

“Why exactly do you think that the U.S. is even here in the first place? What justifies them staying?”

“I don’t know. I guess . . . we came here to defend South Korea during the war, and we’ve stayed as a deterrent against invading forces.”

“The goal is reunification, not invasion, you know that. Besides, you don’t think that the U.S. having a footprint in mainland Asia plays a big part of it?”

“Only incidentally. We are here as allies to Korean people. In many cases, among those old enough to remember the war, we’re welcomed as guests here.”

We recede into silence. The room remains quiet long enough for things to feel uncomfortable: silent enough and still enough that we begin to recognize the difference between our upbringings, our educational backgrounds, our current stations in life. When I recall this conversation years later, it is filed under ‘naivety.’ It will be a while before I start understanding how right she is about all of this, about most of the things she said to me during our time together.

“Tony,” she begins, shaking her head with disappointment. “I think that you and I just come from different worlds.” It is the last thing she tells me before returning her head to my chest, closing her eyes, and resting.