

chapter one

He kept his head bowed all the way up the steep path. It was April and the Korean hillsides, having persevered all winter, complaining under the snow, were suddenly extravagant with pink jindala that broke out on their thick brown hides like a rash. It was cold as he neared the summit. He drew into himself, less of a target to the wind. The ground was flat where he stood on a small plateau. On one side he could see the vast valley from which he had mounted, on the other he looked down upon the Yellow Sea. A misnomer, he thought, it's the Gray Sea, gray as a timberwolf and rabid, lying on its side, flanks heaving with forced respiration and the spume of the waves like spittle bubbling from its jaws.

Someone had carved a great stone Buddha on the summit. Sloane walked to it, leaned against the granite pedestal and lit a cigarette. *Until the East Sea's waves are dry* went "Augukka," the Korean national anthem, but the Buddha gazed out over the sea with an expression of nausea, as though even the sight of that ocean made him seasick. The faint grimace, the lowered lids, seemed to be a suppression of gastric distress. Like me, Sloane thought.

Korea. With his entry into this country he had begun the ordeal that would lead him to his manhood, or death—or both. Everything that had gone before—his decision to be a

doctor, medical school, surgical training—had taken place in a kind of nursery. He had been called Doctor there, had gotten married, performed operations, delivered babies, but he had only been dressed in his father's clothes *playing* grown-up, *playing* doctor.

"Why do you want to be a doctor?" the chairman of the admissions committee had asked him.

Sloane had looked at the center of his polkadot tie, the little knot like the head of a kingpin in the man's neck which, if pulled, would cause that crew-cut, razor-lipped, small-eyed head to roll across the table like the yield of a guillotine. Who would wear such a tie at a time like this? Or such a ridiculous white mustache, pencil thin? With a straight face he had said, "I find the material interesting." He had calculated it well in advance, knowing they would be looking for the slightest sign of frailty, softness, pity. He wouldn't be caught there. Nor could he have told the simple truth. "To swim in the very stream, sir, not walk alongside of it." No, he knew who they wanted him to be. Pure objective. Man of science. No faggotry. Be crisp and let them see you in a laboratory titrating body fluids, *not* holding a hand, helping mankind, anchoring a heart to courage. No wit either. Risk being a bit of a bore. "I find the material interesting." And he was accepted.

He had crossed the water on a troop transport along with twelve other doctors and the backbone of Medical Company 102 of the Seventh Division Artillery. From Japan it was eastward until there was no more east. They had docked at midnight, were unloaded at Pusan by three in the morning. It was January and cold in the darkness of an anemic moon with flashlights curtly waving them on to a comfortless beginning. Loaded into the open back of a two-ton truck with thirty others of his kind, he was treated to his first Korean roads, so pitted and rutted as to be felt in every cell. Pressed close together, the men in the truck did not huddle for warmth, they did not even talk. It was a sober enactment

of anxiety and the need not to show it. The intermittent flare of cigarettes made the truck seem infested with phosphorescent bugs. Now and then one of these insects would arc from the truck in an apparent suicide. Easily understandable. By morning they were ensconced in an abandoned Japanese jail. Three to a cell plus rats made a crowd. Men and beasts crouched and eyed each other yellowly in the glare of a naked bulb. Sloane fell into a damp and restless sleep. They parted the next morning.

The trip north was in the noisiest conveyance he had known, wheezing and coughing as if it had contracted emphysema from the dust. Sloane saw that the driver had at least two talents: driving through potholes and spitting. Each time they were catapulted, doll-like, the driver would shake his head, lean out of the jeep and propel a dollop of spittle into the cloud of brown and putrid dust. It had become twilight and still they headed north. Sloane slouched in his seat, willing limpness into his body, giving himself up to the battering. He discovered that if he rested his elbows on his knees and let his bowed head swing forward freely between the shoulders, he could avoid the headache that came stronger and stronger with each transmission up the spinal column. He was certain that with each blow a tiny punctate hemorrhage appeared in his brain. He felt his cerebration dulling. If the trip were long enough he would lumber from the jeep slope-browed and forever stupid.

Korea. The name reminded him of a disease, chorea, characterized by aimless jerky movements of the body: St. Vitus Dance. It was fitting. Since he felt no purpose here, his arms and his legs had no purpose either. With the decision not to resist came a measure of relief, small to be sure, but enough to make thought again possible. He felt schizophrenic, as though he were watching himself from elsewhere, but the alienation gave a patina of numbness to his discomfort, like receiving a shot of morphine. The pain was still there but one no longer cared.

Between jolts, pictures of his life slipped into view like lantern slides. He rejected each one until he saw himself at 8 o'clock filing with the other white coats into the cold amphitheater for Grand Rounds. From this distance they looked like prisoners in a concentration camp forced to watch an execution. The crime: surfeit of life—inadvertent misuse of the body. For a moment the picture stuck and they were no more than gravestones on a hill. Last to arrive was the bed bearing the patient, abandoned in despair in the presentation pit at the center of the hall. Her black head protruded from the covers, an old cracked boot, tongue unslung and flipping over the side.

“Jessie Atkins is a sixty-eight-year-old widowed Negro female,” the intern intoned, “who was admitted to the hospital ten days ago with the complaint of having fallen unconscious on the street.”

A hard jolt threw him bruisingly against the door. The driver swore softly and ground the gears. Sloane turned to the side and settled himself in the seat, his body seeking a comfort that was not there. With each hour of buffeting, Sloane's fear increased. It seemed incredible that he would ever return through this place. Were there in fact people at the end of this journey, people who expected him? Would there be edible food, clean water, conversation? Or—if it ever ended, if there were a destination—would it be a hillside, one of these many, with only himself to guard it or whatever the army made men do with hillsides? He wanted a drink, an old-fashioned, then he wanted to fly home. He closed his eyes. He would think of cool woods, blue skies, foxes and pheasants.

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“There it is, sir, Seven Div Arty,” said Gallagher, the driver, and the jeep, coughing, rolled to a halt.

If I open my eyes, Sloane thought, I am committed, it will be real. If I keep them closed . . .

What he saw was a brown hillside dotted by darker brown tents in rows, a few brown Quonset huts like the shucked skins of giant slugs, and a flat bulldozed place for trucks, ambulances, jeeps.

“Give it to me straight,” Sloane said to the medical officer who had opened the door of the jeep and was accompanying him to a cave-shaped tent with a central stove and planked floor, the jakesway that would be his home.

“Really? Straight, eh?”

His name was Larry Olsen, a doctor from New Jersey.

“B.S. won’t help me.”

“No, it will not. Well then, it’s simple: you’re my replacement.”

“How many of us are there?”

“Just you. You are *the* replacement. No bullshit? It’s bad. Bad, boring, degrading. The fucking war came through here six months ago. We took a lot of casualties. Bloody scene for a while. It broke the monotony. But the war moved on. We didn’t. You won’t. You’re assigned to all the villages in the province. All of them. There’s no duty like it. There’s nothing *in this world* like it. You work through interpreters. There’s no roof that doesn’t leak. The rats are fearless. Flies rule the country. Everybody steals. Orphans, refugees everywhere. They’re coming down from the north. There’s no equipment to speak of. There’s no sterilizer. And the dirt, the vermin. I just plain don’t touch *anybody* unless I have to—*had* to—*had* to. It’s *yours* now. I’m sorry about that but I’ve been waiting for you forever. You said you wanted it straight. *You’ll* be waiting for *your* replacement forever. That’ll start today. It’s better than fighting in the field, force-feeding on C rations and freezing to death, but . . . that does *not* change the fact that morale is impossible, so don’t even look for it and don’t look for home, either. Where’re you from?”

“I was up at Yale.”

“Yeah, well, listen to me: New Haven, New Jersey, New York, Philly, Boston, D.C., the White House, the Grand

Fucking Canyon—none of those places exist or *ever* existed here. You will see them wiped out by the day. Now I'm going to get it all back. *I'll* do the erasing. If I never hear the word Korea, if there *is* no Korea, that'll be okay. ”

Sloane looked at him. Gleaming belt buckle decorating a paunch. Shiny boots, blue eyes, and meaning what he said.

“When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow?”

“*To*-morrow.”

“That's not possible.”

“Look, Sloane—I wish with all my heart that I could take you with me. I don't have to know you to know that you don't deserve it—none of us deserves it. We're physicians, but not for this. But we're in the army now, so—”

“But how can you be leaving tomorrow?”

“Let me put it to you this way. If, by some ill wind—a storm, a shift in the war—I were detained for a few days, you'd be looking at a bullet in my brain, conducting the autopsy. *One* more night, *one* more morning—that's about all is left in me.”

“How am I to know what to do?”

“You'll be fine about that. The Korean boys'll show you the routine. They're a pair all right but they're the best. Keep them alive, keep 'em close to you, you won't slide in too deep if you can help it.”

Olsen excused himself. Clearly his time now was budgeted. He was as short as it gets.

Sloane returned to Gallagher the spitter, a heavy-set Carolinian whose job it was to repair the ambulance and jeep after each convulsive trip.

“Gallagher—what's the routine here?”

Gallagher climbed around in the engine with a wrench and a large pair of pliers as he spoke. With youthful agility he shifted his stocky frame and his head would disappear into the works and reemerge with a black smear on his face or his ungloved hands.

“Better ask Jang, sir. He runs the shootin match. Far as I know it’s G.I. sick call mornin, local the afternoon, whatever else pops up along the way.”

“Like what?”

“Babies. Pendicitis. Splosions. Fucking fields—sorry, sir—fields are *full* of land mines. Every time a papa-san walks his ox and his fucking plow—walks his plow down a field, sir, he’s takin a big chance. Lot of em here without a leg, big holes in’er guts. Ought to see them fucking cows—*that’s* a blast.”

“Jang runs the show?”

“Yup, him and Yoon. They’re good at it, Doc. You won’t have to do much, only the big stuff. Them two katusas are as good as any stateside doctor I ever met.”



“Living is *not* what I do best,” he had said to Kate, the orders sending him to Korea in his hand just five months after they had been married. “Look at my destination: Sasebo. An airfield near Yokohama, but it sounds like something growing on your nose.”

She had hidden her feelings if she had had any. Her face was like a pond after a frog has jumped in it, a pond that tidies up the ripples, muffles the sound, hastens back into the quiet reflection that is most becoming. She was beautiful to him and she was resourceful. She could live quite well and courageously without him, he was certain of this. When he was boarding the plane she slid her fingers beneath his lapels and rubbed with her thumbs the little brass caduceus in each. He had said that he wanted no goodbyes. He looked for but could not find a higher shine to the eyes, a tight little pallor around the lips, the whisk of a tremor across the cheek.

“Do whatever is appropriate,” she said very softly. “Now, and later.”

It had made perfect sense when she said it. Now it worried him. Did she mean that she, too, would do “whatever is

appropriate,” and if so, what would that entail? He was annoyed with himself for not having asked her exactly what she meant. Now it was too late to ask because it was too late, probably, to know.



Sloane rose early after a restless night. He was anxious to see what it looked like in daylight. Surely there must be some charm to it. He stepped to the door of the jakesway and threw it open. It had snowed heavily during the night and the post had taken on the desolation of a Russian army barracks. The great bulk of things—tents, vehicles, Quonset huts—were submerged under many feet of snow and what protruded was a tiny portion of each, giving the impression that all of life transpired under the snow in a labyrinth of passages and cubicles.

When he stepped out into the cool air, two Koreans squatting on their haunches, dressed in the drab winter fatigues of the army, were worrying a dying rat with a stick. As he watched, one reached out and poked the beast on its snout. It reacted by baring its yellowish fangs and whipping its head in their direction as though to attack. After a few seconds of bristling and reflex rage, the rat sank onto its side and resumed the labored breathing. It suffered silently, the eyes staring along the snow, unseeing, uncaring. The other Korean took his turn with the stick, sliding it beneath the upper trunk and flipping the rat into the air. He screamed with laughter as the rat fell back to earth near their feet. It lay still for a time, then rose unsteadily and began to convulse. After a high sharp scream that weakened into a few staccato notes, they poked it without response. One of the Koreans stood up and prodded the carcass with his foot. They stood looking down at it, fascinated, a thrill quite visible on their faces. Sloane was slightly nauseated.

“What are you doing? Get out of here.”

They had not seen him and were shocked by his outburst. They stood as one and saluted smartly. They looked

like teenagers. He automatically returned their salute, feeling sheepish.

“Who are you?”

“I Jang, sir.”

“I Yoon, sir.”

They were both giggling like schoolgirls, as though the sound of their names was too ridiculous for words.

“What’s so funny?”

They looked at each other, shook their heads and covered their mouths with cupped palms as though to hold in the laughing.

“We do rat patrol,” said Jang. “See?”

He pointed to a wheelbarrow: a pile of dead rats lying heaped as they had been flung, eye to tail, white bellies crossed by tiny feet, snouts poking between adjacent bodies.

“Rat patrol?”

“Every morning, sir, rats die. Poison all round tents. Rats come night, eat. Morning die. See?”

They both laughed again, covering their mouths tightly. Sloane looked at the neighboring jamesways. Here and there lay the corpses of other rats, awaiting the patrol.

“Where do they put the poison?”

“Here. See poison?”

Sloane followed them to the corner of the jamesway. There was a pan covered with a wire net in which a handful of meal had been strewn.

“I see.”

They were both the same height, short and slender. Each of their shirts bore a white strip above the pocket that gave his name and the letters ROKA: Army of the Republic of Korea.

“We katusa,” said Yoon agreeably. “Korean. Attached to. United States Army.”

“We help you. We your boys. You want something?”

“No, I don’t want anything.”

He made as if to reenter the jamesway. They followed him to the door.

“We crean tent, sir.”

“Is that part of your job?”

“We your boys. We take care of you.”

“I Jang.”

“I Yoon.”

They laughed heartily. He watched them fill a pan with water from a five-gallon can and set it on the pot-bellied stove.

“What’s that for?”

“You wash and shave,” said Yoon, motioning. Reaching into a carton, he drew out a white toilet seat and leaned it against the stove.

“What’s that for?”

“You go john—three-holer.” Yoon pointed up the hillside toward the outhouse. “You takee from stove. Sidown, nice’n warm. Everybody else sit on ice. Sir Doc nice’n warm. Be happy, see?”

“Looks as if I’m going to rot first class,” Sloane said.

They burst into laughter as though they had understood.

“We medics, too,” said Jang. “Go every prace you, all time we go you.”

“How old are you?”

“I thirty.”

Sloane was shocked.

“And you?”

“I twenty-eight.”

He was glad they were older. It made him feel less threatened by their youth. They looked sixteen. Smooth chins, faces unlined. At the backs of their necks the twin columns of musculature, deeply cleft in the middle, were irregularly sprinkled with unruly boyish hair. But there was strength in their brown arms and rocky fists. There was nothing soft in their bodies, only when the eyelids lost their turgor and the eyes looked dreamily off and away. They did not talk about themselves, but later Yoon told him that Jang was from the north and had a wife up there. He had not seen her in two

years. Jang said of Yoon: “We number one good buddy. Only sometimes”—and he shook his head disapprovingly—“he drink too much makju, go crazy.” He drew a circle around his ear with his finger.

As Sloane shaved he could hear the rhythmic scraping of snow shovels. When he hitched through blizzards to Albany Medical College there was much to complain about but he refused to complain, for this was part of the adventure he had charted for himself: he was going to be a doctor. Not a doctor *easily*—a doctor, whatever it took. And he was a doctor *to practice*—wherever he might be. He reminded himself that what was true for Larry Olsen did not have to be true for him. Probably it was, but he would see about that.