

# Brushing Shoulders with a Long Lost Hero

Jacob Venable

## 우연한 만남 - *A Chance Encounter*

I walked into Golden Corral, ready to stuff my face with all the free food I could stomach. It was packed with old people wearing military regalia. The restaurant's annual Military Appreciation Night, held every Veteran's Day, was a popular one, where all service members, past and present, were treated to a free dinner buffet. I arrived alone, as always, so they sat me down at the first available seat; a small table with two chairs. The other was occupied by an elderly black man wearing a Korean War hat. I sat down.

We did not exchange names. Instead, we talked about our experiences in the military. Right away, it felt like we were already friends, brothers-in-arms. He told me about his service in the Air Force and his time in the Korean War. He served along the 38th parallel, where all the action was. Over a plate of steak, fried chicken, and various greens, he retold his heroics with enthusiasm and a friendly grin.

"I was a supply sergeant," he said. "We were always under attack by the northerners."

"The 38th is now a demilitarized zone," I said, "but they still fire shots across it now and then."

For the briefest of moments, I saw a familiar face upon his, one I had not seen for a very long time. It was the face of a man I long looked up to, one that bore the warmth of the Sun itself, in both love and wrath. A man I admired greatly, a man I aspired to emulate: my grandfather.

## 할아버지 - *Grandfather*

Born in 1925, Richard Eugene Venable grew up in California. He joined the United States Navy young and served in three foreign wars: World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Though he retired shortly after I was born, I could see that professionalism every day.

He stood straight, was always well-groomed, and maintained a discipline within his home that I ensured I never broke. He and my grandmother were always welcoming when I visited. My grandfather took my child self on long walks around his Sonoma community, where I picked flowers for Grandma, and then we would venture into the groves where we picked ripe figs to bring home. These were the happiest childhood moments, and I always looked forward to visiting them.

He had always seemed tall to me, though in my adulthood, age had shortened him to below my height. But in my youth, he had been a larger-than-life character. I recall how he and Grandma took me to Train Town, a small theme park revolving around trains. It was a place I enjoyed a lot as a child, for there was much to explore. My favorite thing to do there, though, was to sit with my grandfather and grandmother and ride the train around the park. It was such a peaceful time, when I could forget the troubles at school and the drama between my mother and father. A time when it was just the three of us, me and my grandparents, on a train ride I wished would never end. As much as I loved the sound of the train, I dreaded the final toot signifying the end of the line and we were forced to disembark. I did not want to.

“Can we go again?” my five-year-old self asked with big pleading eyes.

Grandpa smiled down at me. “Before we leave, we’ll take one more ride.”

“Yay!” I cheered and hugged his leg.

Grandpa was of French heritage, but for a long time, I thought he was of Mexican descent. I knew between him and Grandma, I inherited French and Mexican genes. I thought Grandpa was the Mexican one because he had a fairly red face. He also yelled in Spanish when he was angry. Many times I witnessed his finesse in Spanish while watching a movie or when I had upset him. A vivid memory of us watching Terminator 2 plays frequently in my mind: Sarah Connor blasting the T-1000 with a shotgun, knocking it back toward the molten steel, only to run dry just as it teeters on

the edge.

“Throw the bloody shotgun at it!” Grandpa shouted, with a string of angry Spanish right after that I assumed was an explicit rant he did not want me to understand.

A silly moment, but it amused me. It was not until after my grandmother passed away did I learn she was Mexican, not Grandpa. Her passing broke my heart, and I know it broke his too. Though he put on a brave face, I could see it in his eyes. He did not deserve to be alone.

### 마음은 어디에 있는가 – *Where the Heart Lies*

The Korean War veteran asked me about my service. I explained I served eight years in the United States Army, and how I was stationed in Korea for two. I joked how Korea was probably the worst years of his life, while Korea was the best of mine. He laughed. Korea changed a lot between our visits, from a war-torn nation of brother fighting brother to a prosperous nation of modern sensibilities interwoven into tradition. My visit was much different from his, but he made it out alive and in one piece, which was a great achievement in its own right. He liked the people and the culture, but did not like the war. His time there was at the tail-end, so fighting was not at its worst. Still, making it home alive was an accomplishment and as he sat before me, he looked good for being 93.

I told him all about how Korea has changed. Between the monolithic skyscrapers that replaced the rubble of Seoul, the vast rail system weaving through much of the northern regions of South Korea, and the rapid economic growth the nation experienced afterward, the nation practically became an overnight success. I talked about meeting a lovely Korean woman and falling in love. We broke up when her mother said she did not want a foreigner for a son-in-law.

“Her name was Mi-Hee,” I said. “She was lovely and a perfect sweetheart. I didn’t deserve her.”

With my words, I painted a picture of Seoul Tower, the COEX Mall, EverLand, and the beautiful beaches. He marveled at my tales, amazed at how vastly different our visits had been. Seoul Tower sat atop Namsan (a small mountain in the middle of Seoul), lit with a collage of colors at night. The COEX Mall was a massive complex filled with stores, a convention center, an aquarium, and a hotel. EverLand was the *real* “happiest place on Earth,” a theme park I thought was much better than Disneyland.

Alas, his food had run dry. With his plate empty, he rose to fetch himself another and I found myself sitting alone with my own food and my own thoughts.

### 줄다리기 - *Tug of War*

Korea had a turbulent history. When World War II ended in 1945, the Soviet Union and the United States freed the Korean peninsula from Japanese occupation. These two nations divided it along the 38th parallel and worked to rout the Japanese. However, when it came time to create an independent Korea, the two sides could not come to an agreement. Thus, the United States established a government with an elected president in the south, while the north was rebuilt with communism and an appointed dictator by the Soviets. Both sides claimed sovereignty over the entire peninsula.

On June 25th, 1950, the north attacked the south. The north steamrolled through the south, as they were more militarized. The south pleaded for the United States to aid them, and just when the north had all but won, the United States Marines landed in Incheon. They made quick work of the northern military. The United States and South Korean militaries pushed through to the Chinese border. Just when victory was imminent, China entered the fray. For three long years, it was a war of attrition, with neither side making any significant gains. It was one big game of tug-of-war, with two foreign powers using the Korean people as the rope. Families were broken, brother fought brother, and people died for the whims of foreign entities.

The Korean War resonated with me. I stood before *The Stat-*

*ue of Brothers* at the *War Memorial of Korea* in Seoul. A giant statue depicting two soldiers embracing in a broken battlefield towered over me. The older was an officer for the South Korean army; the younger was an infantryman for the north. When they encountered each other on the battlefield, the two dropped their weapons and embraced, long lost brothers reunited in the midst of combat. It was a moving story. It resonated with me because, like Korea, I was used as the rope in my divorced parents' game of tug-of-war, both pulling me in opposite directions, using me to hurt each other. Eventually, my father gave up; he let go of the rope and abandoned me.

My grandfather, like the hero he was, swooped in to ensure I still had a strong male leader in my life. He was angry with my father for abandoning me and went out of his way to visit me often. We played catch and went on walks. He even moved closer when Grandma passed away, buying a beach home in Arroyo Grande, a place I visited often.

When I got married, Grandpa attended my wedding, even when my own father would not. Apparently, my father's Hawaiian vacation was more important than seeing his first-born son get married. I did not know it at the time, but Grandpa had fallen ill, yet still managed to travel across the country to see me. That was the last time I saw him alive.

### 추억은 아름다운 기억 - *A Beautiful Memory*

The Korean War veteran returned with his dessert. He sat down and I told him about my grandfather. I explained how he served in three foreign wars and what a respectable man he was. He was my hero. The veteran nodded and said he was pleased I held him in high regard. He asked where my grandfather was now, and I explained he passed away in 2010. When he finished his dessert, he got up, thanked me for keeping him company, and left. I wished him well and watched him leave. When he walked out the door, something came over me. As I looked down at my plate, tears dripped onto my steak.

When my grandfather fell ill, I was stationed on Okinawa. I did not have any leave left over, so I requested emergency leave. My

mother sent them a Red Cross message to aid in the process. My grandfather requested my presence, as he wanted to see me one last time. The Army, however, refused. Emergency leave was granted for immediate family, and my grandfather was not considered immediate family. I tried to fight it, but I might as well have fought the wind. They refused to budge and I was stuck on a tiny island in the middle of the ocean, thousands of miles away from my dying grandfather.

“Sir, is it all right if I seat someone here?”

I looked up from my plate to the server standing beside the chair the Korean War veteran had just vacated. Her smile disappeared when she saw my red eyes and tear-streaked cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice small. “I’ll leave you alone.”

I told the tale of his encounter to Darius, my best friend since high school. While Darius does not believe in God, his exact words were “You’re in a very stressful situation, man. And you got to sit with someone who very well may have crossed paths with your grandfather, giving you a short time with his memory in a situation as close to in-person as it can come. It’s understandable. It may have been like brushing shoulders with your grandfather for one last time. If there is a God, maybe He was giving you a gift.”

I want to believe this. I never got to say goodbye to my grandfather. The day after my fight with the Army, I came home to dreadful news: my grandfather had passed. I knew it was coming, but it hit hard all the same. The man I had admired, aspired to be like, and viewed as a hero, was gone. No more walks to the fig grove. No more flowers to pick. Only one last visit to the beach of Arroyo Grande to watch the sea swallow his ashes. I rendered a proper salute.

Just as the Korean War has yet to end, so too does my internal war rage on. Just like the Marines landed to save the day in the Korean War, my grandfather landed in my heart to save me. But he has long since passed, so the battle must be fought with my own army. Whether it is strong enough to win the day, only time will tell.

Until then, I look to his memory for guidance.

