

Kaboom!



The first experience with my destructive paranormal powers began when I walked down a shady street in Guangzhou, and a man sound asleep beside the road bolted awake and yelled at me for staring at his armpits. I can't believe how long ago this was: back in the early 1980s when I visited a diplomat friend who worked in the US Consulate. I was practically the only American in the entire city (the guidebooks were still calling it Canton) who had arrived as a single, freelancing tourist. China had just "opened" for foreign travelers, but the government mandated that almost all outsiders enter on a packaged tour that got whisked from one promotional spot to another. They saw a model commune, the Peasant Movement Institute, a hospital, the "modern" and "wonderous" container port of Huangpu, and then it was time for lunch. Most foreigners jumped at the chance; they were thrilled just to be inside Communist China.

But there I was, a tall, young white guy with bushy red hair like a sunset cloud, loping along by myself on a sweltering summer day to the Memorial Park for the Martyrs of the Canton Uprising. I wanted to see the monument to fallen

Koreans but got distracted down a side street that was overhung with branches of banyan trees. The trees grew on both sides of the road, spreading their limbs like enormous wings, creating a tunnel of green. A few of the city's denizens walked or rode their bikes through this leafy passage, and halfway down the block, a man slept on a cot, feet facing me. Let's check it out.

In retrospect, this tunnel-that-beckoned recalls some portentous scene from a child's fairy tale (Hansel and Gretel's gingerbread house? The rabbit hole in Alice in Wonderland?), but at the time all I felt was a pull to walk down the street, so I entered. Even though I expected the shade would be soothing and cool, the tree branches sagged with Guangzhou's tropical heat, and the air was as dense as water.

The sleeping man wore gray pants and a sleeveless undershirt. Legs splayed, arms stretched back over his head, sandals falling off. His unshaven face was turned away from the street and me. At his feet lay a basket of yellow mangoes.

When I was about fifteen feet away, my eyes honed in on his armpit. The dark hairs, slick with sweat, made me think of a side dish of seaweed. They swirled in a vortex that grew in my consciousness like successive satellite photos of a hurricane. I started to salivate. Because of sexual appetite? Desire for cool vinegared seaweed? Probably both. Simultaneously my body began to hum—a robust buzzing sensation, like how you felt as a child when you touched the metal prong of an electrical plug as you inserted it into a socket. The electric hum intensified as I got closer. I became irresistibly drawn to the man's armpit and felt I might kneel against my will and lap at it like a dog licking a bowl.

When I was about four feet away, the man snapped out of his sleep. He jolted upright, turned his face towards me, and thrust his arms down at his sides. He stared for a moment as his face turned purple. Then he started to yell.

I'm not entirely sure what he shouted, as my Cantonese was only intermediate at the time. However, I did catch all sorts of expressions like “*foreigner*” and “*go*” and some swear words. And he kept repeating one term that

I later learned meant “*invasion*.” As I’ve come to realize, you can always trust social calamities to enrich your second language vocabulary. “*Press clipping*,” “*social insanity*,” “*military intelligence*” — I can’t begin to enumerate all the lexicon I’ve learned this way.

But there the guy was, screeching like some hoarse-voiced Asian opera star, flinging a sandal on the ground with a slap. The other pedestrians stopped to gape, first at him, then at me. A pinhead of sweat crawled out from my armpit and crept down my ribs like a tick. From the basket of fruit, I sensed a thick, rotting stench.

I kept walking, acting on the outside as if nothing had happened. Inside, though, my heart was kicking like a jackrabbit, and my thoughts sped into hyper-drive. My brain started rapid-firing banyan tree trivia--like how the word “banyan” originally referred to a caste of Hindu merchant who was forbidden to eat flesh, and how the word came to denote the tree because some merchant set up a booth under it. And now here I was being screamed at by, perhaps, the very sort of fruit peddler who gave the tree its name.

The man shrieked louder, and my mind began to chant words for bizarre plants whose names begin with “B”: *banyan*, *bamboo*, *baobab*, *breadfruit*, *banana*, *bonsai*, *butterfly bush*.

Fortunately, the drama soon came to a close. As I continued down the street (*boxwood*, *boysenberry*, *Brussels sprout*, *bodhi tree*), the fruit peddler’s yelping dwindled to the drone of a mosquito. When I got to the end of the green tunnel, I turned onto a wide treeless avenue that brimmed with bright sunshine, a fresh blast of heat, and swarms of bicycles. After the darkness of the banyan tunnel, my eyes couldn’t adjust to the light. I shaded my face and squinted down at the pavement, where bicycle shadows swirled around me like frenzied bats.

Eventually, I reached the park with the monument to Koreans; the building it was in was called, weirdly, the Pavilion of Blood-Cemented Friendship. Then I walked home to my friend’s apartment. Along the way, I noticed the wind pick up. The streets, where the dust usually just seemed to fester, were now whipping specks of grit that got in my eye.

When I got to Kathy's apartment, she was walking from room to room, closing the windows.

"It's practically a haboob!" she said, as she held back the light-weight, lacy curtains with one hand while she struggled to pull shut the windows with the other. Outside, dust was flying about everywhere, thick as fog. We ate dinner in her kitchen, and by the time we finished, the rain had started.

"This is so strange," Kathy said. "It wasn't supposed to rain until next week...yet this is such a deluge. And the wind, wailing like a banshee!"

The rain pounded the windows, the windows rattled in the wind. After dinner, while Kathy sat on her couch, leafing through a stack of Western and Chinese newspapers, I sat mute in an easy chair, scared stiff.

It wasn't a banshee's voice I heard outside – I felt that the wind was mimicking the fruit peddler who yelled at me this morning. In the whoosh and roar, I heard him hoarsely screaming "foreigner" and "go" and the other words I recognized but didn't understand yet. And as I sat in Kathy's apartment, I again felt that electrical-shock-kind-of buzz.

The next morning, the air was clear, but outside, debris clogged the streets. Some trees had toppled over, and the local news reported that a few houses had collapsed.

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A week later I flew back to Seoul, Korea, to prepare for the fall semester—a refreshing flight from a mostly somnolent country of one billion souls to the crazed anthill that characterized Korea in the 1980s. A vast distance between me and my run-in with wacky weather telepathy. Or so I thought.

To tell the truth, this first time didn't affect me that much after it was over. I was traveling; China was seething with strangeness; the whole trip was like a dream. And when you think about it, China itself was coming out of a long, turbulent sleep. Once I boarded the plane in Hong Kong to return to Korea, I shoved my experience out of my mind.

In Seoul, I was a full-time lecturer at Kang Tae University, a small but prestigious school founded after the Korean War by Jesuits from the United

States. Most of the professors were non-Catholic Koreans, but a few dozen American Jesuits lived in a dormitory on campus, and other foreign instructors like myself dwelled on our own around the city.

I boarded at a lodging house in a residential part of town that most foreigners had never heard of. I had my own room but ate breakfast and dinner on the floor in the landlady's living area, usually with the other lodgers. These were young Korean businessmen: traveling salesmen stationed in Seoul for a few months and some entry-level "*salarymen*" in the *chaebols* (Samsung, Hyundai, LG). Every day I rode a packed public bus to the university gates.

It felt great to walk through those massive iron gates my first day back because I truly loved our school. Our campus nestled into the side of a small mountain. The slope curved inward, creating a kind of natural amphitheater, with academic buildings at the top, administration in the middle, and a few playing fields scattered about the base. While American universities have always gone for that well-lawned look, Korean schools in those days were dustbowls. Much-loved dustbowls, but dustbowls nonetheless. Scrawny trees, lots of cement, and well-packed dirt that could nevertheless cloud up from a gust of wind or a few hundred scuffling feet. Our campus buildings were red brick or poured concrete. They stood no more than three or four stories high and evinced only a modicum of a stab at aesthetic appeal. Nonetheless, the Jesuits had created an oasis of calm, enlightened study in the zany world that was pre-Olympics Seoul, and I was delighted to be a part of it.

In fact, I want to emphasize just how acceptable, how above-board my life was before my craziness happened again. I was a foreigner who taught at a prominent university—historically, Korean society has always maintained a revered slot for that kind of person. I had a master's degree in applied linguistics from an impressive grad school in the USA: awe-inspiring at the time, but still comprehensible. And because I had spent a year helping some Maryknoll missionaries in the mountains east of Seoul, I spoke Korean. Not many foreigners learn the language, but missionaries do, often quite well, so there was nothing unusual there.

My only peculiarity was the superficial issue of my appearance. Most Koreans had never seen 6' 3" carrot top with blue eyes before, but in Seoul, they rarely commented on it, even though my head floated above the crowded streets like a gumball on a sea of licorice.

My second paranormal experience came during Chusok, the Korean Thanksgiving, which that year fell at the start of the fall semester. The entire city turned into a ghost town for three days as the citizenry journeyed to their ancestral roots in the countryside, where they'd visit with relatives who were still alive and pray at gravesites of those who had passed away. Filial piety being what it was, getting out of town was a horrific mob scene. Buses were packed to the rafters and invariably a few passengers, usually children, suffocated to death. The military commandeered the railroad stations with guns, forcing the hordes to squat in lines while they waited to buy tickets and board trains. A two-hour trip to the countryside now took ten.

I had nothing to do, so I went downtown to one of the sprawling market places to eat. Almost every stall was closed for the holiday, but a few shops and restaurants remained open. You'd look down a row of stalls which were shut tight with metal grills that rolled down from the ceiling, and you'd spot, off in the distance, a shop that hadn't closed (selling, maybe, traditional brightly-colored clothing sets for children to wear for Chusok, or dried fruits and mushrooms for cooking the traditional Chusok dishes). Or perhaps you'd come across one of the market-place restaurants. The market alleys were mostly dark, as shop owners had spread plasticized tarps overhead, stretching from one stall to the stall opposite. Some of these tarps were more translucent than others, all in all creating a mottled tunnel effect.

At the intersection of two of these alleys, I found a restaurant serving steaming bowls of traditional rice-cake soup with seaweed, a favorite of mine. The restaurant was open to the alleyway (as all stalls were) and a pair of customers sat at one of the other tables, slurping away at their bowls of soup. They were middle-aged men in business attire; I guessed they worked for one of

the Western companies, perhaps an investment bank, which remained open with a skeleton staff to deal with international requests and reports.

Catty-corner across the alley intersection was another open stall, selling fresh seafood: whole fish, shellfish, octopus, cuttlefish all spread out on tables covered with layers of chunked ice, everything gleaming from the bright overhead lights. The shop owner, an elderly woman with her hair in a bun, sat impassively behind one of the display cases.

Everything was proceeding nicely, and I was enjoying my soup. Then the fish stall lady got up and started to fuss around with her display of foods. At one point, she seemed to disappear as she bent over to get something on the ground behind the table. Then her butt emerged to one side as she backed up into the open space next to the display case, dragging a large red rubber tub that was filled with water and live eels, all huddled in a bunch at the bottom. She left the tub out there in the open, where everyone could see it, and went back to her seat behind the display case.

And then it happened. Every time I brought my spoon to my mouth, my eyes would veer across the alley and glom onto the tub of eels. The eels started swimming in circles around the red tub's circumference, slowly at first, then faster and faster, looking like the, well, like the whorls of a hurricane when viewed from space. And then my body began that buzzing sensation. The fishmonger started to sneer at me; so I stood up, nervously paid for my meal, and hurried away, but not before I heard the fish seller snap out a long string of invective at me, all of which I understood, and not before I saw one of the eels escape from the tub and writhe on the cement floor, white belly flashing.

Stunned, I boarded a public bus for the journey home. The vehicle was empty and I sat in the back, hurled to the left then the right as the driver careered maniacally through Seoul's deserted streets. The brakes shrieked, the wheels pounded the potholes like tympani. Despite all the lurching, I kept my eyes glued out the window, trying not only to decode the individual shop signs, which I normally can't resist doing, but to connect two, three, four signs in a row to form a Korean sentence. "*Dr. Park Kyung Ho, Dentist, accuses the Apollo Tea Room of*

servicing Pyong Yang Noodles from the Won Sok Pool Hall to Madame Song Hye Jang, Marriage Broker."

When I got off the bus, I walked up the twisting, abnormally empty alley to my boarding house as the daze slowly wore off. My landlady was just leaving as I approached the front gate.

"Hello. Have a nice lunch?" she asked in Korean as she dipped her way through the tiny door in the gate.

"Yes, thank you."

"Will you want dinner tonight? You're the only person here. I can serve you in your room."

"Yes, thank you."

"I can't buy any food, so it will be just rice mixed with bean sprouts and seaweed soup. The other lodgers aren't so happy when I serve this, but you always like it."

"Yes, that will be fine. I'll let you know when I'm hungry."

My landlady looked up at the sky. "Funny, it looks like rain. The television this morning said it was going to be a beautiful day all day."

I won't go into the terrible storm that ravaged Seoul that night, nor into the third incident, which happened a few weeks later when the students at my campus started a massive anti-government protest on the playing field, shouting and marching about in a long column, four- and five-abreast, that snaked around and around like a giant sea serpent, raising a big cloud of dust, after which they tried to leave the campus via the front gate but were repulsed by the waiting government forces, which fired round after round of battlefield-grade tear gas. (Note: all of this was standard operating procedures for campus protests at the time.) I gazed down at the whole thing from my office window, and when my body started humming I just went with it, just tried to notice what exactly was happening, trying to see if I could augment the buzz or tone it down. I could do neither.

Aside from all the damage that night's storm caused, including some highway deaths during the peak rush hour, at least the rain washed away the

remaining tear gas dust that coated our campus buildings and grounds. There were many campus protests during those years, and for days afterward your eyes would itch and sting from the remnants of the tear gas canisters (it's not really gas, anyway – it's a fine powder).

I had a few more of these experiences – mostly in Seoul but once on a field trip with the school's English Language Club to a Buddhist temple in the south of the country. I don't know how the Korean CIA figured out I might have had something to do with these severe weather disturbances, but I started spotting plainclothes cops lurking around in my boarding house alley and near my office on the Kang Tae campus. How did I know they were plainclothes cops? They were always easy to spot, especially at school. They were older than the students, and not dressed like any of the professors, who generally wore white shirts and ties. No, these not-so-secret service agents were dressed in cheap windbreakers and clunky shoes. They had bad, chunky haircuts, and they stood in one spot for hours, chain smoking cigarettes, until a pile of butts littered the ground at their feet like so much cubist bird shit. And then my visa renewal application was rejected, ending my teaching career in Korea. There were even two plainclothes cops (I'm sure of it) watching me at the airport when I finally left the country, flying to Southeast Asia, where I knew that with my Ivy League diploma I could pick up lucrative jobs teaching English, and where the cost of living was fantastically cheap.

I swear I had no control over any of this. Nor over the unexpected cyclone on Indonesia's main island of Sumatra (brought on after I watched some tourists swimming around in Lake Toba), nor any of the similarly destructive storms over the years as I worked my way from country to country, living cheaply and raking in tons of money with my pedigree degree.

Nor, I swear on my mother's grave, the very sudden and very vicious Tropical Storm Claire, which happened when I visited my niece, a Ph.D. candidate in chemistry at Tulane University in Louisiana, and watched the carbonation bubbles swirl around in a large Pyrex beaker of prosecco while we partied with friends in her lab. Claire flooded more of New Orleans than

Hurricane Katrina, but at least it caused far fewer deaths – just a couple of dozen, compared to almost two thousand with Katrina.

That's why I live in the desert now. Where and in which desert? I'd rather not say. But it's flat (nothing concave), and there's no water around, both of which seem to have been part of the "invasion" equation (to use the term shouted at me by the fruit seller in China). It hasn't rained here in decades. I keep no carbonated beverages in the house, and I don't cook spaghetti, because of how the individual strands swirl around in a pot of boiling water. I have all my food delivered from the local supermarket – the delivery woman knows by now just to leave the box of food on my doorstep and take the envelope with the money plus tip that I've stuck halfway under the doormat. Every day I sweep the front porch, including under the doormat, so there's not a speck of dust anywhere.

A guy in a shiny silver Mercedes with darkened windows visited me once and started asking questions about my travels around the world and whether I knew anybody in New Orleans, but I don't want to go into that now, either.

Nor do I want to discuss how I feel.

- *Bruce Ballard, August 2019*