

# MARTIN LIMÓN

MR. KILL

A SERGEANTS SUENO & BASCOM MYSTERY

**MR. KILL**

Also by Martin Limón

*Jade Lady Burning*

*Slicky Boys*

*Buddha's Money*

*The Door to Bitterness*

*The Wandering Ghost*

*G.I. Bones*

# MR. KILL

MARTIN LIMÓN

**SOHO  
CRIME**

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**MR. KILL**



# 1

**H**ot metal shrieked as the Blue Train express from Pusan braked its way into the vast yard of Seoul-*yok*, the downtown Seoul Railroad Station. Someone barked an order. Two squads of khaki-clad Korean National Policemen fanned out along the cement platform, prowling like shadows through roiling clouds of vapor.

“Whoever this guy is,” Ernie told me, “G.I. or not, he’s about to be introduced to a whole world of butt-kick.”

My name is George Sueño. I’m an investigator for the Criminal Investigation Division of the 8th United States Army in Seoul, Republic of Korea. My partner, Ernie Bascom, and I stood with our backs against brick, waiting in this overcast afternoon for the arrival of a train that, according to railroad authorities, held tragedy. The Blue Train engineer radioed ahead that a female passenger in

car number three had been threatened with a knife and raped. She was found by one of the stewardesses cowering in the lavatory, too incoherent to give much information, but claiming that the perpetrator had been a *kocheingi*. A big-nose. In other words, a foreigner.

In the early seventies, what with 700,000 fire-breathing Communist soldiers on the far side of the DMZ just thirty miles north of here, there weren't many tourists in the Republic of Korea. Nor were there many European businessmen, and only a smattering of diplomats. The foreigners most likely to be using the Blue Train on this Monday morning were *Miguks*. Americans. And those Americans were most likely to be among the 50,000 or so G.I.s who fell under the jurisdiction of the 8th United States Army. Therefore, the call had been made by the Korean National Police to us, the agents of 8th Army CID.

Exactly who this guy was, we didn't know. All we knew for sure was that the crime had been committed sometime after the Blue Train pulled out of Taejon. Between there and here, no stops. The Blue Line takes about four hours and fifty minutes, total, to travel the almost 400 kilometers from Pusan to Seoul, with only two brief layovers, the first at the East Taegu Station and the second at Taejon. At each scheduled stop, the train pauses for less than five minutes. After leaving Taejon, whoever perpetrated this crime would've had no way to get off the train. Therefore, we were assuming, as were all these Korean cops, that he was still aboard.

Lieutenant Shin, the officer in charge of the KNP detail, told me that the engineer had further explained that the victim was a young mother with two children

in tow. Apparently, she'd left her son and her daughter in their seats while she used the bathroom. That's where she'd been assaulted. The rapist forced his way into the small bathroom behind her and threatened her with a knife, slicing the flesh of her throat superficially. The blood and the blade had convinced her to comply with what he demanded. Everything he demanded.

The cops in Lieutenant Shin's detail already knew that a woman with children had been assaulted by someone they assumed to be an American G.I. They weren't happy about such a non-Confucian crime being committed in broad daylight in a public place, and they allowed their anger to show when they glared at Ernie and at me, as if we were somehow responsible.

Steam puffed from the sides of the train. With a huge sigh, the big engine shut down. Usually, even before the wheels stopped rolling, people would already be hopping off metal steps, hurrying to beat the crowd filtering toward the front gate of the main station. Today, eerily, nobody moved. If I hadn't been able to make out seated silhouettes through the fog-smudged windows, I would've thought it was a train full of ghosts.

Lieutenant Shin barked more orders, and two cops took up positions at the ends of each passenger car. Other cops covered the opposite side of the train. Thus surrounded, all possibility of escape was eliminated.

Behind us, on the overhead ramparts, a crowd gathered, people waiting for other trains. Some of the civilians murmured loudly about *Miguk-nom*, base American louts. Somehow they'd gotten wind of what had happened.

Accompanied by Lieutenant Shin, Ernie and I climbed

aboard the first passenger car. The head conductor, wearing a high-collared black coat and a pillbox hat, was already waiting. He was a craggy-faced man, middle-aged, with his feet planted shoulder-width apart as if from years of pacing up and down rocking central aisles.

“She’s in car three,” he said in Korean. I translated for Ernie. “The children are confused,” he continued. “They know something happened to their mother, something bad, but they don’t know what.”

“Has the perpetrator been identified?” Lieutenant Shin asked.

“No. All she told the stewardess was that he’s a koche-*ingi*.” He glanced toward Ernie and me. I nodded for him to continue. “She’s in her seat, huddled with her children. So far, she refuses to move.”

“Take us,” Lieutenant Shin told him.

We followed the conductor down the center aisle. As we did so, row after row of Asian faces turned up to us, some of them frightened, more of them angry. I heard epithets whispered, a few familiar, a few I’d never heard before.

“Tough crowd,” Ernie mumbled behind me.

As we passed from car to car, Ernie and I checked the bathrooms, just to make sure no one was hiding in them. No one was. They were small, locked from the inside, and under normal circumstances barely large enough to hold one person.

Finally we entered car three and stopped. A gaggle of grandmothers, clad in traditional Korean dresses, surrounded two of the seats. As we approached, they turned their heads and, one by one, faces soured. Wrinkled eyes

evaluated me, finding me in some way disgusting, flashing disapproval—at me, and at the crime that had been perpetrated on this Blue Train from Pusan.

It wasn't me, I wanted to shout. Although I've been falsely accused before, and I know the sick feeling in the gut, I've never in my life threatened anyone with a knife—nor have I raped anyone. I stifled the urge to scream at these women: I'm a cop, not a rapist! Ernie fidgeted behind me. Americans are generally welcome in Korea. It wasn't often that we faced such hatred, but we were feeling it now—down to our bones.

Lieutenant Shin stepped forward, breaking the silence. With a rustle of silk, angry grandmothers stepped away.

The victim was a petite woman, five foot two or three, maybe just slightly over a hundred pounds. She sat huddled with her two children, the boy about four, the girl about six. She wouldn't look up. Lieutenant Shin spoke to her softly.

“Are you hurt badly?” he asked.

She didn't answer.

“Can you show me where you're cut?”

The children stared at us with wide, worried eyes. When the woman still wouldn't answer, Lieutenant Shin reached out and touched her arm. Like a startled spider, she flinched, curling herself into a tiny ball. The children clung more tightly to their mother and started to cry. That's when I saw it. Blood. On the side of her neck. The wound hadn't been completely stanching. The blood trickled slowly down the side of her small neck, staining the round collar of her dress, pooling against bone.

The grandmothers had had enough. They pushed

themselves between Lieutenant Shin and the woman, shooing him away.

He refused to back off. The authority of the elderly in a Confucian society like Korea is great, but not greater than the law. Still, the presence of two kocheingis was making his job more difficult. He motioned with his eyes for Ernie and me to continue on ahead of him toward the rear of the car. We did, passing another surly group of passengers craning their necks to see what was going on.

According to the conductor, the bathroom at the back of the car was where the crime had been committed. A nervous stewardess in a stylish blue skirt, white blouse, and matching blue cap explained in Korean that more than an hour ago she'd received complaints from other passengers that someone was in the bathroom and wouldn't come out. The stewardess investigated, pounded on the door, and finally coaxed whoever was inside to open up. She found the victim crouched on the floor, dress ripped, blood seeping from a slice on the side of her neck, covering her face with splayed fingers. The stewardess immediately reported the incident to the head conductor. Together they bandaged the wound and, after much coaxing, managed to escort the devastated woman out of the bathroom and down the aisle to her seat.

“Did you see the foreigner?” I asked the stewardess.

She shook her head.

“Did you or the conductor see an American up here in car three?”

“No. And neither did any of the passengers. They've been talking among themselves nonstop since this thing

happened. Only now, because the police are here, are they quiet.”

The Korean National Police are a mixed blessing. They maintain order, plenty of it. But sometimes they maintain that order at a high price, especially if you're on the receiving end of a polished wooden nightstick.

“So no one saw a foreigner in car three?” I asked.

The stewardess nodded. I explained what she'd said to Ernie. He pushed open a door, and air rushed into the car. We both studied the metal walkway leading back toward car four.

“Where are the Americans?” I asked the stewardess. At the RTO, 8th Army's Rail Transportation Office, tickets are issued free to G.I.s on official travel and sold at a discounted rate to those on leave or pass or other forms of unofficial travel. Eighth Army's policy is to try, whenever possible, to keep all the Americans in the same passenger car.

The stewardess showed us with her eyes, glancing back at car four.

Lieutenant Shin approached. While the stewardess went over the same ground with him, I crouched and studied the interior of the bathroom. There wasn't much to be seen. A little splashed water. A low toilet—porcelain embedded in the floor, Korean style, made for squatting; a small sink; and an unraveled roll of paper.

In the center aisle, men in blue smocks were trundling toward us. Stenciled on their chests, in white block hangul letters, was the word *Kyongchal*. Police. Keeping his voice low so the female victim couldn't hear, Lieutenant Shin

briefed them. These were the technicians who would be searching the bathroom for traces of blood or semen or hair. I was impressed. So was Ernie. In the Itaewon bar district, loaded with business girls who catered to American G.I.s, rape wasn't taken nearly as seriously. As the technicians placed their gear on the floor and squatted down to get to work, one of them said in Korean, "First the mother of our country, and now this."

Lieutenant Shin stationed a young cop near the bathroom to make sure that no one interfered with the crime scene or with the technicians.

What we did next was what Ernie had been aching to do since we arrived at Seoul Station, ever since we'd been subjected to the hatred in the eyes of the masses of Koreans surrounding us: he reached in his pocket and pulled out a shining set of brass knuckles. Slipping them over his fingers, he clenched his fist, enjoying the fit and heft of the finely crafted metal. Satisfied, he nodded. Lieutenant Shin took the lead. Together, we entered car four.

Autumn had fallen quickly in Korea. This was not unusual in itself—seasons change rapidly on the Korean peninsula—but it had also fallen early. Gray clouds appeared, and gloomy winds started to blow. A week and a half ago, August 15, it had been the twenty-ninth anniversary of Korea's liberation from the occupying forces of the Japanese Imperial Army. The Japanese had taken over the country in 1910, stripping the Korean monarchy and the Korean legislature of any real power, and ruled the entire peninsula as a colony until 1945.

To mark this all-important day, Pak Chung-hee, the former army colonel and current authoritarian president of South Korea, had given a speech to a packed hall.

Unfortunately, a Japanese national, believed to be in the employ of North Korea, smuggled a gun into the hall and took a few potshots at the president. Pak Chung-hee crouched behind his heavily fortified podium and was not harmed. His security guards, however, pulled their own weapons and returned fire, and for a few mad seconds hot lead zinged all over the auditorium. One of the bullets struck the head of Yuk Young-soo, the wife of the president, who'd been sitting on the stage only a few feet from her husband. She was rushed to the hospital but declared dead on arrival.

Like most first ladies around the world, Yuk Young-soo was popular, much more popular than her husband. The death of such a vital woman, the mother of three young children, shocked the country, sending it into mourning. Only hours after she died, the blue skies of summer disappeared with the onset of autumn.

Does a country have a mood? Maybe. Maybe not. We only read our own moods into what we see around us. But if countries do have moods, the mood of the Republic of Korea was surly right now. Surly to the point of tipping over into rage.

As we entered car four, rows of passengers gaped at us. They were mostly Koreans, but there were a few American faces scattered among them. While Lieutenant Shin and the ranking sergeant in his detail asked for identification

and briefly interviewed the Korean nationals, Ernie and I studied the Americans. The faces were confused and concerned, but nobody bolted for the door.

I pulled out my badge and held it up.

“Good morning, everyone. I’m Agent Sueño. This is Agent Bascom. We’re going to be asking you some questions. First, I’d like everyone to pull out their identification and their travel orders.”

“What if you don’t have travel orders?” one of the G.I.s asked.

“Then your leave orders will have to do,” Ernie replied.

Every American G.I. had to be able to prove that he had permission to be away from his compound. If he didn’t, we’d report him to his unit and nonjudicial punishment could ensue. This was punishment short of court-martial, like restriction to the barracks or forfeiture of pay for less than thirty days.

While Ernie stayed inside the car, I took the American passengers outside onto the platform, one by one, and interviewed them. I wrote down their names, units of assignment, serial numbers, and the issuing headquarters of their temporary duty instructions. G.I.s don’t travel much in Korea, unless they’re under what we call TDY—temporary duty—orders. There were a total of seven G.I.s in car number four. One was a courier carrying a packet of classified documents. Another was on his way home on emergency leave orders; apparently he had a child back home who was gravely ill. Four of the G.I.s were Signal Corps technicians on their way to do some repair work at the 42nd Long Lines Battalion at Camp Coiner. The last G.I. was an officer under orders to report to 8th Army

headquarters for a SOFA Conference, a joint ROK-US Status of Forces Agreement confab.

Nobody was on unauthorized travel. Nobody was absent without leave. At least, that's the way it seemed so far. The paperwork they showed me could have been forged. It was even possible that their ID cards were phony. Unlikely, but possible. Later today, Ernie and I would be checking out the validity of their stories, but for the moment I was taking what they told me at face value.

When everyone had been interviewed, Ernie and I compared notes with Lieutenant Shin. He had the passenger manifest, which had been radioed up from Pusan and Taegu and Taejon and then painstakingly transcribed by hand by the head clerk in the Seoul Station dispatch office. The manifest didn't have names, but all assigned seats were indicated, along with an annotation indicating where the passenger boarded the train: Pusan, Taegu, or Taejon. The manifest also indicated those tickets purchased by 8th Army RTO. About 80 percent of the seats were filled when the train left the Pusan Station. Pusan is a bustling international port and the second largest city in the country. Seoul is not only the capital of the country but also the largest city by far—with a population of eight million—and the home of most of the country's industrial production. As such, the majority of the passengers on the Pusan-to-Seoul Blue Train travel the entire route. Still, at Taegu twenty-two people disembarked and forty boarded. At Taejon less than a dozen disembarked and about thirty boarded the Blue Train to Seoul. At that point, every seat on the train was occupied but five.

Lieutenant Shin made another announcement, asking everyone to continue to remain in their seats, apologizing for the delay, and telling them that they would soon be released. With the conductor at our side, we walked up and down the length of the train, making sure that every seat that was supposed to be occupied was in fact occupied. They were—all but one. It was in car number four, in the back row.

Next to the empty seat a G.I. slouched, bored with the delay. I'd already interviewed him, and he'd assured me that he'd seen nothing unusual, no Americans wandering forward from car four to car three. He was a private first class, wearing a wrinkled khaki uniform, holding a big leather pouch on his lap. The courier. The nameplate pinned to his shirt pocket said Runnels. I checked my notes again to make sure I had the spelling right. His eyes popped open and he looked up at us.

"You're delaying my delivery," he told me. "This pouch is supposed to be at 8th Army J-2 by fourteen hundred hours."

"You still have time," Ernie told him.

The guy checked his watch, snorted, and gazed out the window.

"Who was sitting next to you?" I asked.

The courier turned his head and gazed down into the seat next to him as if seeing it for the first time. "Here?" he asked.

"You see any other seats next to you?" Ernie asked. He was toying now with the brass knuckles hidden in his coat pocket, aching, I knew, to pop this guy a good one. We waited.

Private First Class Runnels shrugged. "Some guy," he said finally.

“An American?”

“Yeah. Wearing civvies. He told me he was on in-country leave.”

“Did he say why?”

“No, he didn’t. I guess he just wanted to see Seoul.”

“Where was he stationed?”

“How should I know?”

“You didn’t ask?”

“What do you think I am? A bargirl?” In a singsong voice, Runnels said, “Where you *stationed*, G.I.?”

Lieutenant Shin’s face tightened. I positioned my body between the two men.

“So, what did you talk about?” I asked.

“Nothing. He wanted to be quiet, and so did I.”

Keeping my temper in check, I coaxed PFC Runnels into providing a detailed description of this man who had been sitting next to him. About six feet tall, dark brown hair cut short, blue jeans, sneakers, a thick pullover black sweater. Was he carrying a traveling bag? Runnels hadn’t noticed. He had noticed where he’d boarded the train: in Pusan, just as Runnels had.

Then Ernie placed his hands on the armrests on either side of Private First Class Runnels and leaned in close to him, so close that Runnels winced at Ernie’s breath.

“Okay, Runnels,” Ernie said. “Time for the little-boy act to stop.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

Runnels was squirming now. Ernie’s green eyes shone from behind his round-lensed glasses, and his nose was pointed as if he were a woodpecker about to poke

Runnels's eyes out. These were the moments Ernie lived for. The moments when he turned the tables on criminals.

"Where is this guy?" Ernie sneered. "This invisible guy who boarded the train at the same time you did, who was supposedly going all the way to Seoul. Where is he now?"

"How in the hell should I know?"

Like a hawk swooping up toward the sky, Ernie's right hand flashed across Runnels's face. The sound of the slap filled the silent train. Everyone turned. Ernie leaned in even closer to Runnels.

"A woman has been raped, Private Runnels," Ernie told him. "A decent woman who is the mother of two children. Two children who were sitting only a few feet from her when she was assaulted. I don't give a shit about what your feelings are about MPs or law enforcement, but you're not getting off this train, at least not in one piece, until you start telling me and my partner what we want to know. You *got* that?"

Runnels held his palm at the side of his face, his mouth open in shock. "You can't *do* that," he said.

"Can't do what?"

"You can't hit me."

Ernie slapped him again.

Runnels squirmed back in his seat, leaning toward the window, trying to get as far away from Ernie as he could. Maybe it was the look on Ernie's face. Maybe it was the disapproval that flowed in waves from the passengers all around. Whatever the reason, Runnels started talking. His words came in a rush. He told us everything he knew about the silent man who had taken the seat next to him.

“The guy was complaining about the army,” he said. “You know, the usual screw-the-army stuff. But then he said he was going to even the score.”

“How?” Ernie asked.

“He didn’t tell me. All he said was that there were a bunch of things, and people, who had to be taught a lesson. And when he rose from his seat, he glanced back at me and said something funny.”

“What was that?”

“He said he was going to start now.”

“Why was that funny?”

“Because he also said this would be the first check mark on a long list of what he called ‘corrective actions.’”

“‘Corrective actions?’ You mean like after an inspection?”

“That’s what the guy said.”

“What’s it mean?”

“How the hell should I know?”

This time, Ernie didn’t slap him.

Lieutenant Shin ordered everyone off the train. Grumpily, the passengers grabbed their bags and coats and made their way onto the platform. When the technicians had completed their work and everything was done that could be done, Lieutenant Shin talked to the conductor. In a few seconds, the big train was building up steam, and we hopped off and watched it roll slowly away. We made our way back to the huge domed entrance of Seoul Station.

Inside, much to our surprise, a crowd was waiting for us behind the long metal railing. People hooted, shouting epithets. Lieutenant Shin ordered his men to pull their

batons. Forming a V with Ernie and me at the center, we started to carve our way through the crowd of angry faces.

That's when we saw her, sitting in a wheelchair, surrounded by medical personnel and the same group of old women who'd been with her on the train. The victim. By now, Lieutenant Shin had told me that her name was Oh Myong-ja. As we approached, she stood shakily up from her chair. The old women patted her shoulders and tried to persuade her to sit back down. She took a tentative step toward us. The angry crowd grew quiet. We walked up to them. In Korean, Mrs. Oh Myong-ja started to speak.

"You should go home," she said.

I just stood there, wondering what she meant.

"Back to your country," she continued. "Back to America. We don't need you here any more."

The crowd was strangely silent. And then the woman's daughter was standing next to her, and then the son; and the small triumvirate put their arms around one another protectively, and all three stared at me until tears started to flow from their eyes.

I wanted to say something, I'm not sure what, but I was sure it was important that I say something at that time. Very important. Instead, I said nothing.

Finally, I felt Ernie's hand on my elbow. He told me later that as we made our way out of the station, people threw bits of wadded newspaper at us and even a couple of empty juice cans. The KNPs batted them away with their riot batons. In addition to cursing, a few people in the crowd started to chant, "Yankee go home!"

I remember none of this. What I do remember is Mrs. Oh Myong-ja, white gauze taped to her throat, knees

shaking, hands clutching her children, black eyes burning with defiance. And I remember the smooth cheeks of her children's faces and the tears that flowed down them. And the fear that showed in their eyes as they clutched one another.