

One Gift - Hold The Wrap

By John Schulian

Christmas morning the planes booming in and out of LAX woke me the way they did every other morning. *A Christmas Carol* was playing on Channel 5, so I watched it and wound up feeling like half of me was Scrooge and the other half was Bob Cratchit. Afterward I toasted my schizophrenia by finishing a Diet Coke that I found sitting open in the fridge. God rest ye merry gentlemen.

I didn't shower or shave, just hung around the one-bedroom apartment I could hardly stand in the best of times until it was leave or blow my brains out. There was only one place I could go, and I hadn't been invited. I went anyway. I had to.

Everybody who usually clogs the 405 to Long Beach must have been home checking out the iPods and XBoxes that Santa had brought them. The sun was still burning off the pre-noon haze when I parked my road-weary Cherokee on 70th Street, kitty-corner from the stucco shanty I wanted to watch in my rear-view mirror. The first thing I noticed was that the Christmas lights out front were still on. The second thing was my right eye. It was hidden beneath sunglasses, but I still would have sworn there were more lines at the corner of it than there'd been the day before. The lines looked deeper too. I tried to tell myself it was the shadows in the car playing tricks on me, but when I took my shades off, the skin beneath the eye called me a liar by sagging like a fighter who can't answer the bell. No wonder the eye itself looked so weary, so sad. It belonged to a loser.

I put my shades back on and checked the mirror again, looking for whatever would come next and seeing nothing but the past. The past was why I was here. There was no escaping it, even as the warmth of the sun lulled me to sleep. The bad dream my life had become would follow me anywhere.

The first time I laid eyes on her, I'd just spent twelve hours waiting for an accountant who wasn't the dognapper his ex-wife made him out to be. It was three in the morning and I was piling up some expenses at the counter of Norm's, on La Cienega. Between bites of bacon and hard-fried eggs, I thought about all the other nights I'd wasted in a lonely car on a dreary street, waiting for bad news to show up. The memories would have ruined the romance of my life as a private eye if there'd been any romance left. Then she slid onto the stool next to mine the way hot fudge goes on ice cream.

Another Asian mascara junkie, I thought at first. But I changed my mind after taking in the eyes, the arms, the mouth of her, the east, west, north and south of her.

Somewhere in the middle of the tour, she caught me staring. She didn't bat an eye. Maybe she couldn't.

"I see you tonight?" she asked.

"Would you remember if you had?" I said.

She laughed self-consciously. I took it as a no. But at least we had the start of something resembling a conversation. That's how I learned she was a dancer at the Jewel Box, just down the street. "Naked body," she said. "You better come see my show."

I went once, twice, so many times I finally lost count. I'd seen this kind of thing happen to a flock of wandering husbands, but never had it occurred to me that I might turn out the way those sad sacks did. Yet there I was, in an all-nude, no-alcohol club with five circular stages and the strippers hustling the customers between sets. I showed up strictly for the dancer who called herself Aiko, and I wasn't the only one. We couldn't avoid each other, my competitors and I. Our obsession was as bare as the woman at the heart of it. If I didn't see them, I automatically assumed that they showed up on the nights I couldn't make it. I was jealous of them all, wondering what she did in their private lap-dance sessions but afraid to find out. She said it was strictly look, no touch - only I got special privileges, at least when the steroid mastodon who handled security looked the other way. I wanted to think she was telling the truth even before I knew her real name.

Things got more complicated with the Japanese businessmen who poured into the club every night, fresh off a tour bus and so horny you'd have thought they were just out of prison. They headed straight for the blondes, but they changed directions as soon as they got a load of Aiko. They dug deep to hang money on the tip rail for her, and not just singles, but fives, tens, even twenties. She never smiled wider than she did then. She never spread her legs wider, either.

One night, as I tried to ignore the obvious possibilities, I heard another dancer, a redhead with a bad boob job, mutter that the damn Japs were taking care of their own. The Asian guy who drove the tour bus heard her too, and winked at me. When the jealous dancer headed backstage, probably to toot up, he said, "Not Japanese."

"Who?" I asked. "Aiko?"

"Yes. Korean."

Then he headed for the door, where he would wait until his clients had been in the club exactly one hour before rounding them up and moving on to the next fleshpot. He caught Aiko's eye and gave her a nod that made me wonder if he got a percentage of the business he steered her way.

She wouldn't tell me, of course, not that I ever worked up the nerve to ask. She was cautious in that regard, and in plenty of others. A cautious exhibitionist - the contradiction in terms was almost as delicious as she was. Before she told me her real name, she wanted to see my business card, the one that identified me as MATT CORBRIDGE, PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR. She called both numbers on the card, office and cell, and asked for my home number so she could call me there too. "No woman answer," she said, and it sounded like she was having a hard time believing it.

My wife had walked out three years before and taken everything in our bank account with her. Now she was shackled up in Laurel Canyon with a straight-to-video director. The guy was a no-talent bum - every critic who had watched a frame of his work said so, and believe me, I Googled them all. But he still had to be pulling down more than I was.

It wasn't anything I wanted to tell Aiko about, so I tried to steer clear of the subject of money. When she said she didn't understand what a PI did, however, my explanation summoned up her thousand-watt smile and my first glimpse of her primary interest.

"You find other peoples' secrets and they pay you not to tell," she said.

"It doesn't work like that," I said. "At least it's not supposed to."

“But you get rich.”

“Not in this lifetime.”

“Maybe I come work for you,” she said. “Then you rich.”

She was tottering on stiletto heels in front of my table, holding a drink tray over her left shoulder and wearing something red and cut to the navel. “I don’t think the business would ever be the same, that’s for sure,” I said. And we both laughed.

It wasn’t long afterward that she told me I could call her Su-Yon. “Unless you like Aiko better,” she said. I didn’t.

Calling her Su-Yon - but never loud enough for other customers to hear - made her seem more real. So did hearing her story about the car salesman she’d married to stay in the U.S. He was a fast-talker who slapped her around before he ran off with the nineteen-year-old neighbor he’d been banging. All Su-Yon had left from the marriage was two daughters, a tiny house filled with bad memories, and so many brothers, sisters and parents drifting in and out that I didn’t know how she kept track of them. It wasn’t much of a life, but it was still more than she’d been able to afford on a grocery-store cashier’s salary. And then one of the women she worked with told her sister about the Asian chick the male customers always flirted with. The sister was a stripper, and when she saw Su-Yon, she recognized a natural for the business: a face that begged for sex and sumptuous breasts that were, in this land of silicone, all hers.

I didn’t need a shrink to understand why she was always in the back of my mind and trying to wiggle to the front. My reasons were physical, emotional, maybe even spiritual. After all, I chanted her name on those mornings when I ran the way religious zealots call on the deity of their choice. It was crazy, the kind of behavior I’d never tell a friend about - and a friend would have told me I should have split when I didn’t get in her pants by the second night. But I kept my mouth shut, and I kept going back to the Jewel Box, and to Su-Yon.

Every time I showed up, she doled out a little more of herself, talking about her latest scheme to make a better life. Sometimes it was beauty school, sometimes a roach coach with her brothers. The idea she spent the most time on, though, was a hostess bar, the kind they have in Korea, where there’s a girl waiting for every lonely guy who walks through the door. And the girls aren’t necessarily hookers either, just babes with sympathetic ears. “Right,” I said. My sarcasm earned me a laugh and a light punch on the shoulder. She told me the punch was a sign of affection. “If I hit you hard, you know I angry,” she said. So I counted my blessings and stayed grateful for the hasty goodbye kiss I got when I finally called it quits for the night.

Things didn’t change until I told her about my first good score in a year, maybe longer. A pro surfer had finally come back from Australia and paid me five grand for recovering his prize board from a female fan who wanted to trade him sex for it. Problem was, the surfer was gay. I wasn’t, so I suppose you could say that things worked out for everybody. And now I thought I was getting a bonus, making myself sound like a big deal by bragging about the money without mentioning that I’d gotten laid in the line of duty.

“Maybe you help me then,” Su-Yon said.

I knew right away that I’d run my mouth too much, but there was no turning back. “Help you how?” I asked, never doubting for an instant that the answer would involve money.

She needed every penny of my windfall to pay the first and last month's rent on a bar she said was in Koreatown. The bar was actually on the stretch of death that was Jefferson between Western and Crenshaw. Koreatown adjacent, you'd call it if you were a real-estate agent with no shame.

I tried to tell her that the neighborhood could get ugly, the good folks in it hiding behind the iron bars on their doors and windows while gangs, drug dealers and kill-you-for-blinking outlaws ruled the night. She didn't want to hear it. "This my dream," she said, a pout wiping the smile off her face and her body language suggesting that I had suddenly become as appealing as an STD.

"All right, I'll think about it, okay?" I said. "No promises, but let me run it around in my head."

"Just a loan," she said.

I'd heard that before from people I knew better and, to be honest, had more reason to trust. Every last one of them had let me down.

She read my silence perfectly. "We better talk more," she said.

But it was her turn to dance. Her favorite song, one of those hip-hop things that made my ears hurt, was already playing, and the club's manager was bearing down on us, waving his arms to get her attention.

She started toward the stage just as I said, "This isn't the place."

"Pick better one," she said, throwing me a smile over her shoulder.

Half an hour later, she told the manager she was coming down with the flu. Half an hour after that, she was in my bed. Time became a blur. I didn't focus again until I wrote her a check for five grand. "How I thank you?" she said. I told her she already had, but if she wanted to thank me some more, she could be my guest.

She came back regularly for the next couple of months, always leaving before dawn, never suggesting that we try her place on for size. Her complaints about the jealous dancers at the club were leavened by her visions of the bar her brothers were whipping into shape for her. She planned to be there every night even if she had to show up late because she was dancing. As soon as she'd socked away enough money, she'd give up stripping and run the bar full-time. I told myself I'd have her for my own then. I even daydreamed that she'd turn out to be one of those unlikely immigrant success stories you hear about. But reality intruded when I had to miss her grand opening because a skip-tracing job took me to Seattle.

She'd been in business for a week by the time I got my first look at her dream. It was a corner building next to a TV repair shop, squat and joyless California stucco. All the sign out front said was BAR, hardly the come-hither I'd imagined for lonely, thirsty Korean men. I parked just off Jefferson and headed for the front door, wondering if my car would still be there when I came out. It couldn't have been an original thought, and yet there were more customers in the place than I expected, a dozen at least. But they seemed a lot more surprised to see a round-eye than I was to see them.

Su-Yon gave me a hug and a quick kiss to let them know I wasn't the enemy. One look at her, though, and I was more concerned about the worry peeking out from behind her smile. I asked what was wrong as soon as she dragged me to a corner booth. She put a finger to my lips and leaned across the table.

"You got a gun?" she asked.

Of course I did. It was a .45. Where my cases took me, I'd have to be brain-dead not to pack one. But I hadn't used it more than a couple of times in the dozen years I'd been a P.I., and then it was strictly for show. I fired it only when I went for target practice. I wasn't a great shot, but that didn't bother me. What bothered me was Su-Yon's question.

"Why do you want to know?" I said.

"I need security maybe," she said.

"Did something happen?"

"No."

"Then you must have taken a look at the neighborhood. Too bad you didn't do it before you sunk your money in here."

She pulled back, frowning. "No lecture."

"Fine, no lecture. But I'm not a rent-a-cop."

"You don't want help me?"

"I already did."

"No money this time."

"Yeah. Just me and my gun, right?"

"Not every night. Only when possible." She smiled wickedly. "Unless you got someplace better to go."

"How do you know I don't?"

"I know."

I felt her bare foot on the inside of my thigh. She'd kicked off one of her shoes and was heading toward the heart of the matter.

"See what I mean?" she said.

We closed the deal in the bar's storage room. Even the drunkest customer must have known what we were up to, but none of them said anything then or on any of the nights I stopped by after that. Their silence was enough for me to get the message that I wasn't wanted. The only regular who broke with policy was Mr. Kim, a sharp dresser who pumped me for the little I knew about the stock market. And Hui, a barmaid with a full crop of hair under her arms, kept inviting me home no matter how many times I turned her down.

It was just the opposite with Su-Yon. I could feel her pulling away from me even when we were in bed. She didn't offer a reason and I didn't press her for one. I should have. I'd done it often enough when I was tracking down creeps, deadbeats and bail-jumpers. But Su-Yon had turned me into a coward. I'd been lucky I hadn't chased her away when I badgered her about the neighborhood or when I tried to avoid becoming her personal army of one. Afraid to push my luck any further, I showed up at the bar whenever I could, a slave to something that didn't qualify as love but gripped me just as hard.

The next time Su-Yon needed me as bad as I needed her was the night trouble walked in. It came in the form of two black guys with jailhouse struts, braided hair and pants hanging off their asses. They split up as soon as they stepped inside, the short one staying by the door, the one with a raincoat over his arm heading for the cash register. Su-Yon flashed a distress signal with her eyes. I caught it in the booth by the broken jukebox where I usually sat, but I'd already guessed what was up. The weather still

prickly in November, no rain for months: the son of a bitch with the coat wasn't even trying to be subtle about the stick-up that was seconds away from happening.

I eased my .45 onto the table, clicked off the safety, and prayed the jukebox would shield me from the brother at the door. Then I shouted, "Hold it right there!"

Raincoat wheeled in my direction and flashed the sawed-off shotgun he'd been hiding before I finished my sentence. I shot him twice in the chest, driving him backward lifelessly into a row of barstools.

His partner blasted away in the general direction of the jukebox, hitting it and showering me with plastic as I dove to the floor. I rolled onto my left side and saw him rip off two more shots. I fired back three times as he yanked the front door open. He had a foot outside when one of my ricochets hit him in the base of the skull. He stayed wedged in the door until a couple of the regulars dragged him back into the bar, covered with blood and viscera, and deader than his dreams of an easy score.

"Call the police!" I shouted at Hui.

"No!" Su-Yon screamed. "No police!"

"Bullshit! Call the cops, goddammit!"

Su-Yon started screaming at Hui in Korean. The barmaid stood there and took it, too intimidated to even glance at me for moral support.

"All right," I said. "I'll call them."

I was digging my cell phone out of my pocket when Su-Yon came flying at me. "What I tell you, what I tell you?" she said, pounding my chest with both fists. "No police!"

"Are you nuts?" I said. "You've got two dead men in here. You can't just leave them on the floor."

"Too much trouble."

"That's what the police are in business for."

She'd stopped hitting me by now. I was starting to dial the phone.

"Not trouble for police," she said. "Trouble for me."

She glanced around the room at the regulars, still breathing the smell of cordite and blood, some already motioning for Hui to start pouring, and to do it fast.

I lowered the phone without hitting the final 1 in 911. "What do you mean?"

"Can't talk," she said, shaking her head vigorously.

"What's the problem? Immigration? Alcohol and Beverage? Come on, I need a reason."

"No. You care about me, you don't call police."

Then she got on the bar's phone and called someone else. Whoever it was spoke Korean. Forty-five minutes later, when we were the only people still around, the tour bus driver from the strip club rolled in with two other guys. They wrapped the bodies in what looked like painters' plastic drop sheets and loaded them on the bus.

"What are you going to do with them?" I asked the driver.

"Better you don't know," he said.

"I killed them, didn't I?"

"Yes. Now we make it like it never happened."

"Who the hell are you anyway?" I asked.

He turned away from me without answering.

"Hey, pal," I said, "I want your name."

I was starting to go after him when Su-Yon grabbed my sleeve.

“Hush,” she said. “He helping.”

Su-Yon and the driver did all the talking after that, and they didn’t translate for me. I might as well have been invisible until the bus drove off into what was left of the night. Then she rubbed up against me and said, “Better this way.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “For who?”

“Come inside. I show you.”

She was offering the bait I’d always taken, but this time I said no.

“What you mean?” she asked.

“Just what I said.”

I started walking toward my car.

“You be back,” she said.

“Maybe,” I told her. “Maybe not.”

I almost caved in a couple of nights later. I didn’t want to step inside the bar, but I was still concerned about her. The dead men might have been in a gang, and their homies would be out for payback. Or maybe it would be a family thing. There had to be somebody who wondered what had happened to them, didn’t there?

I stopped worrying when I drove past the bar and caught a glimpse of two men with rifles on the roof, a reminder of the Koreans who guarded their turf during the ‘92 riots. Su-Yon would be as fine as she could ever be in that hellhole. She’d find someone to mop the blood off the floor and patch the bullet holes in the wall. Maybe she’d even get a new jukebox, at somebody else’s expense, of course. Whether she’d still have customers, I couldn’t say. I’m sure word traveled fast in her corner of the world whether the cops were privy to it or not. But success would have been a roll of the dice for her even if she were in Beverly Hills.

She didn’t call me with any updates and I didn’t call her. Not that I wasn’t tempted. I dialed her number a time or two, but hung up before she answered. Then I found myself wondering if my name had popped up on her caller ID. I didn’t want her knowing how strong a hold she had on me. No, strike that. She knew how strong a hold she had on me. I just didn’t want her to hear me say it.

So I spent my sleepless nights alone, staring at the ceiling with sand under my eyelids and my head filled with questions I couldn’t answer. I imagined confrontation scenarios that always went wrong, the bouncer at the Jewel Box kicking my ass, the regulars at the bar beating me into a tae-kwan do stew. If I had any brains, I would have just stayed home and spent the holidays licking my wounds. But I’d checked my brains at the door the first time I saw Su-Yon, and when you’ve got it as bad as I did, you can resist for only so long.

The squeal of happy kids woke me. Su-Yon’s kids. The way it looked in my rearview, they’d got bikes for Christmas and were showing them off for their mother. A couple minutes later, a man came out of the house. I thought it was one of her brothers until they kissed in a way that said they were more than siblings. When I looked again, I recognized the tour bus driver.

I watched the two of them for as long as I could stand it, and then I started my car. The sound got their attention, and Su-Yon began walking toward me. The driver was going to follow, but she motioned him back. That was my girl, always taking charge.

“You want to join us?” she asked.

“I don’t think your friend there would appreciate it,” I said.

“He my husband.”

In my line of work, I’d seen enough guys walk into sucker punches like this one. But I never expected to do it myself. I’d done none of the background I would have on someone I was investigating, and now here I was with a dumb look on my face.

When I finally regained the power of speech, I asked, “How long?”

“Since last year,” she said.

“Guess that explains why you never brought me home.”

“You find anyway, huh?”

“I’m a detective. Sometimes I even act like one.”

I raised my .45 so she could see it. God, she was pretty, even when she was terrified. And she was terrified now. It was written in her wide eyes and the mouth that opened involuntarily. But she didn’t scream, and she didn’t try to run, didn’t take so much as a step backward.

I should have savored the moment. It was the first time since I met her that she hadn’t been in control. Maybe that was how it was with every man in her life, even the one across the street wondering what the hell was going on. Or maybe she’d learned control as a way of survival after her first husband had belted her around. Whatever the reason, it had turned her into a schemer and a user and one more problem I didn’t want in my life. Damned if I could make myself pull the trigger, though.

She said something I couldn’t quite hear as I lowered my gun. “What?” I asked. She said my name as she leaned in the window and kissed me the way she had so many times before. But this time the kiss would have to last forever. Then she hurried back to a life that was too bent for me to navigate even with happy kids frolicking through it. I drove away, and for the longest time I could feel her lipstick on my lips. I finally dabbed it off on a handkerchief that became special in that instant. The red smear on it was the only Christmas present I got.

John Schulian has divided his writing career between print journalism and Hollywood. He was a newspaper sports columnist in Chicago and Philadelphia before heading west to write for such TV dramas as “Wiseguy”, “Miami Vice”, “Hercules” and “JAG.”. For better or worse, Schulian is one of the creators of “Xena: Warrior Princess,” but he takes far more pride in his work for Sports Illustrated and the two published collections of his sports writing, Twilight of the Long-Ball Gods and Writers’ Fighters and Other Sweet Scientists.