

Aftermath of Peace

Sepo, North Korea, September 1953:

“The war’s over. We should be going home soon,” Ying said. She was bright-eyed, clear-skinned and a picture of pride and high purpose, the kind of socialist beauty often used to decorate billboards to extol proletarian virtues.

“Will it ever be over for us? Inside our heads, I mean. Can we really bury our dead?” Cheng Ching replied.

“At least you’ve got through in one piece, as you had promised. Your whole life is ahead of you, to do with as you will.” Ying’s voice was warm and sisterly. She was twenty-three and had been among the first contingent of Chinese nurses to volunteer for service in Korea.

“Too many didn’t make it.” Cheng Ching’s voice sounded bitter. He had been involved in fighting for less than three months but during that period he had seen far too many deaths. Some of them had been caused by his own hand and each one left a shadow upon his soul. The memories of fallen comrades also haunted him. Old Tung, Mad Fan, Lee, Lai, Koo, the men he had written letters for were all gone. Others had been left maimed or captured. So many sacrificed in such an incomprehensible conflict.

“They didn’t have to die,” he added, after a long silence, still tormented by his memories. “Why order attacks so late in July, when the ceasefire had been all but signed? What was the point of capturing another two or three desolate hills nobody’s even heard of? The whispers in the bunkers are that twenty-five thousand were killed during those final assaults, with possibly twice that number wounded or captured. Don’t know if that’s true. Why so many lives thrown away? What did their deaths achieve?”

“A ceasefire on our terms, according to my Political Commissar,” Ying whispered, placing a cautioning hand on Cheng Ching’s arm. Her bright eyes misted over. “You shouldn’t talk so openly. Others may hear you. Do you think I feel nothing? We’ve got to put everything behind us.”

Volunteer fighters and nurses had been brought together for an outing to Sepo to boost morale. It hadn’t worked. Both groups were self-conscious and hesitant about mixing, except for a few who already knew one another, like Cheng Ching and Ying. The rest kept to themselves.

It wasn’t much of an outing, Cheng Ching thought, and Sepo wasn’t much of a town. But he was glad that Ying was strolling by his side and drawing envious glances. She was from Soochow, that ancient city of hump-backed bridges and picturesque canals not excessively far from his village in Anhui. He wished they had met during a time of peace and hope. Then he would not have made such a fool of himself by crying. The ancients held that a man should be able to shed blood without shedding tears. He had failed to live up to that ideal.

The memory of his unmanliness made him flush. It had happened in May, during his second day at the field hospital, in a ward filled with the wounded from the engagements of two

nights earlier. He had recognized two or three belonging to his company but most had been from other units further along the front. There had been so many severed limbs, torn bodies, punctured chests, moans, gurgles, imprecations and whimpered pleas to absent mothers. And all the while a confused traffic of orderlies, nurses, doctors, stretcher-bearers and supervisors in the field hospital.

In the middle of all that he had been shocked to see on the bed next a member of his company -- Koo. The sober intelligence which used to shine from the man's brown eyes when they played chess together seemed to have deserted him. Now they stared blankly out of an ashen face, like two dull bone buttons. His chest was heavily bandaged and he seemed lifeless, except for a faint, laboured wheeze coming from his throat and a trickle of pink froth dribbling from a corner of his mouth.

The sight of a human being in such a state, let alone a comrade, pained him. He went over to Koo to attempt to ease whatever torment the man might be suffering. He knelt down beside him and whispered his name.

"Brother Koo, Brother Koo, I'm Cheng Ching. How are you?" he asked. "What happened in the fighting? Is there anything I can do for you? You're in good hands. Don't worry about anything. Just rest quietly. You'll get better soon. Doctors here are good. When you are better we can play chess again."

He failed to elicit the slightest response. When he touched Koo's hand it felt cold as ice. Then he noticed a tear forming in a corner of Koo's eye. The tear fattened and rolled down the face. Otherwise, the injured man still did not react. He knew then Koo was beyond help. At the same time he noticed that Koo's ears too were small, like those of the volunteer Lee. In less than three hours Koo was gone and his bed taken by someone else.

While Cheng Ching lay dazed by the loss of Koo, by the realization of how easily life could be snatched away, Ying coming to change his dressing. He had noted her beauty the previous day, while she stitched his wound with her face close to his. To judge by the filthy state of her hospital gown, she must have had an appalling twenty-four hours.

"We've found no evidence of concussion," Ying said cheerfully, as she removed the bandage from his cheek. "It looks like you've escaped with only a flesh wound and a slight fracture of the maxilla bone. There's not much anyone can do about that. It will heal itself. So will the wound, if you keep it clean and not get infected. You'll be right as rain in a few days. I'll get you some antibiotics. Come back next week to have the stitches removed. You can go back to your unit today."

"I don't want to go back. I never want to go back," he said, very quietly, and suddenly tears rolled down his cheeks.

Ying, mistaking his remarks and his tears as a sign of fear, placed a hand firmly around his shoulder and whispered: "It's natural to be afraid but it's your duty to go back. Look around you. You're luckier than most. You'll feel better once you're back with your unit."

"I'm not afraid," he said, flushing. "I just don't want to kill any more or to watch other people being killed. Yesterday I looked into the eyes of a stranger and blew his brains out. I watched them spill onto the ground. It was revolting. Today I knelt beside a man whom I had

played chess with and watched his life ebb away. It was every bit as bad. Such things are too hard for me. I can't stand them any more. I would rather die."

"You were just doing your duty, resisting aggression, defending the freedom of the Korean people. The man you killed yesterday was an enemy, a heartless killer."

"No, he was just a young man like me. He had blue eyes and golden hair. I've never seen someone like him before. He was badly wounded and terribly frightened. I wanted to help him but I couldn't make myself understood. Then he panicked and I panicked and I killed him."

"It wasn't your fault. Such things happen in war. He was up to no good. He came to kill. He got what he deserved."

"He did not look like a bad man, not someone out to murder or rape. He was just a teenager doing his duty, like me."

"Well, looks can deceive. He came with a gun and a blackened face, didn't he? Only evil men out to do shameful deeds need hide their faces. All aggressors are murderers by definition. I've attended many women and children injured in American air raids. If dropping bombs on the innocent isn't murder, then what is?"

"The man wasn't dropping bombs. Killing someone face to face isn't like dropping bombs. You can see right into a man's soul. Something speaks to you, touches you, when you snuff out a life like that. It was horrible. This is supposed to be a hero's war, to end with a great victory and a hero's home-coming. Killing a wounded man didn't make me feel like a hero. I felt like a murderer, a barbarian."

"All right, all right," Ying said, gently. "It must have been a terrible shock. I'll give you something to calm you down and keep you under observation for another night. You should feel a lot better tomorrow. I'll come back to see you then."

When Cheng Ching returned to the front the following day, a great fuss was made of him by Old Tung, Mad Fan and the others for having acquitted himself so well in his first battle. Old Tung seemed particularly pleased and excused him from night patrols till his stitches had been removed. His own joy over seeing old comrades again, however, was dampened by too many missing faces. He could not bear to count the number of new men or to ask after absent friends.

In the meantime, Mad Fan appeared to have acquired many new photographs. But he had become much more solitary and secretive in studying them. The day after Cheng Ching rejoined the company, he handed Cheng Ching a photograph of a golden-haired man with an arm around a smiling girl in a printed calico dress. Their faces seemed to radiate hope, affection and happiness.

Cheng Ching recognized the man as the one whose brains he had blown apart. The memory sickened him again.

In the nights that followed, he could not sleep. He kept visualizing the face of the young man and speculating over the anguish the girl must be going through. What cruel destiny had brought them face to face, on a desolate hill far from their homes on that cool May morning? He had been fated to be there because his nation had urged him to resist aggression and repel

imperialism. He had also wanted to honour his father. But what of the man with the golden hair? Had he gone there to enslave others, to commit murder and rape, as the Party newspapers said?

He remembered his father telling him that Dr. Sun Yat-san had launched his revolution against the Manchu dynasty on the basis of his Three Principles of the People. Those principles had been based on the ideals of Abraham Lincoln, an American President who had opposed slavery. His father had also told him the American constitution was very idealistic, holding liberty and freedom of the individual in high regard. How could it make sense for Americans to come to Korea to enslave others?

He might have gained a better understanding if the Americans had made broadcasts from no man's land explaining themselves, as his own side had done. Or if he had been able to talk to the man he had killed or to other Americans. How could there be understanding without talk and how could there be talk without a common language? He suddenly felt as if he had stumbled upon a truth. Different peoples, with their differing values and cultures, had to be able to communicate. Otherwise they would remain forever trapped in the dead end of their own prejudices and beliefs. He began badgering Old Tung to teach him English, convinced that sooner or later he would have to master that language.

The following week, he returned to the field hospital to have his stitches removed. He still felt depressed, both over the blue-eyed American and the dead in his company.

"Your wound has healed well," Ying said, noting his mood. "It will leave a scar, though not a very big one. I've been told that Prussian officers used to consider a scar on the cheek a badge of honour."

"My scar can only be a reminder of my disgrace."

"What has been done is done," Ying said. "It's no good brooding."

Cheng Ching took out from his pocket the photograph of the dead American Mad Fan had given him. "This is the man I killed," he said. "How can I ever forget?"

Ying refused to look at the photograph. "Why do you have to feel sorry for dead foreigners?" she flared. "Why don't you go through the wards and look at what the Americans have done to your countrymen? Do you feel sorry for them? I used to have an older brother. He was killed last year. Did anyone feel sorry for him?"

Cheng Ching was taken aback by the vehemence of Ying's reaction and the revelation about her brother. The reddening of Ying's eyes flustered him. "I'm sorry, Elder Sister," he stammered. "I didn't mean to upset you. I didn't know about your brother. It's wrong of me to saddle you with my problems."

Ying shook her head and fought back her tears. After a while, she said: "No, it was wrong of me to shout at you. My brother and I were very close. He was also a volunteer. After he was killed I used to look at his photograph and cry. I thought I'd got over it. Your trying to show me that picture did something to me."

"I'm sorry, Elder Sister. I really am sorry."

"I'm all right now. You keep addressing me as 'Elder Sister'. Are you suggesting we should adopt each other? I don't have a brother any more. Do you have a sister?"

“No, I’m an only child. It would be an honour to become your adopted brother.”

“You must first promise me you’re going to live through this war. I couldn’t stand losing another brother. Also promise to come and see me when you’re sent to the rear for delousing or for a rest.”

“I promise,” Cheng Ching said.

It had not been difficult to keep his promises during the month of June and the first part of July. The front was quiet and the routine of the trenches had resumed its tedious pattern, with only occasional sniping and minor clashes. He drifted, like Mad Fan, into a more solitary existence and shied away from new friendships.

There were persistent rumours of a ceasefire about to be signed and everyone hoped that it would come into effect without more fighting. That proved a vain hope, for the artillery opened up again in mid-July. This time it was Chinese guns firing the first salvoes, to presage an offensive.

After the heavy guns had pounded one another for two days, Old Tung informed them of a general attack along the entire front. The specific task for the company was to capture an enemy strongpoint a mile away. The attack would begin at midnight the following night.

At the appointed hour the men slipped out of their trenches. Another company took over their vacated positions, ready to move out when the time came.

It was Cheng Ching’s first offensive action and he went into the night wondering if he would ever see tomorrow. Old Tung ordered him to stick close to him so that he might learn some of the craft and cunning employed in battle.

The company moved stealthily across no man’s land until they were close to the enemy outposts. Then Old Tung sent out small teams to eliminate the outposts. The ploy was successful. The signal for attack was given, and they threw themselves into the assault, oblivious of barbed-wire, buried mines and machine-gun fire.

They fought throughout the night. The following morning the rain reduced visibility to a matter of yards. Still they fought on, clinging tenaciously to every inch of captured terrain. By the end of that wet and miserable day the strongpoint was captured. But the price was high. Old Tung, Mad Fan and sixty per cent of the company had perished.

As Ying and Cheng Ching turned into another of the unremarkable streets of Sepo, Ying said: “I hope they send us on an outing to Pongyang. That’s usually a sign they’re about to send us home.”

“Do you think we will ever get home? According to my Political Commissar, the British imperialists are now organizing provocations near the Hong Kong border. They’re in league with the Americans and the Kuomintang in Taiwan. They’ll never leave us in peace. If we do get home, what do you intend to do?”

“Try and get into medical college and become a doctor. What about you?”

“I’ll study English, in honour of Old Tung, and eventually try to gain admission into the Party.”

“You should have no trouble with your family background and your war service. We might visit each other during holidays since we’ll be in adjoining provinces.”

“Wonderful!”

Cheng Ching was not yet seventeen but he could sense that another power as mighty as the Party’s was laying claim to him. He had learnt in the Communist Youth League that socialist love had to be pure, selfless and noble. He could go along with that. What baffled him was whether that held true if the object of his love happened to be his adopted sister.