

from *Lost Names: Scenes from a Korean Boyhood*

“Is Someone Dying?”

Yesterday, those who did not have blisters on their hands were given a pick and shovel and were ordered to work on the runway. Along with my classmates, I shoveled all day, digging up rubbery red clay, to a depth of four feet, barely clearing a ten- by twenty-foot sector, which was our class's quota for the day. We are building an airfield about thirty miles south of Pyongyang—or about twenty miles north of our town. The airfield, we are told, will have two runways and will serve as a refueling station for the Kamikaze planes that are being flown from Manchuria to the mainland. That the planes are to come all the way from Manchuria means—a friend of mine says, with a knowledgeable air—that either the Japanese are running out of planes in Japan proper or they are running out of pilots so fast, they can't keep planes flying in Manchuria.

In any case, so far, we have been spending most of our second year in junior high school in Pyongyang, on this so-called airfield; so-called because, although some four hundred to five hundred high school students have been working on it at all times for the last several months, the airfield has only one runway barely com-

pleted, and we have yet to see a single Kamikaze plane, or any plane, either land on the field or even fly over it.

We all live in tents, one class to a tent; after several months in use, the tents still exude a rancid odor of tar and grease melting under the broiling August sun. The tent has raised wooden platforms with an earthen path between them. The platforms serve as our sleeping quarters; that is, each of us is given a straw mat to put on the platform, and that becomes his bed. At night, it is very damp, and so are the straw mats, and, what with the smell of tar and grease and the mildewed, rotting straw mats, the air inside the tent is always stale and nauseating. We have learned to breathe with our mouths open, to avoid, at least, the sickening sensation we get when we inhale or sniff the air through our noses. When it rains, the earthen floor and the path usually get flooded and muddy, and the reddish brown clay stays wet and squishy for several days, giving off a smell that reminds you of rotting fish.

There are about sixty of us in our tent, plus our teacher, a middle-aged Japanese, a scholar of Chinese classics, of all things, who, like the rest of us, sleeps on the straw mat on the platform by the entrance to the tent, though he is separated from us by a bed sheet hung by straw ropes between his bed and the next bed. He could have slept in a tent specially constructed for teachers, but he insisted on sleeping with us, as well as working with us on the field, saying, “We are in this together, aren't we?” In spite of that, he is not popular or respected, though he is not disliked by the class. He has been lately confined to his bed, because he was stricken by a severe case of dysentery. Once a day, he is visited by a Japanese medic, who gave us permission to have someone stay in the tent at all times to look after our teacher. The medic also doles out aspirin tablets and small bags of bitter white powder, which is for diarrhea. Nearly everyone has diarrhea.

Although we suffer from dysentery and diarrhea and chronic indigestion, we can't really complain about our meals—mainly because we do get to have three meals a day. Most of us would be having two meals or, more likely, only one meal a day if we

weren't working on a Japanese airfield. Each day, we take turns for "kitchen" duties and take buckets over to the field kitchen and bring back cooked barley and soy-sauce soup that always has bean sprouts or several cubes of bean curd floating in it. As it is about a ten-minute walk from our tent to the field kitchen, our meal is cold by the time we get it to our tent, and, on rainy days, transporting the meal to our tent becomes a major operation. We all have our own utensils, which we brought from home, as well as our own bedrolls.

Speaking of our homes, once a week, for a day, we are allowed either to go home or to have visitors, and most of my classmates, except those who happen to come from nearby towns or villages, learned to stay. What with the shortage of trains and buses, which are now running on charcoal, travel is not only difficult but also demoralizing. If we are late in reporting back to the airfield, we have to do extra work. Some of the well-to-do boys, when they have visitors, manage to get cakes or candies, which become as valuable as money. Although there is a canteen for students by the field kitchen, most of us are without money and try to avoid going to the canteen even if we have money, because the canteen is a favorite gathering place of the Japanese students, who can get things there by using ration coupons while we pay in cash. The Japanese students live apart from the Korean students, in their own tents at the other side of the field, with a cluster of tents for the Japanese airmen between us. We seldom meet one another, even when we are working on the field. We have been here over two months this time.

After work and after our evening meal, which is the same as our breakfast as well as our lunch, though without the soup, we have classes in our tent. "The school must go on," says our principal. So—for two hours a night, under the dim, flickering halos of kerosene lanterns, we study; that is, we keep up with the progress of the war, which is supposed to be going very well for Japan, or we read from Japanese history. Having worked all day out on the field in the hot sun, it is difficult for some of us to stay awake

through the two hours of nightly classes, especially because we have to kneel and sit on our heels Japanese style on the straw mat, straining our eyes in the dim light.

"Why don't we quit the school?" we often ask ourselves. Most of us would have liked to quit the school and go home. But, getting into the school was difficult to begin with: The competition was fierce, and, for those of us who came from small towns and villages, it was doubly difficult to be admitted, and, then, once we quit the school, we would never be admitted to another high school anywhere in the country—that is, those who withdraw from the school to avoid "serving the Emperor through labor" become, automatically and by law, *persona non gratae*. In my own case, I have a special reason for not quitting: I was told that if I quit the school while the school is "requisitioned" to work on an airfield or in a munitions factory, my father would have to give a report once a week to the local police as to what I was doing and so forth, like a man out on parole.

This morning, the Japanese corporal who is in charge of our class inspects our hands and, seeing that my hands are bubbling and oozing with blisters, orders me to work, along with eight others, as a gravel-carrier. I and a classmate will, as a team, go outside the barbed-wire fence (which surrounds the entire field, including our tents) to a gravel pit worked on by the students from another high school, load the gravel into a big straw sack, run a wooden pole through the sack, and carry it, Chinese-coolie-style, to the section of the runway in which our class is digging. Everything is done by hand; we have not seen a single piece of machinery on the field, except for a dozen or so stone rollers. Even the cement that has not been used yet is transported to the field by oxcart. When the Kamikaze planes land, they will be the only machines on the field—if they ever arrive from Manchuria.

I am weak from diarrhea, and I have a splitting headache. My hands are wrapped in an old towel, which I also use to wipe the sweat from my face. The sun is glaring hot on our bare backs,

which are blistering and peeling from the heat, and our shoulders ache and chafe from the weight of the wooden pole. Our feet are also blistered, and, after a while, our thin cotton socks get glued to the burning skin of our feet, and, soon, the rubber soles of our sneakers will stick to the socks, and our feet will begin to feel as though they were walking on squishy, wet rubber.

Usually, we manage to start the day laughing and chattering about what we would like to eat and what we miss most, which always turns out to be something edible. We have breakfast at six-thirty, start working at seven-thirty, and, by nine in the morning, no one is talking very much—until lunch time comes around.

Around eleven in the morning—I must have made ten or twelve rounds carrying gravel—the Japanese corporal wants to see me. The corporal is young, barely twenty, and so thin that, when he breathes in, you can see the whole of his rib cage. He, too, is suffering from dysentery or, at least, from heavy diarrhea; he has a pallid face, yellowish and hollow around the eyes, as if he hasn't slept for days.

When I report to him, he tells me that my mother has come to see me. "Visitors are allowed only on Mondays," he says, "unless it is for something very urgent, like when someone dies." He orders another boy to take my place. He does not seem upset or angry with me, and, as though he were reciting a regulation for my benefit, he speaks matter-of-factly. "However, in case of emergency, students may be allowed to receive visitors at the discretion of the officer of the day. Permission granted. Make sure you return to duty as soon as you can. Dismissed." The corporal stands in front of me, not knowing what else to say or do, panting and gasping, his naked torso streaming with sweat. He is actually a college student in his first year who was drafted as what we call a "quickie" soldier, to be assigned to labor forces, especially to supervise students working on airfields or at munitions factories. He is as exhausted and undernourished as anyone else, going through his work mechanically. He is so frail and thin that we are not really afraid of him at all. He is not as strict or mean-tempered as most of the other Japanese soldiers supervising us; in fact, some of us

suspect that he is more afraid of us than we are of him. We think—and we have a small bet going—that he is going to collapse before we do. "All he needs is a little push," says a wrestler friend of mine, "just a little push." The corporal shrugs for no apparent reason and gives me his water canteen. "When you are through, have it filled and bring it back to me."

I take his canteen, give a little wave of my hand to my classmates, and head for the main entrance to the airfield. I pass by a line of my friends who, stripped down to their waists, are carrying gravel, waddling under the heavy sacks. They all want to know where I am going and why I am not working. I tell them that my mother has come to see me. I move on. The field is swarming with hundreds of students shoveling, hoeing, removing dirt, carrying gravel . . . and yet the sizzling field is strangely quiet.

A large tent just inside the main gate is reserved for visitors. The tent has long wooden tables and benches. On Monday afternoons, when we are allowed to have visitors, the tent is packed with parents and relatives, not saying very much to each other, just looking at each other, the boys munching on cakes or fruits, some mothers crying quietly and embracing their children when the sergeant of the day comes and announces that the time is up.

The tent is roasting in the sunlight. My mother is standing in the shadow of the tent. She is wearing Japanese-style women's pants, which all women have to wear these days; they are the regulation "uniform" for women, who are not allowed to wear Korean dress outside their homes. My mother looks uncomfortable and terribly out of shape in that baggy colorless get-up.

I drag one of the wooden benches from inside the tent and place it in the shade. We sit down, side by side, not saying a word for a while. She is holding my hand in her hands. Her fingers are rough, and her fingernails are cracked. She has gotten quite thin lately. She unwraps a small bundle and hands me an apple. I take a bite from it.

"Visitors are not allowed, you know," I say to her, eyeing the Japanese sentry at the gate, "except on Mondays."

"I told them a little lie," she says, trying to smile. She is not

successful. Her eyes are filled with tears, watching me munch the apple. She wipes my back with her handkerchief. "Hungry?" I shake my head. "No."

"I brought you some clean underwear," she says, touching the bundle, "and—this." She takes out white cotton sheers folded into little squares.

"I don't need sheers."

"These are not sheers really. You said you were bothered by bedbugs and insects, so I sewed sheers together, you know, so you can just crawl into them and tie them up around your neck. Won't that help a little?"

I nod. "But how did you get in? What did you tell them? Anything wrong at home?"

"I told them your grandfather is very ill or something like that, and they let me in."

"Which grandfather?"

"Well, both our grandfathers are fine, really. I had to tell them something. I wanted to see you, and then Father thought I should come." She dabs her reddened eyes with the handkerchief.

"Father sent you?"

She looks down for a second. "In a way," she says.

I crush the core of the apple on the dusty ground. "Something is up then," I say.

She hands me another apple. "How is the work going here?"

She looks toward the field; hundreds of tiny figures on the field seem hardly to move. "Poor things," she says. "You all have to work like laborers in the sun like this!"

I laugh. "We are laborers, you know."

She shakes her head. "Have you seen any planes yet?"

I laugh again. "That'll be the day. Nothing much is getting done here, you know, and we don't have any machines, like trucks or bulldozers. It'll be a long, long time before any planes can land here."

"It will probably be too late then," she says, lowering her voice a little.

I give her a hard look. "What do you mean?"

"Well, the way the war is going . . ."

"What is the latest news? We don't learn anything new here, except that everything is going all right. Of course, we just don't believe a word of what they say anymore, anyway."

"It won't be long," she whispers, casting a quick glance back to the sentry. "It won't be long at all. That's what Father says."

"He knows something then."

She nods. "Just between us."

Her meaningful look and whispered words make me serious and contemplative, and, for no reason at all, I think of the Japanese corporal whose canteen is dangling by my feet. "No, it won't be long. Even I can tell that." I look at her to emphasize that I am not simply making an idle remark. "A little push, Mother, as we say here. Just a little push—and they will collapse like a man with only skin and bones left."

"Well, they've had that little push already," she says quietly, trying to look casual. "Not many people know about it, though."

By then, I know that my father has something directly to do with her coming to see me and that they are both trying to tell me something. "What happened?"

She takes out of the bundle three cakes of millet with dark sugar. "Germany surrendered a long time ago, almost three months ago, and we were never told about it, of course. And the Russians are attacking the Japanese in Manchuria."

I am too stunned to respond immediately. I only mutter, "In Manchuria . . . the uncle . . ."

"Father was in Manchuria to see our uncle about two weeks ago. They had a talk, so your uncle should be all right."

"The Russians . . ."

"That's not all," she says, her voice hushed. "The Americans have dropped some sort of new bomb on Japan, and the rumor is that it is very powerful, some sort of scientific weapon. One bomb can wipe out a whole city, and Father has heard that two cities have already been destroyed by these bombs. Japan can't last long fighting against that kind of a new weapon with bamboo sticks and boys like you slaving on a puny airfield like this."

"It won't be long then. It really won't be long this time."

She nods. "The Americans have landed on Okinawa, too," she says, as though she were saving that piece of information for last. "They have really landed, and it won't be long before they will land in Japan itself. You'll see."

I feel my heart beating wildly, triumphant yet afraid. "When was that?"

"Almost four months ago. How can the Japanese hide that sort of thing from us!"

In my imagination, I see hundreds and thousands of Japanese charging the Americans on the beaches of Okinawa with bamboo sticks and the American soldiers simply machine-gunning them down . . . the shovels, the picks, the straw sacks, the gravel, the barley, and the soy-sauce soup with bean sprouts, my Japanese teacher down with dysentery, the skinny corporal with hollow eyes, and the Japanese Kamikaze planes that never showed up. . . .

I look at her. "Does Father want me to come home?"

She says quickly, as though she had been waiting for me to ask that, "Do you want to?"

"Well, Mother, if it won't be long before the war is going to be over, I think I'd better come home and stay alert, you know, just in case. Father would need me around to keep my eyes open and that sort of thing."

She stares at me in silence, then, with a sniffle, tears shine in her eyes. "We should all be together, of course," she says.

"Yes, I want to come home," I say firmly. "When the Japanese are defeated, it will be chaotic everywhere, you know. For a while, anyway. It may not be easy to travel back and forth, and who knows when I can ever get home?"

Without a word, she takes a piece of paper out of her pants pocket. She hands it to me.

It is a notice of withdrawal from the school, already signed by my father.

"Things are pretty urgent then," I say. "It really won't be long

then, if Father feels this way. Why didn't you let me see this in the first place?"

"We wanted you to decide. We didn't want you to feel that you were running away, you know, deserting your friends. You are in this together, and you don't want to look like a weakling, not that slaving for the Japanese is important or worthwhile. The only thing is that we really mustn't and can't tell the others. I mean, you simply mustn't tell your friends why you are quitting. Do you understand that?"

I nod. "We can't take a chance like that. It is too dangerous."

"It's too bad, but we really can't."

"All right," I say, getting up. "We'd better hurry then. I'll take this to our teacher and tell him I am going home."

"Do you want me to come along?"

"Of course not, Mother. I can handle this. I'll be right back."

She takes out four apples and the three miller cakes I have not touched. "Do you want to give these to your friends?" She wraps them up in a clean towel. "I did bring your clean underwear and the sheets, you know, just in case you didn't think you should quit now."

I take the apples and the cakes. "I'll be back in a minute."

"Will he let you go?"

"I'll just tell him off if he makes a fuss about it."

I run toward our tent. I am going home, I am thinking, I am going home; I am going to quit this rat hole and go home. It won't be long; it won't be long. . . . My running feet raise a cloud of choking red dust, and the sun bears down on my bare back, but I don't mind. I've been waiting for this moment for a long, long time. And now it has come—and I am going home.

The boy who stays with the teacher to look after him is outside the tent, doing laundry, which is one of our duties when we get our turn to stay with the teacher. I tell him to stay outside while I talk with the teacher.

The air is broiling and sickening in the dark tent.

The teacher is sitting cross-legged on his straw mat, reading a magazine, smoking a cigarette. He looks up when I come in. "Oh, it's you," he says, adjusting his thick eyeglasses. He has lost weight, too, I think, as I look at his bony fingers rubbing his nose. "What are you doing here?" he says.

I go up to him and give him the withdrawal notice.

He takes one look at it. "So—," he says, looking me up and down. He takes off his glasses and bars his eyes a few times. "So—it has come to that."

"Sir?"

"I always wondered when you would quit."

To my surprise, his tone is neutral and subdued. I am at a loss what to make of his words.

"I am not going to ask you why you are withdrawing from the school at a time like this," he says. "I am only interested in the fact—yes, the fact—that you are, indeed, quitting us."

"Sir, I don't understand you."

"You don't have to say anything," he says, bidding me sit down beside him on the mat. "Now that you are going to leave us, we must have had it. This is the end of us, isn't it?"

I am silent.

He takes a fountain pen from a leather briefcase by his mat and signs the paper. "There," he says, handing it to me. "Now, you can go home."

I don't know what to do or say. I was expecting a tirade from him, and I was determined to have it out with him if he became unpleasant.

He is silent, too, looking past me toward the open entrance, through which he can see the boys working on the field, which shimmers in the sun.

At last, I manage to say, "It is not that I am a weakling and can't take the work . . ."

He quickly interrupts me. "No need to say anything, boy, because I know the real reason for your withdrawal."

His words frighten me a little. I feel uneasy with him. With the paper in my hand, I try to find the proper moment to take leave of him—for good.

Abruptly, he says, "Have you any idea how the war is going?" I shake my head. "No, sir." Then, quickly, "I mean, sir, everything is going fine."

"You don't have to tell me that, especially you. It is not going well, and you must know that. Don't you? You and your father must know a way to find out, don't you? And that's why I have been wondering when you would decide to go home. You know, I used to tell myself, 'Well, when that boy quits, we've had it.'"

I squirm, without a sound.

"Don't be afraid of me," he says, smiling. "Not all Japanese are evil men, you know."

"No, sir."

"But you mustn't repeat this to other Japanese."

"I know that, sir."

"We've lost the war," he says in a voice so hushed that I am awed by it. "To continue the war is sheer lunacy. You have not seen Japan or Tokyo, of course, but let me tell you that it is a vast wasteland. Last time I was back home, it was . . . ah, but why go into that? It is too late. Did you know or do you know that the Americans have already landed in Okinawa?"

I remain silent.

"The have," he says. "The landed there a long time ago."

Without realizing it, I let it slip out of me: "The Russians have invaded Manchuria . . ."

"Where did you hear that?"

I say quickly, frightened, "It's just a rumor, sir."

"You must never, never tell that to anyone. Do you understand that? If that is true, then the end has really come. There is nothing in Manchuria to stop the Russians. You know there are no planes left there to come all the way down here and use this airfield! Lots of nonsense! The only planes left are old primitive ones, unfit for

flying. But the Russians! They have waited this long! Ah—it means troubles. What dirty, double-crossing opportunists those Russians are!

I am afraid of the nature of our conversation and am also afraid he is getting off the track. "Sir, my mother is waiting."

"She is here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you must go. Wait. They may give you trouble at the gate if you show just that withdrawal notice. I'll write out a pass, and you don't have to tell anyone about your withdrawal."

He takes a blank pass and fills it out for me. It says I am going home for three days because of an emergency at home.

"Thank you, sir." I am, to my surprise, really grateful.

He nods. "I suppose you don't understand why I am being kind to you, do you?"

I am touched and say, "I hope you will get better soon, sir. You've lost a lot of weight since we came out here. I do hope everything will be all right for you, sir."

I climb down from the wooden platform and stand on the earthen floor. I bow to him and turn around. I go to my straw-mat bed and collect my things. I leave the apples and cakes on the mat, with a note to my friends to help themselves to them. I wrap up my things in a bed sheet and put them in my bag. I feel the teacher's eyes on my back as I take a step toward the exit, with the bag in one hand and my bedroll in the other. I have to pass by him, and, as I do, I bow to him again, without looking at him.

"Wait a moment," he says.

I feel a big lump in my throat, afraid he may change his mind.

"Sir?" I face him.

"Will you remember me?"

Taken aback, I mutter, "Of course, sir."

"Well, your father is a big man in your town, isn't he?"

Bewildered, I don't answer him.

"Oh—I know all about your father."

"Yes, sir?"

"Perhaps—well, I don't quite know how to put it to you," he says, raising his eyes to the tarpaulin ceiling of the rancid tent. The air is hot and suffocating. He lights a cigarette. "Perhaps, one of these days," he says, blowing smoke from his cigarette, "who knows?—I may come to your town."

I don't understand what he is trying to say. "Yes, sir?"

"If I ever come to your town, do you suppose your father would help me?"

I stand silent.

"When we lose the war, we Japanese will have to get out of Korea. That's quite obvious, isn't it? Well, I was just thinking, perhaps your father could help me then. Do you think he would?"

I am now beginning to grasp what is going on between us, and I say, rather boldly, "You mean, sir, like hiding you for a while?"

"What do you think?"

"You won't have to hide from us, sir."

"It may become almost impossible to travel, you know, and anything can happen."

I don't reply.

"You Koreans hate us. I know that in the marrow of my bones."

I keep silent.

"I help you now," he says, smiling, peering at me through his thick glasses, "and you help me later. That's the general idea, you know. What do you think?"

I do not say a word. I know I am not going to reply.

"Please give my regards to your father, will you? And tell him what a fine man I have always thought he is, judging from the way he has brought you up. And you may tell your father what you and I talked about a moment ago. That's quite all right."

I want to get away. I want to run out of the stinking tent, but I don't want to make him angry with me. "I'll tell him that."

"You never know. Perhaps, we'll see each other again before long."

It suddenly strikes me that he is saying this sort of thing to other boys, too. To a select few . . . just in case. And, with a jolt, I

remember several other boys who were given a special pass by him to go home for a few days—and I know the boys well, because we all share one common bond, among others, of having a father who has been convicted for his "Thought Crime," or for his activities in the Independence Movement.

I've got to get out of here, I tell myself. Fast. I bow to him.

"Take care of yourself, sir. I may see you again someday."

"Remember me, now," he says with a smile. "And don't forget! The war isn't over yet, you know."

I am running—away from the tent, away from him, and away from my bondage to their tottering empire. I am running toward my mother. "I'll never see you again," I keep telling myself as I run . . .

. . . but I do see him once more, back in Pyongyang, after our Liberation. . . . I see him working on the streets of Pyongyang, a member of a Japanese labor gang, shoveling and sweeping out the trolley tracks, under the watchful eyes of sullen Russian soldiers in black jackboot with burp guns and German machine pistols. . . . He does not see me, but I see him, and, for one fleeting moment, I am sorry for him, but then I think—For thirty-six years, you and yours have trampled on us and tried to destroy our souls. . . . Love and compassion that have been smothered by the memories of thirty-six years cannot be resurrected by pity that lasts only for a fleeting moment. . . .

My mother is waiting, and I nearly run into her, choking with pounding, aching emotions, trembling with a dizzy swirl of ecstasy and fear. I tell her about the Japanese teacher.

"He must be frightened," she says matter-of-factly. "What do you want to do with this?" She holds out the Japanese corporal's canteen.

I toss it onto the wooden table inside the visitors' tent. "He can get the water himself."

At the gate, I show the pass to a young Japanese private, the sentry. Cradling his rifle, he looks at my pass. He is young, too,

not much older than I am. His uniform is soggy with sweat. He gives the pass back to me.

"All right, boy," he says, tossing his head, eyeing my mother.

"Is someone dying or something?"

I merely nod my head. Yes—someone is dying, I want to shout to him. You and your Empire are dying . . . and I am going home. . . . I am going home, Boy! . . .

By the dusty, rutted road far from the airfield, we are waiting for a bus . . . and my mother tells me that my maternal grandparents are now at our orchard. My grandfather in Pyongyang, the Presbyterian minister, was put in jail after every Sunday church service, sometimes for a day and sometimes for a few days. A pair of Korean and Japanese Thought Police detectives always came to the Sunday service, taking notes on what my grandfather said in his sermon. Three weeks ago, says my mother, they came and took grandfather away as usual. He didn't come home for more than a week, and, when he was finally released, everyone could see that he had been beaten. He had cuts on his face and a broken rib. They kept him, my mother says, because they didn't want him to come home until they had patched him up in a hospital. His church, as well as the other Christian churches, was ordered to close down when he was taken away. My parents went to Pyongyang and brought my grandparents to our town.

"They are staying at the cottage," says my mother.

"Is Father staying out there with them, too?"

"No." She puts her hand on my shoulder, drawing me to her. "Don't be afraid," she says. "They took your father away to a detention camp." She begins to sob. "Four days ago," she says.