Young Song

Chapter Three

"Selfish," Mrs. Pak chided gently as she finished plaiting the strong black hair of her daughter. "You should be ashamed to live in this house." The throaty tones of the Korean language added to the harshness of the words. "Your father has no work. And your sister is hungry. Your brother--he, too. But you wear braids."

Young Song frowned. She knew nineteen years to be too old for wearing braids when one's family is poor, but she had not yet been made a woman. That was the meaning of braids. She decided her mother was being unreasonable.

"I don't want a soldier. Father said I must not," she insisted, adding quietly, "unless I wish."

“What should a father say? But you have a duty to him. He knows. And so should you."

Young Song watched her mother, who moved with an easy grace about the room. Her mother even looked severe, the girl thought. A great garment billowed from Mrs. Pak's breasts. The books said it was an imitation of the French Empire style, but it seemed likely that the Koreans had gotten there first. It hung in an unshaped skirt to her ankles, making her look like the very old American women whose pictures Young Song had seen. She was not old, her mother.

That was the reason her mother continued to argue after so many weeks, Young Song decided. . because she was grandmotherly and finished with life, but still living. It was the war. It had changed everything.

"Soldiers want girls with American clothes," Young Song ventured after a respectful silence. "I haven’t any. They don't want me."

"Your cousin has clothes. I brought some things here for you to use. Your cousin knows your duty, even if you do not."

"Her soldier will be angry if I use them. And my cousin is too large–here–for me." I can put cloth inside the top to make you big. No one will know." The mother felt she might slowly be winning, because the objections were becoming more reasonable.

"Maybe I can go tomorrow, instead. Tonight I can't. I don't know how to–be--with a man." She flushed.

"They know how. Today the soldiers are paid. Go today," Mrs. Pak said sharply losing patience. Then she allowed herself to be a mother again. "Don't be frightened, Song That's the reason for women. Find a soldier. Soldiers know what to do."

Young Song stood up and began to disrobe. Her mother splashed water into a basin and set it on the floor mat in front of Young Song. Together they began to bathe her, taking care not to waste the new cake of Lux soap that a soldier had given to her cousin.

Young Song dried herself and dressed in the borrowed clothes. But her feet slipped about in her cousin's heeled shoes, and she couldn't walk confidently.

“I can't go," Song protested hopefully. "No American shoes.”

“Wear Korean shoes," her mother said impatiently”

“Everyone will laugh.”

“It's already dark. No one will see.”

Young Song went to the door and stepped down into a pair of flat rubber shoes with upturned toes. A heap of rubber footwear lay in the ground level of the ground entry. Disconsolately, she kicked the heap aside.

“I will have a bed ready," Mrs. Pak promised. "For my good daughter, who knows her duty.” Young Song put her hand to her mouth, to cover her smile. It was not often that her mother complimented her, although she thought her mother was sometimes very kind.

"Annyong-i ke-sipsio," Song said. Goodbye to one who is staying.

“Annyong-i ka-sipsio," answered the mother. Goodbye to one leaving.

Mrs. Pak escorted Young Song across the small open courtyard. A brass bell rang as she unlatched the tall wooden gate. She guided Young Song outside and relatched it. The bell stilled. Mrs. Pak called a warning over the fence to children in the street. Perhaps they took notice. Then she felt the chill and went into the house.

Young Song followed a narrow street that went off toward the Army post. She walked quickly, her head lowered, so that she would not be recognized. She felt certain that the people in the streets would be waiting to see her come home in her shame. And they would talk among themselves and point fingers after her. But the war. . . .

As she walked, she crossed often to the opposite side of the narrow dirt street, bypassing puddles of mud forming as the snow died in the spring sun. A ring of ice had begun to build in the small pools as the cold night came on. Young Song walked faster.

The roads changed very fast, she thought. A few days ago they were tumbled with snow. A few days more and they would be dusty and sick with the smells of urine and refuse. Then the rains would begin. She decided that everything was changing and unreal. Even the summer rains that clean. Even the spring that had started.

As she neared the Army post, Young Song stepped under cover of trees that flanked the wall of the camp. Someone told her that the trees, misshapened by the war, still hid barbed wire strung on the brick wall. But it was already dark, arid so she couldn't be sure.

"Hi."

She was startled by the voice and didn't answer. The soldier hesitated a moment and then went on. People loitered everywhere. Girls laughed and teased with soldiers between visits of the military police car making a sham patrol As the car approached each time, everyone went in other directions, as if an urgent business. They returned immediately to the rallying point outside the main gates. Others went off in pairs and stayed away.

Young Song remained behind a fat tree and didn't answer the voices the came from passing groups. One time or twice someone offered to bargain with a soldier for her, and often another girl offered encouragement. An hour passed. Young Song started home. She planned excuses for her mother–such things as that soldiers don't like Korean girls with American clothes and rubber shoes.

"Hi."

Young Song pretended not to hear. The soldier was behind her and then beside her.

"I saw you waiting there," he said and continued to walk. To the MPs, that signaled legitimate business, not that anyone really cared.

She didn't answer. As they walked, Young Song dropped a step behind, watching. He was very tall, she thought. All soldiers were very tall. She decided without looking that he had yellow hair because all soldiers have yellow hair–or almost yellow hair. She had hoped he would be good-looking, but he was not. Well, not exactly. It wouldn't matter.

“I said hello to you," he said. The soldier was behind her again, and she turned.

"Good evening," Young Song answered in her best book-English. She was proud of her ability, even if it was not wise to be so.

“Good evening," he replied with the over-pronounced tones of a teacher.

They walked on together. Young Song carefully averted her face as they passed clusters of Korean people, who called shaming phrases after her.

“Where are you going?" he asked.”

“I am going to my father's house." She spoke slowly and distinctly.

"Is your father at home?"

"Perhaps my father is at home."

"Is your mother at home?"

"Yes, my mother is at home."

"Oh." After a time he asked, "Where did you learn to speak English so well?"

She flushed. Compliments should not be so direct. "I learned to speak English in high school."

"You speak it very well."

"I think I do not speak very well. I am sorry."

"Why sorry?"

"I did not agree to you."

"That's all right. Many people don't.

"Thank you."

"How old are you?" he asked.

"I am nine-and-teen years old."

"Korean or American years?"

"I am nine-and-teen years old Korean and seven-and-teen years old, American. How old are you?"

"Twenty-four. American." Of course he didn't believe her. It was common for teen Korean boys to taunt American men with claims that "My mother, she cherry," or to subtract decades from a compliant woman's supposed age as they bargained. Hers was backwards.

"I am sorry," Young Song said.

"Why? Am I too old for you?"

"No. My father house is in this street."

A narrow alley shouldered its way through the low shops and featureless wooden temporary or masonry permanent buildings and joined the main roadway.

"I'm sorry, too," he said, "because you're going home."

"I am sorry.

They laughed.

"I thought I could spend some time with you," he said.

"Spend?

"To use. To visit with you."

"Perhap at my father's house"

"Won't he be angry?"

"Yes, he will not be angry. He knows."

"All right." The soldier hurried Young Song into the sidestreet. "Off limits," he said carelessly. "Do you understand?"

"Do you go to university in the United State?" Young Song asked after a time.

"Yes."

"What do you study there?"

"Many things. I'm a teacher."

"Do. . .are you teacher at Army? I am sorry. So many questions."

"I like your questions. But I have a have a different job in the Army. Not a teacher."

"I am sorry. My father house is here."

They mounted a stone block that united the street and the gate. The high board fence kept the house from their view. Young Song shook the gate, and the brass bell sounded. She answered a low inquiry from inside. The gate was opened, and they stepped up into the court. Young Song relatched the gate, because its keeper had disappeared from the court.

She watched the soldier appraise the area. There were still tufts of snow in the corners. Ice crusts, slipped from the tiled roof, lay in shivers against the chill board walls.

"I am sorry," Young Song said again as they reached the entry. "Please–your shoes. Korean custom." She kicked the rubber shoes from her feet and bounded inside.

"Yes, I know," he said, but she was already gone. He unlaced his boots and stepped up to the floor level of the house. The entry was walled, with sliding panels to form a diminutive foyer.

"Please. Come inside," Young Song called from an adjoining room.

He moved a screen and went into the room. A half dozen faces shone in the glare of the electric globe dangling overhead.

"Sit down, GI" another young woman said to him coarsely. "Over there."

A place was made for him in the over-populated room, and he insinuated himself into the group. Then he lowered himself to the fire-warmed floor and brought his heels up to his buttocks. He knees sprang up, and he tried to push them nearer the floor. A child laughed. He edged closer to the glowing brazier in the center of the group. The added warmth was an extravagance for the occasion, and the pungence of charcoal had been softened with a stick of incense.

Young Song began to speak rapidly in her language, punctuating the address with the word 'Bo.' Then she turned to the soldier.

"Here Mr. Kim, my father," she said with required formality.

Mr Kim leaned forward from a squatting position. He bowed until both his head and his buttocks appeared to be pendant from his knees. His string goatee, nested on the white cotton robe, sprang back undisturbed as he lifted his head.

"Hello," the soldier said.

"Here Mrs. Pak, who is my mother." It was a Korean custom for a married woman to keep her own maiden name throughout her life. Mrs. Pak bowed, less honoringly, and the soldier did his best bow.

"Here is my cousin-sister, Miss Choi. She speak English."

"Hi," said Miss Choi casually, at ease among her clan-family and its guest.

"Hi." He saw that she was more fully developed than Young Song and aware of her advantages. Maybe it was in her carriage, which was not humble.

"Here my sister." Young Song touched the small girl hiding behind the cousin-sister. "Here my brother," she said, completing the circle. The brother was probably about seven or eight years old. American.

"Hello," the brother shouted. He showed ten fingers to tell his age by Korean count. So young; yet they looked old. Is it only the war?

"Hello. How are you?" The soldier grabbed at the boy, who rolled away, but gamingly, not shyly. "Yes. Hello," the boy echoed. "Hello." He laughed. "Hello, hello." His mother pulled him aside.

"I am Bo," he said, opting for the shortest form, and he bowed slightly.

The group clustered more closely about the clay burner, and no one spoke in an interval of minutes. Finally the father rose, bowed perfunctorily, and went outside. Mrs. Pak motioned, and the two children left.

Young Song hurried into another room.

"You pay now. Can do?" cousin-sister Miss Choice asked, translating Mrs. Pak's request. Simple business procedure among buyer and seller.

"Can do," the soldier replied.

"How much you can pay? You speakee."

"How much you speakee?" he countered in her street-English. Miss Kim never whore-girl. This first time. Miss Kim father not catchee job now. Need money." Miss Choi continued. To bargain successfully is an art she prided herself on possessing. After a respectable time lapse, the three agreed on a sum. The soldier pushed several military payment certificates toward Miss Choi. Miss Choi pushed them across the floor mat to the mother, who scattered the bills across the floor.

"Mrs. Pak does not like to do this thing," Miss Choi said. "There is too much tax. No work. Must eat. What can she to do?"

He decided he would have paid more, but what they required was enough for the start. Of course the amount would rise. . .if there were a future for the visits.

Mrs Pak asked a question.

Miss Choice translated. "You catchee–" She stopped. Sliding nearer to him, she whispered in his ear, effusively confidentially.

"Hava yes," he answered.

“No makee baby Miss Kim.”

He rose, entered the adjoining room, and slid the panel shut behind him. Young Song was seated on the floor in a mattress of quilts. The random patterns of the coverlet washed about her in the flow of light from the brazier.

"I am sorry,”Young Song said.

“Don’t apologize. I’m sorry. He sat beside her, and she stiffened. He made no further moves immediately, and she relaxed. He began to caress and then to fondle her. They lay back.

He began to undress. Young Song took his uniform and hung it carefully on pegs along the outer wall. He hesitated at his underwear. She waited, and he slipped his T-shirt over his head and unsnapped his military shorts. Young Song took them with the lapsed concern of a wife and rolled back the coverlet.

Then she drew the covers over him.

Young Song turned to undress. "Do not look.”

He made a show of turning his head. Reluctantly she stripped herself of her clothing, hung it carefully near his, and, holding a towel in front of her, slipped into the quilts. He put his arm around her and stroked her arms and throat and thighs. After a time she ceased to tremble, and he raised himself on his side, kissed her repeatedly and grew urgent. Young Song touched his almost-yellow hair and his nearness over her; and with confusion and hurt she became a woman. For a while they lay silently together. Then they dressed and went out among her family. Young Song sat apart. The cousin-sister indicated that the soldier was to sit near the mother. The father was still outside, but the children had been
put to sleep on quilts in an end of the room.

“You likee Miss Kim?" Miss Choi asked.

“Yes.”

“You likee to steady with her?"

"Maybe.”

“Wife in States hava yes?"

"Hava no.”

“You lie. All GI marry. All same-same.”

“Yes, I steady with Miss Kim.”

“You Number One Heart," Miss Choi said. She related the agreement to Mrs. Pak, who did not acknowledge the comment.

“How much you can pay?”

“We'll talk about that tomorrow," he said.

“Tomowwoh," she said angrily and made a spitting sound. "You nevah come here more. I know."

A siren intruded, a physical thing. They stopped talking at the blare. He checked his watch: eleven-thirty; civilian curfew. Police state. They relaxed again.

He went to Young Song. "I'll be back tomorrow."

"Thank you," she said.

He put his hand to her face, but she pulled away.

“No. My mother will see. I am sorry." She was genuinely embarrassed by his unguarded show of affection.

“Do you like me, Miss Kim?" A pause, with no answer. "I like you very much.”

She nodded. "My name is Miss Kim, Young Song.”

“Young Song," he repeated softly, receiving the compliment of knowing her personal names.

“In English it spells Y-o-u-n-g S-o-n-g.

“What does it mean?”

“Do not mean. Is Korean name.”

“In American it means you're beautiful with life.”

“Thank you.”

“Good night," he said.

“Good night," she replied.

He went to the darkened entry, found his boots, and began to lace them. That the boots were still there spoke well for the honesty of the family. Boots could be sold on the black market. Even used boots.

Young Song followed as he left. Tentatively. "Bo?" she asked.

He looked at her in response.

"Is it all right–I say Bo?"

"Of course it is all right."

"Tomorrow I will cut my hair."

"Why?”

She grasped a braid. "Now I am a woman." She turned away. “You are not angry to me?”

“No. I'm happy."

In the truth among truths, she was a find.

“I like to be a woman.” She smiled behind her fingertips and then blushed.

"Thank you, Young Song.”

"Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

Young Song crossed with him to the gate. Mrs. Pak reproached her husband from her place at the door. He ignored her. Holding the clapper of the bell, Young Song unlatched the gate. All were silent as the soldier stepped outside. The gate was bolted, and one sound escaped the bell. Then Mrs. Pak cried out against her husband, who had allowed the evening to happen.

He struck her.

"I am sorry," said Young Song to no one. In the quiet she felt the soldier desert her.

END OF CHAPTER THREE

Author’s Note:

In our culture, the calm acceptance of a rape by its victim is the stuff of pornography.

However, in a culture ravaged by war, the girl had a ‘duty’ to perform that function for the good of the family. She could not have challenged her parents directly. She could not disrespect a ‘guest.’ If she had performed her ‘duty’ to her parents, as required by her culture, Young Song had succeeded as a dutiful daughter.

As for her age, the American count is always the lesser. That’s irrelevant here, other than as a mark of confusion. Korean infants are awarded a first-year designation at birth plus a second year at the first calendar new year. So, depending on its birth date at year’s end, a new-born could be counted as two years old within its first week of birth.

Then, despite the Official Versions of the Korean “miracle,” consider the horror of life in a nation and time in which families must sell their daughters in order to survive.

The civil war between North and South Korea during the ‘Fifties was politically justified, although that’s never admitted. The US fought there to defend capitalism, not democracy; the travails of the Korean people were irrelevant. If we can’t admit the facts, must we go to war again over rockets and imputed targets?

The North’s message to us is “Stop pushing!” The South knows that, but we pay for “terrified,” don’t we . . . ?