

The Saga of My Great Grandfather

By Eric Byeong-Ik Kang

The morning wind from the top of the mountain made my mind clearer than before, but there was something deep inside of my heart that I couldn't erase. It was the horrific tragedy of my parents getting killed in front of me by the Japanese soldier. I thought about an old saying "Time is flying," but it had been too fast to believe that it was two years since we, the Republic of Korea, got freedom from the Japanese occupiers. When I was thinking about these heartbroken memories of my family, I was at the Buddhist temple, praying for my wife and three sons for good fortune after the liberation. Also, I was at the temple to get away from all the confusion and to get an answer about which government system to follow. Back at town, I was hearing all kinds of reasons from my neighbors and friends why we should accept democracy or communism. These were hard times. During the day-time, the Republic of Korea's soldiers patrolled the town in order to catch us making suspicious movements and to stop people from believing in communism. But during the night-time, the Communist soldiers would attack and steal food from us; they tried to force us to believe in their way of government. In my opinion, it didn't matter which system I followed as long as I could raise my own family in peace.

After the prayer, I ate lunch with my family and went to the village courtyard for the regular meeting where our people talked about how things are going around the village. When I was almost to the courtyard, I saw a new family and I went to them to say hello. As I was getting close to them, I only saw a woman and her two children. Where could her husband be, I wondered?

I went up to her and said, “Hi, my name is Kang Soon-Yeol, I’m the vice mayor of this little town. Nice to meet you.”

She said, “Nice to meet you too, my name is Kim Sun-Yeong, and these are my two children. One is eight years-old, and the other is ten years-old.”

The children replied with very good manners and I asked her, “I’m sorry for this kind of question, but where is your husband?”

She replied, “My husband is gone. He died during the control of the Japanese empire. He was a protestor in the town where we lived before here and the Japanese people put him in jail for protesting about freedom. After that, I never saw him again, but I heard a rumor that they killed him after few days or so.”

I was shocked about what I heard from her and thought about their two kids growing up without their father. At the same time, I thought about what would’ve happened to my family if I had been killed during the Japanese empire’s control.

It was a scary thing to think about but I erased it quickly from my mind and focused on the subject of today’s meeting. Our town’s mayor announced that we were going to discuss the ongoing Communist attacks and how we could prepare ourselves. It happened to be what I was thinking before I came here, and I raised my hand to tell them what I thought was the best solution.

I said, “We should have people standing guard at night at the town gate in order to be ready whenever they come. We should rotate people everyday so it was fair to everyone.”

Our mayor asked people if this was a good idea and most of people agreed with my suggestion. I heard from many people who said that they had lost most of their food,

especially rice, and house supplies during an attack. I thought at first that it was ridiculous how we lost our loved ones during the Japanese colonization and now we had to lose our belongings after it too. So, I was proud of myself as a vice mayor that I had something that could solve our town's biggest problem.

After our town decided to have male guards during the night, someone at the meeting shouted, "How are we going to decide who is going first?"

Our mayor said, "We are going to decide it by the order of the last names and also, there would be ten people every night at the gate."

I thought it was fair to everyone, but the decision made me the first person to guard our town the next night because my last name is spelled with the first letter of the Korean alphabet. Even though I would be guarding our town with nine other men, I would have to go again next week because there was a total male population of seventy, not including senior males. The reason that we didn't have many people in our town was that it was located far away from the main city and people left our town to get jobs in the big cities after the Japanese gained control of the area. So, I always joked with my friends and neighbors that if you didn't farm in this town, then you should probably go looking for jobs in the big cities in order to raise your family.

After the meeting, the mayor, who was also my friend, came up to me and asked me if I could come to his house after dinner tonight because he had something to talk about as a town mayor and as a friend. Back at my house, I discussed the meeting with my wife and I told her that I had to guard our town tomorrow night which surprised her a lot. But, she just said I needed to be careful about what I would say or action I would

take in front of the Republic soldiers and the Communist soldiers. I just told her to take care of the boys and work on the rice paddy with them while I would be gone.

She was still worried about me after I explained to her that it was going to be fine and she kept saying, "You have to be really careful, husband. Our boys need a father to grow up as men."

This annoyed me. I said to her, "Damn woman! Don't worry about me. Take care of yourself and our children. Just bring my supper so I can go over to my friend's house to talk things over."

After that, I finally could eat and finish my dinner without her talking about how it was dangerous and I could get hurt or even worse from guarding the town. And I thought that someone had to step up for the town in order to save us from danger. Townspeople were losing their possessions, night in, night out. I shouted in my head that it would be me who would protect my town along with others as long as I could live. So, I took out my father's pistol and started to walk to my friend's house. The reason I took my father's pistol was to protect myself from Communist soldiers and wild animals.

It took me about five minutes to arrive at the mayor's house and his children were helping their mother wash dishes and clean the house. His wife asked me if I wanted something but I politely refused and went into his room. He was sitting on the floor with a mat under him and there was a newspaper in front of him which was on the low table. He asked me to sit down opposite him and he showed the newspaper to me saying that no one was trustworthy outside of this town. As I was reading the newspaper, I saw a picture of a Communist soldier but there was a little headline on the top saying that it

actually was one of the Republic's soldiers dressed up like a Communist and he was laying traps.

When I was done reading the newspaper, he said, "From now on, we cannot trust the Republic's soldiers so you have to be careful tomorrow night. I heard that the Republic's soldiers played their little game of deceit in another city not far from here."

I knew, for a fact, that if you were caught by the Republic's soldiers while giving any city information to the Communists, you would immediately be put in jail. Also, there was a very small chance that you would never get out of jail. As we were talking and sharing details about the town's problems and stories about our own experience, there was something inside of my heart that I needed to ask my friend. I asked him what would happen to my family or his family if one of us died in the cause of guarding our town. He briefly said that he didn't know what would happen but he was sure that the families would be very sad. But for me, it was more than that because I was thinking my wife and sons having their life without their husband and father, and how I couldn't see my sons growing up like me. I didn't share my feelings with him.

I was about to leave when he said, "I have to be gone tomorrow because I have to go to my father's house in the city, so can you be the co-mayor tomorrow for me if something happens?"

I shouted as I was about to leave his gate, "It's fine with me as long as you bring me some fresh fish from the city!"

The next morning, I again went to the Buddhist temple to pray for my family's protection while I would be gone tonight and for my own fortune. I talked to the priest about whatever bothered my mind because I was nervous. I could see the priest

figured out I was nervous when he brought me up to the top of the Buddhist temple and gave me a cup of tea. It really helped me to calm down and focus on my life after seeing the view from the top. I thanked the priest for his help and started to head down to my house because it was almost lunch time.

Before I ate my lunch, I spent time with my boys at our rice paddy, preparing for the winter. My sons did a good job helping me. I called my eldest son to come over to me while the other two were still working.

As he came to me, I told him, "You have to take care of your mother and your two younger brothers while I am gone tonight. Make sure your mother gets plenty of sleep and comfort. I'm talking to you about this because you are my first son and you have to start learning how to take care of yourself and the family."

He said honestly that he would do what I said and went back to work. I thought I could trust and believe him even though he was only twelve-years old, and I believed he could lead the family if something happened to me and I couldn't be there with him. I also thought about when my dad told me the same thing about taking care of the family when he was gone, which caused me to laugh in the middle of the peaceful rice paddy. It reminded me that this was what I, as a father, had to teach my own sons.

I finally said farewell to my family and started to walk to the town gate. The sun was almost behind the mountain as I was walking down the dirt road with my father's automatic machine gun in my hands and pistol behind my back. The night was getting chilly but it was beautiful to watch the sun make a red sky when it was about to go down for the day. I got to the gate and saw the other nine men standing around the fire pit talking about their own experiences, and about the people that they had killed before. I

went to the fire pit and told them that the mayor was out of town for his own business. I said I was the co-mayor for the day. They didn't really care about me being the mayor for today, but they cared about how they would kill the Communist soldiers if they came tonight. When someone mentioned the Communist soldiers, I remembered what I saw in the newspaper that the mayor showed me. So, I told them that there were rumors about the Republic's soldiers dressing up like the Communists and arresting people for giving vital information. They couldn't believe what I just announced to them. To me, they looked like they didn't want to believe it.

Suddenly, we heard gun-fire just outside of the gate which caused the people to flee from the spot and run off into the bushes and behind rocks on the mountains. It only left three of us against however-many they were. None of us was highly trained, so we decided to surrender.

Their commander stepped out of the darkness. He asked us, "Who is the mayor of this town because I want to talk to him about something?"

When he finished that question, I said a couple of curse words inside of my mind and answered, "The town's mayor is gone for today and I am the co-mayor when he is not in town."

The commander asked me, "What is the fastest route to get to the main city without getting caught by the Republic's soldiers?" He turned to one of his men who had just stepped into our group. He said, "We will destroy that road."

At that moment, I was debating in my mind whether these Communist soldiers were real or not but I decided it didn't really matter anyway because our people would get killed if they were real Communist soldiers and I shouldn't answer their questions.

On the other hand, I would end up behind the iron jail bars if I told them the information and the Communist soldiers happened to be fake, like the one in the newspaper. So, I thought it was better to not get any of us killed. I told them where to go and look, but as God showed a sign that I did something wrong in this world, the Communist soldier suddenly handcuffed me saying that they were fake Communists after all. They also shouted in my ear that I was going to jail for telling information about what they asked.

I thought it was ridiculous and unfair how they could just put me in jail for answering what they asked, and they didn't even know what choices I had as the mayor of the town when they asked me with those big guns in front of my face. As they were dragging me across the road to the nearest police station, I shouted to the people who didn't flee to tell my family and the mayor what happened to me. I was thinking about what my wife's reaction would be when she heard about this "accident," and I was sorry for my eldest son. But, I knew that he would lead my family, as I wished this afternoon, because he was my son.

I was woken up the next morning by the sound of iron bars sliding across the floor and I thought, at first, that I was at my house but I was just in the middle of wooden square laying on a tiny bed. I saw the Republic's soldier going back and forth in the middle of the cells checking the prisoners. I was thinking about what my family was doing at this time of day because my wife would be cooking breakfast while my sons were working on the rice paddy or the vegetable paddy. I got hungry after thinking about breakfast but knew I could do nothing. As I was about to lie down again on the hard wooden bed, I saw a small plate sliding under the door. I hurriedly grabbed the plate and started to eat but noticed it was uncooked rice. I asked the soldier, who was

going across the hallway, if I could get some cooked food but he spat on my face which I understood as “no”. I was so hungry that I didn’t notice myself eating the uncooked rice until the other prisoner was laughing at me across from my cell.

Three or four hours later I ate the uncooked rice before the soldier slid a metal lunchbox under the door saying, “It is from your son who came here probably an hour ago.”

I was about to ask him why it took an hour to give me the lunchbox when he could simply walk over here in five seconds and slide it under the door. I didn’t ask him because I didn’t want him to spit on my face again before I could have my wife’s homemade lunch. I guessed that they had been checking the lunchbox to see if it had a tool or a gun that could get me out of here but of course, my family would never do that even though I was in jail. While I was eating my wife’s food, I was half crying, half smiling because I knew that this would be the last food I would get before my execution.

After cleaning up every single crumb of food in the lunchbox, I pulled a handful of hair out of my head and put it in the lunch box. The reason I did this was to give my family something to put into my grave after my death because there was no way that they could find my corpse after being shot by the Republic’s soldiers. I wanted to write something to my family, so I asked the soldier if I could have some paper and ink to write letters before my death but they said that I couldn’t have any because I was a traitor of my own country. I thought about how having two different ideas about government could mess people up like these in the police station, and how it could teach them not to recognize the same blood living on the same soil. I pulled out another handful of hair because I couldn’t write letters to my wife and three sons. I just hoped

that my eldest son could understand the meaning of my hair and could safely bring it to his mother. I prayed for my family after giving the lunchbox to the soldier because now, I was sure that they would never see me again.

I kept meditating after my son's visit with the lunchbox. During the meditation, the only good thing was that I couldn't feel hunger or pain. I didn't eat any food after his visit because they didn't give any food or water to us. Later that day, while I was meditating on top of my wooden bed, I heard some officer saying that they were going to remove us from here to another prison in the middle of the mountain. I thought the place where we were going to was where they were going to kill us. Another soldier said that it was the perfect place where they could bury us after we were shot because it was on the middle of the mountain.

Sometime later, when I was about to go to sleep, I heard a couple of trucks parking outside of the police station and some of the soldiers opened our cells. They told us that we were being transferred to the other prison, the one for traitors like us. I got into the truck without losing my mind like some other prisoners did. The truck that I got on was already filled up with other prisoners from another city and the whole truck smelled like cow dung. I noticed that a lot of them didn't have any clothes, pants, or shoes which I was thankful to have at least clothes and pants on after they dragged me over to the police station. The truck started to head out of town into the peaceful mountains but soon it was interrupted by the sound of the truck's engine.

I couldn't tell how long we were in the truck since we left town but knew it would be at least two or three hours. I was really tired but I looked around the truck and I could see some people's faces were afraid of death or really calm and peaceful. I could

guess that those people who were calm and peaceful knew that they could do nothing to get out of here and had one choice which was to face death. I wasn't afraid or calm about my death but more disappointed about my countrymen and how they couldn't see their own people in front of their face while they were killing them.

The truck suddenly slowed down and as it was coming to a stop when I heard gun fire very close to the truck. A soldier yelled at us to get out of the truck and move in a single line to the corner of the little ditch that they created. I saw some soldiers carrying bodies of people out of the ditch and throwing them off the cliff right next to it. I finally understood that I only had a couple minutes to live when I began to pray for my wife, my three sons, and my friends. I wasn't crying or losing my mind like other people did, but I calmed myself by remembering the view from the Buddhist temple. I wanted to stop the time in order to talk to my wife and eldest son and tell them that I was sorry that I couldn't be there with them. I was mostly sorry for my eldest son because I wanted to teach him everything that my father did but I had to die while he was so young. I finally went into the ditch and remembered yesterday's beautiful scene with my boys on the rice paddy.