

"The Black Wall"

"Kuroi Kabe" by Miki Fujita (Fumiko Halloran)

Chapter Ten

The first thing Tom saw when he opened his eyes was the unpolished beams of the ceiling. He began to hear several people talking. Still in a fog, he let his eyes wander. Then a human face came into view.

"Oh good! You've regained consciousness!"

A red haired, white capped, young woman took Tom's left hand and checked his pulse.

"I'm your nurse, Betty Hodges, Lieutenant O'Brien."

"Where is this?"

"Yokota Air Base Hospital in Japan."

"Why am I here?"

"You were wounded in combat in Loc-nin and brought here."

Tom remembered he had been dreaming.

Blood covered bodies bounced in the air. All the bodies were the same, Vietnamese with helmets and white arm bands.

Another dream: The face of a Vietnamese man with raised eyebrows. What was his name? Captain? Tuan? Captain Tuan. In his dream Tuan's face repeatedly smiled.

"Well done!" Smile. "Well done!" Smile.

Yet another dream occurred in thick gray clouds.

In this dream, Tom floated in the air trying to get through the thick clouds to look onto the other side. But it was in vain. Each time the clouds split, he saw human crowds. He wanted to join them. But each time he tried to get closer, his body was pulled back. Now he remembered his frustration that he couldn't cross to the other side.

He had a terrible headache. His body was filled with pain and he realized that he couldn't move. Seized with fear, he looked over his body and saw that he was covered from his shoulders to his stomach with a plaster cast. An IV tube was stuck in his left arm.

"Nurse!" His voice was hoarse.

"Yes, soldier, what do you want?"

"Tell me what's wrong with my body. Don't lie, tell me straight."

"OK, I'll bring your doctor. But don't worry, you still have your legs and arms."

The nurse winked at him and left. Tom looked to his side and saw a boyish soldier asleep in the next bed, covered with a blanket. Both legs were in plaster and were lifted by a pulley attached to the ceiling.

In a few minutes, a tall doctor sat on the chair next to Tom's bed and said: "Hello." His brown hair covered his neck and he wore a fire engine red T-shirt under his white gown.

"I'm Doctor Taylor. It's good you regained consciousness, Lieutenant O'Brien. How do you feel?"

"I have a terrible headache but beyond that, I don't know. Dr. Taylor, please tell me about my condition."

"All right. You were wounded in Loc-nin and had emergency treatment at the field hospital in Anloc, then had your first surgery at the Tansonut Hospital in Saigon. You didn't regain consciousness so two days ago you were brought here. Your right side was shot in close range by an AK47 and most of the bones on your right side were broken. Many bullets penetrated your intestine. It was a miracle your organs didn't collapse. We did a second surgery here, found more bullets, and fixed the broken bones. The reason you were unconscious for so long is that your helmet was blown away and you hit your head hard on something. We checked your heads by X ray and didn't find a blood clot in your brains. We were worried at one point when your blood pressure dropped very low."

"Thanks for saving me, doctor."

"You're welcome, that's what we're here for."

"What is the outlook for recovery?"

"You should stay here until the cast comes off. You will also need a long rehabilitation of your right shoulder and arm. The bad news is that the nerves of your right shoulder are all shredded, so your right hand may not be able to function. Are you right handed?"

"Yes"

"Hmm. It may be a good idea to learn to write with your left hand."

"Okay, I'll try. I don't know how long it will take."

"Well, you are a green beret. The green beret capacity for survival is legendary. I understand you eat snakes. Do they taste good?"

Tom was not sure whether the doctor was serious or joking. Tom's temples hurt. Dr. Taylor stood up and said, "that's enough for today. I'll tell your nurse to bring you a pain killer. Have a good rest."

"Did someone contact the green beret headquarters in Saigon?"

"Yes, of course. Colonel Atkinson requested that we give word on your recovery top priority."

"Thanks."

Tom was exhausted. On top of that, he just didn't feel good about being alive. A cold, grey world surrounded him.

One week later, Mike McLoyd, the correspondent, visited Tom in the hospital. As usual, he had a beard and wore a sports shirt and jeans.

"Tom! You're alive!"

"Okay Mike. How about you?"

"It was terrible. I was sleeping in the bureau the day the Tet Offensive began. Boom, boom during the night. We were not hit but when we went out the next day to report, it was really dangerous. Saigon was in total chaos and nobody knew who was going to attack whom. Anyway, it's great you're alive, Tom. I heard in Saigon you were here so I made up a business trip to get to come to the Tokyo bureau."

Mike saw that Tom was not only seriously wounded, his face had an unfamiliar shadow.

"Tom, apart from your body, how do you feel?"

"Feel? I guess I'm all right."

"Was the fight really bad?" Mike's hesitant question was met a look in Tom's eyes that raised the hair on the back of Mike's neck. Mike was reminded of the famous picture from the Korean war of the eyes with the thousand yard stare. Tom's eyes were seeing a world where no one was alive.

"It was terrible." Silence followed.

"Tom, I have bad news. First of all, Liu, the rice trader. He was killed by the Vietcong."

"Where?"

"At an auto repair shop I used for contacting him. Liu's man managed the shop. One of the employees whom Liu suspected was a VC brought in a few what he called relatives from the Delta. On the night of the 29th, they were bringing weapons into the shop. Liu and his men happened to come to the site to do the night watch and a gun battle broke out."

"I'm sorry...after all, he was right about the Tet Offensive."

"Ya, but his personal information couldn't do anything to change the tide."

"How about other news?"

".....about Marie Louise."

Tom raised his head from the pillow and stared at Mike.

"Is she dead?" His question was indifferent, as if he were a medic who counted dead bodies too often.

"No, it's more complicated. You know she and her mother and their maid went to Mito. In the Tet Offensive, the VC also attacked Mito. Since then they've been missing. Francois contacted me, so I went to Mito. Her uncle's house was hit and destroyed. Her aunt died. Their neighbors told me that her uncle was a senior official in the Saigon government and the Vietcong took him somewhere. I couldn't locate the bodies of Marie Louise nor her mother. It's possible they survived and moved to some refugee camp. I'll check more."

"What about Francois?"

"He was in Saigon when the offensive started and is half mad with disappearance of his mother and sister. Nicole's family survived."

"All right, if you get more information about Marie Louise, let me know."

"Tom, what happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't sound like yourself. What happened?"

Tom was silent for a moment, then sighed deeply and looked toward the ceiling. His dog tags were hanging on a chain around his neck and rested on the cast on his chest.

He began to talk in a low voice, almost inaudible.

"Ever since I've arrived here, I've been thinking about this war. I was in ROTC in college and in the Special Forces, so I tried hard to understand Vietnam. But since I arrived here, I've seen enough of the reality and realized that the Americans and Vietnamese in that country are beyond my understanding. I could have accepted it as a crazy war. For a long time I didn't want to admit it but now I think this is not a war for the sake of the Vietnamese. The president and the Pentagon have been pouring money and human life into Vietnam for the sake of American glory. I don't hesitate to fight for the sake of United States and Vietnam. But I have no intention to die for a government that covers up its failures, lies to the public, and keeps wasting the lives of Americans. I can't stand that a government like this represents my homeland. America was not like this before."

Mike was silent. Then tears slowly welled up in his eyes.

"Tom, we've been betrayed in many ways. Just being alive may be a bonus."

"No, that's not enough. But I can't believe in anything now. People call someone like me a stupid American." Tom had a twisted smile at the edges of his mouth.

"No, Tom, at least you have not been betrayed by the green berets. I've never had any military experience and am often critical of the way the military is fighting this war. But I'm envious of the bonds among the green berets. I'm amazed how you guys can share life and death that much. Relations with women can't even be compared with that."

Tom didn't answer. Mike thought that an invisible hard wall surrounded Tom.

When Mike stood up to leave, Tom extended his left hand and for the first time smiled.

"Mike, take care of yourself. Thanks for everything in Saigon."

"Ya, get better soon. Thanks for taking care of me with that bomb incident. I'll be in Saigon for a while. Will write to you."

"I hope so, keep your good work."

"Leave it to me. See you."

The hospital at the sprawling Yokota Air Base was full of soldiers wounded in Vietnam. Often throughout the night, the bodies of those killed in action were cleaned and put in coffins before being air lifted to the United States. Many Japanese were hired to do this depressing work.

One month had passed since Tom was brought here. His cast was still in place but he was recovering quickly. The rehabilitation of his hand and fingers had already begun.

One afternoon when Tom was reading, using a book holder, he saw Colonel Atkinson enter the room and tried to rise but his face wrinkled in pain. The colonel said a few encouraging words to other soldiers in the beds, then approached Tom's bed and said "at ease, at ease."

"Lieutenant O'Brien"

"Yes, sir." Tom saluted with his left hand. The colonel returned the salute and sat on a chair.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm doing fine, sir."

"I have good news today."

The colonel pulled out a blue box, opened its lid, and held it in front of Tom.

"First Lieutenant Thomas O'Brien, an officer in the Infantry and a soldier in the Special Forces of the United States Army. At the Loc-nin Army Base on January 30th, 1968, you fought bravely against the enemy at great odds. Accordingly, by the authority of the Commanding General of the United States Army in Vietnam, you are awarded the Silver Star." The colonel added, "you have brought credit on yourself, on the Special Forces, and on the United States Army."

A silver star shaped medal was hung on the red, white, and blue ribbon. Tom's chest was covered with cast, so the colonel pinned it on the pillow.

"Thank you sir." Tom's face had a complicated expression.

"Sir, may I ask who wrote the report to recommend me? I've heard at Loc-nin, almost all our side was wiped out."

"MP Corporal Pete Kesinski. He was wounded but survived and is at a hospital in Manila. I understand you guided Kesinski and Corporal Doug Henson in combat. Kesinski told me that without your help, he would have been dead for sure. The spot you and they defended was the worst and the enemy had a hard time penetrating it. A large number of their dead bodies were piled high there."

"What happened to Henson, sir?"

"Unfortunately he got killed."

Tom was silent.

"Kesinski believed that you and a NVA exchanged fire and both died. When he heard you survived, he immediately asked a nurse to dictate his recommendation."

"Sir, what happened to Lieutenant Colonel Henderson?"

"Um. He didn't make it. Almost all of his B Team got killed. About a hundred Montagnards and their women also got killed."

For the first time since his arrival in Yokota, tears welled up in Tom's eyes, but he said nothing, just stared the binder with his medical record at the foot of his bed.

The colonel was quiet, then coughed.

"I sent a telegram to your parents. I understand your father was in the air force in the last war. Major General Clifford is your father's pal and is now the commander at the Air Force headquarters in Saigon, so your father's message to him came to me."

"Thank you, sir."

"Lieutenant, take care of yourself. I'm now going to the Army post in Camp Zama to brief them on Hue situation."

"What happened in Hue?"

Hue had been a capital for more than a thousand years in the northern region of South Vietnam. It had never been fortified and North Vietnam had not attacked it until the Tet Offensive. The Vietcong and NVA had easily occupied the city. But after fierce battles between them and the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, the South Vietnamese finally recaptured it.

"It was terrible.....this is not official yet, but the Vietcong and NVA entered Hue with a list of the Vietnamese whom they had determined had been collaborators with the South Vietnamese government and the Americans. They searched each house and apartment, captured the collaborators, and killed most of them by shooting them or burying them alive. The total was about 2,800. We are digging up the bodies right now. ...it was hell." The colonel almost spat.

After the colonel left, Tom put the silver star back into the box, put it in the drawer of his side table, and closed his eyes.

Despite his physical recovery, Tom's mind saw no exit. On the surface, he acted normal but below he lived in a split world, without any sense of reality. He feared to express any emotion, always pushing it back into his inner self. He was safely at a base hospital, not in Vietnam, without sounds of bombs or machine gun fire. But that

quiet worked against him, causing insomnia. He received letters from Jane and his family but even they sounded like distant calls.

He knew he was suffering from post-combat trauma. The hospital had several psychiatrists, psychologists, and counselors who were treating soldiers with emotional symptoms but Tom didn't feel like seeking their counsel.

One day in the rehabilitation center, when Tom was exercising to stimulate his right hand nerves with a grip machine, a young man stretching his knee muscles next to him introduced himself.

"Hi, I'm Lieutenant Daniel Cohen, Marines."

"Hi, I'm Lieutenant Tom O'Brien, Special Forces."

Lieutenant Cohen was a stout man with wide shoulders and a shaved head. He had bold dark brown eyes and wore a red sweat shirt with a "USMC" logo in gold and red running pants. Vivid red scars ran across his right knee and he moved with difficulty.

Cohen pointed his chin to Tom's plaster cast and said,

"Tet?"

"Yes. I was at Loc-nin."

"I was in Danang."

"Danang? You must have had a tough time."

"Indeed. Ten of my friends died."

Cohen was a Jewish name. What kind of a Jewish man would even think of joining the US Marine Corps that had a reputation for excluding anyone who was different, Tom wondered. It was rare that Jewish men would voluntarily join the military service.

Tom learned that in combat in Danang, a bullet shot through Cohen's right knee but he refused amputation, putting up with a painful rehabilitation. He was full of the Marine spirit, determined to overcome the obstacles.

Cohen was unusual in that he was strongly interested in Japan and had read many books on Japan during his recovery, and told Tom about them. Tom was puzzled by Cohen's interest. He himself was in Japan but in an American hospital and had never been outside the gate. Why Cohen was enthusiastic about Japan was beyond him.

One afternoon, when Tom was drinking coffee in the cafeteria, Cohen sat down at his table, wearing a white polo shirt and khaki pants. His right leg had recovered to the extent that he only had a slight limp.

"Hey, Tom, I'm going home!"

"That's great, congratulations!"

"Finally. I'm excited. Going home to eat apple pie and have sex with pretty American girls!"

Tom was amused, as he had to listen to Cohen's exaggerated stories of romance with Vietnamese women and American nurses.

"I haven't seen you for several days. Where have you been?" Tom asked.

"Using my R & R, I went to Kyoto."

"Where is Kyoto?"

"Until Tokyo became Japan's capital, Kyoto was the capital for a thousand years. It has two thousand Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. It's an old city, like Hue."

"Hmm."

"Tom, before you go home, you must go to Kyoto. There is something in that city that calms down souls like ours, tired from war. I loved the Saihoji Temple and the Nin'naji Temple. The Saihoji garden was covered with moss. I went there in the morning and saw the morning sunshine shining on the dew on the moss. Such a peaceful view. On the other hand, I don't know how to describe Nin'naji. You have to visit it to understand it. I have been into Tokyo but didn't like it. It's inhumane to be in a city with more than ten million people."

"You grew up in Brooklyn. New York has six million people."

"New York is New York. That city is not America. Tokyo is not Japan either. The center of Japanese culture is in Kyoto. I got lost near Saihoji. A young woman, who spoke fluent English, asked if she could help me. She toured Saihoji with me and invited me to her house. Her mother was a teacher of the tea ceremony. She was in kimono and offered me tea."

"Do they need teachers just for drinking tea?"

"In Japan, it's not just drinking tea; it's called the tea ceremony. It's a ritual with strict protocols based on a five hundred year history. You pour boiling water into a bowl with

bitter green powdered tea. Guests are supposed to sit square, but I was excused because I couldn't bend my legs."

"Did they ask about your knee?"

"Yeah. I told them I was wounded in Vietnam. The mother volunteered that her husband was wounded in Manchuria in the last war but survived and came home. She said this in Japanese, of course. Her daughter translated for me. I asked her to go out but she declined gracefully. I had a very good day." The next day Tom bid farewell to Cohen who left the hospital to return to his parents in Brooklyn.

Seven weeks had passed since Tom's arrival at Yokota.

Since the Tet Offensive, the number of wounded soldiers air lifted from Vietnam leapt and Yokota was their base of entry. Every month, more than ten thousand wounded soldiers arrived at Yokota. They were processed there, then taken to the Tachikawa transfer center and further sorted out to be sent to one of the five army hospitals in that area. Day and night, helicopters transporting the wounded flew into those bases.

One morning, when Tom was eating breakfast in the cafeteria, Dr. Taylor came to see him. Tom's plaster cast was gone and he now had a corset around his stomach and waist in addition to a shoulder pad and a sling.

"Tom, you are going home." The fork in Tom's left hand dropped to the floor.

"When?"

"Next week. We agreed that you can put up with a long distance travel. We'll immediately begin your paperwork."

"Thank you, sir."

Dr. Taylor noticed that Tom didn't burst into excitement as other soldiers. Pulling a chair next to Tom, the doctor asked. "What's the matter?"

"Dr. Taylor, I have five days of R&R coming to me. May I get permission to travel in Japan before I leave?"

"That's fine. It'll be good exercise, too. But you can't push yourself too much. Where do you plan to visit?"

"A city called Kyoto."

"That's all right. Sightseeing is not stressful. Kyoto is a good place to visit. I've been there twice already. But what's the matter? You don't sound glad to go home."

"How many soldiers have died since they arrived here?"

"What? Let's see. It's been one year since I got here. Maybe fifty wounded soldiers didn't make it after arrival."

"How do you deal with it?"

"Tom, I'm a pro. I do my best to save patients, but if they can't make it, that's their fate. Unless I believe that, I'd go mad. Unless you control your personal emotions, it's like opening the lid of Pandora's Box. Numerous monsters start spilling out."

"Dr. Taylor, do you think those who died in this war had their lives wasted?"

".....all wars are meaningless. They're all a waste of human life."

"Not other wars, but this war?"

"Tom, my individual political beliefs are meaningless. My job is to save the wounded."

"I want to know." Tom had a stubborn expression in his eyes.

"You are a soldier. Nominally I'm an air force doctor, but in fact I'm a civilian. Therefore, my view of life should be quite different from yours. What do you think of this war?"

This time, Tom stumbled. No matter how he was disillusioned, no matter how he wanted to say that the dead soldiers' lives had been wasted, he was in Army. No matter the deep anger he felt toward the president and those who held power, the president was the commander in chief of the Armed Forces. For Tom to express his accusations against the government and the military services in front of a civilian was "disobedience." His pride as an officer and training to control himself made him tongue-tied.

Dr. Taylor watched Tom whose face was flushed.

"You don't have to say anything, Tom"

".....Why did you apply to come to Yokota?"

"Let's see. I'm thirty-eight and beyond draft age. I had a clinic in Greenwich in Connecticut, in the suburbs of New York. I had a partner from medical school, a cute secretary and two nurses. We charged a lot to aging and wealthy patients. I think I was getting bored with life. I watched the news about Vietnam on television every day, and got an idea about going to Vietnam."

"How long were you in Nam?"

"I was in Danang for a year."

"That means you renewed your contract before coming to Yokota."

Contracts with private medical doctors and the military were renewed every twelve months.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"As a medical doctor, I wanted to prevent fellow citizens from dying."

Dr. Taylor hastily stood up and put his hand on Tom's left shoulder.

"Tom, I know you are troubled right now. I suspect you suffer from feeling that all of your life or belief in the past may have been wrong. And that must have come from your combat experience. I've read a report on Loc-nin. But I'm advising you as a doctor. Forget the past. Focus your energy on living. When you recover physically and return to civilian life, and if you still have psychological problems, get a shrink. You see, the point is not to be swallowed up. Don't lose focus. This is my survival kit since my work in Vietnam. This is a war in which we have no chance of winning that was started by fools in Washington. If the war goes on like this, who knows, tens of thousands more Americans will get killed. All the more, we have to survive. Do you get it? Shit on justice or ideology."

Bending his head, Tom said nothing.

On the last day at the hospital, Tom was busy with paperwork such as hospital release, request for R&R, and logistics of returning to the U.S. After R&R, he would return to Yokota and fly on a military plane to Oakland, California.

Colonel Atkinson had arranged for Tom to continue his on duty as an intelligence officer at the Fort Bragg Special Forces unit on anti-guerrilla warfare. With that arrangement he could continue rehabilitation at army hospitals.

Before travelling to Kyoto, Tom was required to attend an orientation session on R & R in Japan at Camp Zama .

On the morning of March 25th, Tom boarded a military bus to Zama, wearing a new blazer and pants he bought at PX.

Dr. Taylor and Nurse Betty came to see him off. The doctor spoke for both of them:

"Tom, take care. Complete your rehabilitation and your right hand and arm should be fine."

"Thank you, sir." They shook hand and their eyes met. Dr. Taylor began to say something but held back.

Before Tom boarded the bus, Betty kissed Tom's cheeks. "Take care, Tom." Soldiers on the bus whistled. The bus was crowded with soldiers on R&R. Tom sighed a deep sigh, looking at the doctor and nurse waving their farewell, thinking he had passed a major turning point in his life.

At Zama, an officer lectured to the soldiers who had changed into civilian clothes.

"Japan and the United States are allies under the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and is an equal partner with the U.S. You have no special privileges in this country and never forget you are the guests. Behave yourself accordingly."

"Do not discuss your military duties."

"You are not allowed to carry a weapon."

"Do not be suckered by the sweet talk of the pimps outside the bars and cabarets." The soldiers all laughed.

"We forbid all contact with Japanese anti-war activists."

There were few question because everyone wanted to get going on their R&R.

When Tom got off the military bus at the USO center in the Ginza in downtown Tokyo, he felt a bit dizzy. There were too much sound and color for him after two months in the hospital.

It was some time before evening but the brilliant colored neon signs were already lit. Japanese women walked around in chic outfits. Luxury items were on display in the boutiques and shoe stores. Through the restaurant windows came more bright lights.

Tom asked the bus driver how to go to "Akasaka Mitsuke" by subway and walked to the station carrying his small suitcase. The crowd and the packed cars reminded him of Saigon. But Tokyo was without tropical laziness, chaos, or dirt. On that chilly day with rain threatening, the Japanese, unsmiling, walked quickly toward their destinations. Nobody paid any attention to Tom. Walking among the indifferent crowd, Tom suffered from a split world, this time between the hospital full of wounded American soldiers and Japanese who were not at war, leading normal life without fear of death.

Five minutes from the Akasaka Mitsuke subway station was the Sanno Hotel, which had been an American military billet from the days of the Allied Occupation after World War II. More than fifteen years had passed since the end of occupation but it was filled with

an American flavor. Military looking men in civilian clothes came and went through the lobby.

An elderly Japanese man wearing a bow tie checked Tom in at the desk. He may have learned English during the occupation as he spoke with a drawl. He bowed slightly, checked for Tom's reservation, and greeted him: "Welcome, Lieutenant O'Brien, we've been waiting for you." When Tom asked the Japanese if he could make a reservation for him at the Miyako Hotel in Kyoto, the Japanese bowed his head slightly again: "Of course, we would be glad to do so."

After unpacking, Tom went to the bar on the first floor. A thick haze of smoke filled the bar and loud conversations hit Tom's ears. All were American men.

Tom sat down at the bar and ordered Cognac and soda. A pianist began to play Pat Boone's "Love in April." The piano player was a middle-aged American woman wearing heavy make-up and dangling gold ear rings.

Suddenly the memory of Marie Louise, whose father was French and her mother Vietnamese, flooded Tom's mind. He remembered her shining, cat like eyes. Her soft voice after their first kiss. The pianist was playing the same melody that was playing when they danced. A sharp pain ran through Tom's chest. The image of many, many wandering refugees hit him. Was she alive or dead? He didn't want to think about her.

While Tom was sipping the Cognac and soda, a man smelling of heavy drink sat down next to him. A broad-shouldered man with a thick neck and a GI haircut looked at Tom through bloodshot eyes from heavy drinking and extended his hand.

"Major Victor Goodrich, ranger."

"Sir, Lieutenant Tom O'Brien, Special Forces."

Goodrich glanced at Tom's right shoulder as he extended his left hand, raised his voice to the bartender: "Give him another glass of Cognac."

"Thank you, sir."

"Where were you hit?"

"Loc-nin, during Tet, sir. I was in the Yokota hospital for two months. Where were you, major?"

"Until yesterday, I was at the Irvin Ranger training center in Dakmi."

"Where were you during Tet, sir?"

"I was on the way to the Australian SAS (Special Air Service) Regiment in Foqtsui Province as an observer. I had some business to take care at Tansonnet so I was staying there overnight. Then the boom, boom began."

Five young officers sitting at a nearby table burst into laughter when a middle aged American man looking like a colonel joked about something. Snickering laughter continued with conversations peppered with words like "gook," "Charlie," "Moose". A "gook" was an Asian, from the Korean "Hankuk," a word meaning Korea that had been picked up by the GI's during the Korean war. "Charlie" meant a Vietcong, from the phonetic term Victor Charlie, and "moose" was derived from the Japanese word "musume," meaning daughter but applied to most women by the GI's. Tom could hear pieces of their conversation filled with exaggerated stories of heroic combat. They were all drunk with shiny red faces.

Major Goodrich shook his head.

"They are all liars, but of course I feel like telling war stories since I'm in Tokyo on R & R. I've never heard an honest account of any action in war."

Tom asked the major: "Sir, since you are a Ranger, have you been out on a lurp?" Lurp came from LRRP, or Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol. Tom was in an operation like that on the Cambodian border. He often crossed into Cambodia to look for enemy supply routes and headquarters.

"Yeah, I did. Charlie and the NVA we encountered were well-trained. We fought each other squarely. But the RVN Rangers we trained were much better than other troops. They were ruthless."

By common agreement, Vietnamese soldiers searched for the enemy in villages while American soldiers waited outside. RVN soldiers took advantage of this arrangement. American side knew what happened inside the villages but did nothing about it. Later, when they went in, they saw the victims of rape and torture. But since they did not witness the incidents, they could not present evidence in a court martial.

But rumors said soldiers from South Korea were far more brutal than RVN. South Korea sent their Capital Division, nicknamed "Tigers," the Marine Second Division or "Blue Dragon," and Ninth Infantry Division or "White Horse." They were stationed along the coast of the South China Sea where they were assigned to defend the ports and to securing supply routes inland and to do reconnaissance. The Vietnamese were intimidated by the Koreans and hated them with a passion.

Major Goodrich gulped his bourbon and sighed.

"I once went with the White Horse guys on recon. They were something else. If someone shot at them or they suspected the Vietcong were hiding in a village, they immediately burnt it down. Well, at least they warned ahead of times with a speaker telling the villagers to bring out the Vietcong and their weapons within twenty minutes. After that there would be an indiscriminate attack. They kept the promise, burnt down the villages after twenty minutes. Women and children, they killed mercilessly. That's why Vietcong so far has not attacked the Korean forces. I once asked a Korean commander why they were so brutal. His answer was simple."

"What was the reason?"

"He said, we came to fully understand the communists during the Korean War. We shed our blood to understand them. This is the only way to defeat them. I'm sorry to be impolite to you Americans, but you don't seem to understand the communists."

The second glass of Cognac hit Tom and he felt numb in his head. An image began to appear in front of him. In the smoky dark bar came an image of a broad wasteland in which villages were burning. Vietnamese in rags with empty eyes walked aimlessly. All those empty eyes looked at Tom. Behind this silent, moving mass the sky was red.

It was a fine morning in Kyoto.

Tom got up early and arrived at the temple while it was quiet. He stood at the foot of a wide staircase leading up to a gate with a huge, layered roof. Under the roof were right and left alcoves in which stood a pair of fierce looking statues, their feet rooted on the floor. Tom was taken aback by the power of the temple's aura.

Ever since Cohen had mentioned "Nin'naji Temple," which he could not describe except to say Tom should visit it, he had been eager to see it. He had asked other soldiers at the hospital about the temple but none had heard of "Nin'naji."

At the top of the staircase was a wide open gate with thick wood blocks and iron rivets and a straight pathway filled with white pebbles leading to another gate. Walls on both sides were gray and topped with black slate, making a simple pathway with no decoration. Its strength shattered Tom's vague idea that Japanese culture was made of "paper and wood."

At the end of the pathway was yet another gate that opened to yet another stone staircase. Tom passed through the gate and came to a booth with a list of sightseeing fees. A young woman sitting at the window had long straight black hair and wore a dark kimono. She bowed politely after receiving Japanese bills from him. She gave back balance with coins and bowed deeply again. A gate to the booth's left was open. Tom

went through it and came to a spacious lobby. Shoeboxes for visitors lined the walls. Pile of slippers suggested that visitors to take off their shoes and use the slippers. Nobody came out. Not knowing what to do, Tom stood there uncertain. At the front was a large vase full of wild flowers. Corridors extended to the right and left. Again simplicity itself.

Soon Tom smelled incense whose fragrance was subtle and a young monk with a shaved head and wearing black robe appeared. Seeing the foreigner, the monk widened his eyes a little and said in low voice, in English, "Good morning." He handed Tom a pamphlet in English. When Tom said "domo arigato" in Japanese a phrase meaning "thank you" that he had learned in Yokota, the monk smiled slightly and pointed to the right corridor. Tom noticed that under the black gown was a crisp white undergarment from which the monk's hand extended. From his wrist hung a short string of purple crystal beads that looked like a rosary.

Tom was the only visitor. The silence in the temple was penetrating. He walked through a roofed corridor and reached the main building of the temple compound. According to the pamphlet, Nin'naji Temple was built for Emperor Uda in ninth century AD when the young emperor joined the priesthood. That was more than one thousand years ago. Since Emperor Uda's days, the chief abbots have been sons of emperors, making the temple prominent in the Buddhist world.

The corridor faced large gardens and the sliding doors were open to show the spare rooms with almost no furniture. The floors were covered with reed mats. The walls were covered with "fusuma" or paper sliding doors decorated with brilliantly colored paintings of the four seasons. The themes of the paintings were pine trees, cherry blossoms, and flowing brooks, all with gold backgrounds. The contrast between the gorgeous paintings and the simplicity of their surroundings appealed to Tom. The hardness in his heart that had come from the chaos, disorder, filth, corruption, danger, and killing ever since he arrived in Saigon more than a year ago began to melt.

When Tom turned a corner, he saw a garden with clear white sand and a shiver ran through his body. He sat down at the edge of the corridor and drank in the serenity of the garden.

Small pine trees covered the wall. The top of the trees was like a green wave, high and low, in the morning sky. Among the trees, black rocks in different shapes were scattered and a small waterfall flowed from the top of a rock formation. Marks made by a broom on the white sand swirled like flowing water. Except for the sound of the waterfall, the garden was filled with a deep quiet. The garden's color were stark: the green of the pine trees, the black of the rocks, the white of the sand. Tom thought maybe the garden symbolized the universe with both heaven and hell. The garden was empty yet held

everything that existed. Overwhelmed by the darkness of the world in which humans each other, Tom began to weep.

A man watched Tom from a distance, at the end of the corridor. He was an elderly Japanese wearing a gray suit and his head was shaved. He had come around the corner of the corridor, heading toward the garden, and had stopped when he saw Tom. After a while, the man started to walk quietly and stopped near Tom. Sensing the presence of someone, Tom looked up, saw the man, and tried to stand up.

"Please sit down," the man said in clear English. Tom sat down, and the man sat in a formal Japanese way. He said, "Please let me introduce myself. I am a Zen Buddhist monk. I come do this temple because I had some business with the abbot. Please excuse my rudeness but I watched you for a little while. Are you American?"

"Yes, I am," Tom replied. The monk looked at him for a few seconds and said, "If you feel like talking, why don't you tell me why you are here? You may not be Catholic but perhaps you may need a priest for confession."

Tom stared at the monk. His voice was deep, as if echoing in a cave. But his eyes were gentle. "My name is Ji-un. I speak English as I teach Zen and have trained Americans in the United States."

Tom was silent and the monk sat quietly. After a few minutes, Tom said, "Please excuse me for not responding right away. I am confused as to what to do and not to do these days. I am Tom O'Brien, a lieutenant of the U.S. Army. I was badly wounded in Vietnam and was shipped to the Yokota Air Base hospital. I am leaving for home soon. A friend suggested that I come to this temple before I leave."

"You were crying. May I ask why?"

"In the last year, I've seen many humans getting killed in the war. I myself wounded and killed humans in combat. During the last two months, while in the hospital, I've been consumed with anger because the entire war was a waste of human life. In addition, this war is complicated and there seems to be no exit. I've been in despair and didn't know what to do. But, looking at this garden, I was a bit overwhelmed but my anger was a little tamed."

"What do you mean by the complexity of the war? Please take your time and tell me why you think so. Please don't hesitate. In Christianity or in Buddhism, the role of a monk is the same. A monk absorbs into his heart the sorrow and suffering of his fellow humans."

During the next hour, Tom poured out the emotions that had been locked in his heart, rambling thoughts gushing out one after the other.

That smile of a girl selling flowers in Saigon.

The severely burnt face of a GI who was wounded by the explosive the girl had set.

Vietnamese refugees walking out of burning villages and wandering on the roads.

A Vietcong whom Tom shot to death, the red of the blood in his intestines spilling out of his belly.

The sudden flash of electric lights in Loc-nin and the hair raising fear that came from knowing that an enemy attack was imminent.

The sudden fear that he was going to die that night that came with the first sound of the enemy's artillery.

The strange sensation of his entire life reeling before his eyes like a film in an instant.

The dreams he had before he regained consciousness in the hospital. Anger toward the war policymakers in Washington. Anger toward senior officers stationed in Saigon who would not be honest about the war because they did not want to upset their superiors in the Pentagon. Anger toward the Vietnamese who exploited Americans. Anger toward his own country. A deep sense of being betrayed.

The monk listened, with his head slightly bent forward, his eyes cast on his lap. The sound of the waterfall babbled on, the sunlight shifted from cool clarity of early morning to the warmth of mid-morning, the chirping of sparrows occasionally broke the silence of the garden.

After a while, Tom suddenly stopped talking. He didn't understand why he had said so much to this stranger about the things he had never confided in anyone before. But he felt so comfortable talking and his words seemed to be absorbed into the monk's heart.

The monk began to speak quietly.

"O'Brien-San, you have been through "the Valley of Death," as your Bible says. Perhaps your intuition that you were going to die that night was right. But then why were you saved when the Vietnamese officer's body fell over you, sparing you? I think that perhaps time for your soul's death in this life had not yet come even though your bodily death could have happened. There must be a reason why you are alive. There is no such thing in this life as coincidence. We met at this temple because our souls wanted to meet each other."

"What is the reason for my being alive?"

"I don't know. But someday you may know. Until then, what you should do is not to forget what happened. I am not saying that you should indulge yourself in that terrible and ugly experience. Rather I am saying to keep thinking about the meaning of your experience. Then to go beyond your personal experience and reach the stage of enlightenment on why human beings keep committing then sin of killing each other."

"Sin.....Is there a concept of sin in Buddhism, too?"

"Yes. All major religions have the concept of sin and forgiveness. In Buddhism, killing other humans is described as falling into the world of beasts. If you commit sin in this world, in your next life you must be punished. While Christianity does not have a concept of reincarnation, Buddhism teaches it. Whether you are born as a better human being in your next life or are born as a beast depends on what action you take in this world. Your soul keeps being reborn in a human body, reflecting on your soul's progress or downfall. That is why it is so important how you live this life."

Tom said, "As an American, I believed in the cause of the war as a civilian and as a soldier. I believed that together with the Vietnamese, we had to break an ideology that oppressed the freedom of the people, killed the innocent, and brainwashed them. But ever since I arrived in Vietnam, too many things could not be explained, justice didn't exist, and I could not trust anyone or anything anymore. But I had a duty as a military officer and I had to survive in situation where you would be killed unless you killed. I could not resolve this contradiction."

"It was unfortunate that your country was dragged into this war. Since your country is of Christian culture, perhaps I should use your analogy. Perhaps your God does not support your war. Perhaps because Americans have become arrogant in believing in their power, but ignoring the voice of God. Therefore God is creating a situation in which Americans are not winning."

The monk's words pierced Tom's heart.

"As an American, I cannot bear that kind of thinking."

"Yes, I am sympathetic. There is a Japanese saying, derived from the Chinese philosophy on war, that great things can be achieved only when there is a mandate from heaven, a geographical advantage, and the unity of the people. Among them, the most important is the unity of the people. But for your country, all three elements are missing in this war, a fatal situation."

"Yes, I agree that our country should not have gone into Vietnam," Tom said bitterly.

The monk said: "Americans will suffer from this war and its aftermath for decades. But it is a suffering in trying to give birth to another life as a nation. You have to go through

this suffering yourself to cleanse your sin of killing no matter what the reason was..... Please pray all the time, not only to save your soul, but for the Vietnamese who tried to kill you, for the Vietnamese you injured and killed, and for all Americans who were killed, for all human beings. Human life shines precisely because we are suffering from sin and pain. Therefore, you should also pray for those who survived the war. Prayer is a powerful action."

After this conversation, the two sat quietly. On the monk's wrist was a string of clear crystal beads, similar to a rosary. His hands on his lap never moved during the conversation.

From the end of the corridor, several voices were heard, breaking the quiet of the garden. As if awakening from a dream, the monk and Tom bowed to each other and stood up. The monk looked at Tom with sympathy, as Tom tried to stand up using his left hand to cover for his wounded right shoulder and arm. The monk took the crystal bracelet and offered it to Tom.

"I would like to offer this as my token for this meeting with you. This is called Juzu and we use it for prayers. I shall pray for you all the time, too."

"Thank you," Tom's voice choked a little.

"Meeting you here is mysterious.....I, too, was an officer in the Japanese Imperial Army," the monk said in a low voice.

"Oh? Where?"

"During World War II, I survived in Burma. But I lost almost all of my men from starvation, guerrilla war, and the Allied attacks. It was hell. I, too, thought like you did and suffered for a long time. Please take care of yourself. Farewell, Lieutenant O'Brien."

The monk bowed, turned, and began to walk away. Tom watched the back of the monk. Reaching the corner of the corridor, the monk turned and again bowed slightly. The spring sunshine poured on the elderly man who looked as if he was surrounded with simmering white light.

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