

Watermelon Whispers

The man sat at the wood kitchen table. He had been sitting at *this* table, in *this* spot of the kitchen, for over fifty years. Surrounded by the same wooden chairs and situated beneath the same hanging fruit basket with the same cheap, plastic fruit nestled within. A slight breeze wafted through the windows, breaking the smothering humidity of another July day. The window air conditioning unit in the adjacent living room hummed audibly but didn't offer any relief to where he sat. His son, Dave, was in the kitchen cutting up a watermelon. Dave had brought it home from the grocery store with the hope it would be an easy food for him to chew and swallow.

Subconsciously he made a “hmp” noise. To think it had come to this. His whole life he had been an able-bodied man. He had been a plumber, a mechanic, a repairman, a father and a husband; he had provided for his family and done everything he could to ensure they had what they needed. Only to be bested, slowly, in the here and now by Parkinson's. Just a few weeks ago he had finally relented to using a cane for longer walks. “Longer” now constituting the walk from the lone-standing garage to the house. He shook his head. The shaking was bad now, but it was the persistent fatigue that plagued him. The slightest exertions would wipe him out for the entire day. Even a trip to the grocery store was no longer plausible-which was why their son had come to live with them. Dave did the majority of the grocery shopping now, not to mention the yard work and driving them to numerous doctor appointments. His wife, suffering from dementia, perpetually thought it was almost Christmas. She wandered around the house incessantly, waiting for Christmas packages to arrive in the mail. They never came, but she never seemed to mind. She would sit in the kitchen and drink cups of watered-down coffee, having conversations with her mother who had been dead for forty years. But she was happy, and she still knew who he and Dave were. So, he was thankful for that.

His son walked over with a plate of watermelon slices. “Here ya go Dad, it’s actually a really ripe one. Wouldn’t have been the first time I bought an under-ripe melon.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” the man grumbled, barely audible. His son just smiled and nodded, returning to the kitchen counter.

The man looked down at the plate of red slices, glistening with juice and peppered with white and black seeds. He lifted a piece with his shaking and bruised hands, then took a bite. The fruit dispersed effortlessly in his mouth, and he was able to swallow it down. What a blessing that was. Swallowing and chewing had become so difficult, and he drooled constantly. He would keep a tissue handy, but half of the time he had drool on his chin without knowing it. Damn Parkinson’s. But his son had been right, this watermelon was perfect. He hadn’t had watermelon in so long, he had forgotten how good it was. He gingerly took another bite. He felt a bit of juice dribble down his chin. He reached for a napkin and tried to wipe it away. His hands continued to shake, trying to regain any semblance of control. Finally, he resigned himself to just taking another bite of watermelon. As he lifted the piece to his mouth again, he remembered another time when watermelon had been the centerpiece of his meal.

They had been in Korea for some time when they had found the field of watermelons. For three weeks they had been the only infantry division there, holding the lines alongside the ROK. They had been stationed in Japan, and they had been closest when North Korea had attacked the South. They had been the first soldiers there. Was it three weeks, or an eternity? An eternity of pushing back and holding position. Of going behind enemy lines on recon missions and bringing back the bodies, or sometimes parts, of friends. To take home to their families. It was better than nothing at all. Leaving them to rest in Korea, in a place where no one would see them again. He remembered one mission where he had jumped on the car and as they rode away he had been hit by a piece of shrapnel. He had nearly shit himself, thinking he had been shot. He hated it all: the fear, the killing, the shooting, the body parts, and the smells. Even the watermelons, a welcome treat at first, had hidden toxins in their red innards.

They had all become violently ill after eating the ripe melons. Dysentery. Shitting everywhere. Later, he had contracted malaria as well, which would surface again years later as he tried to crawl on his belly from his bed to the bathroom. He remembered the Red Cross train that had been bombed, and the carnage and pieces of flesh adorning the windows and littering the ground. And the smells. That was what made a man retch. The smell of burning, rotting flesh that had lingered and permeated every fiber of his being. Out of his entire platoon, he was one of twenty men that had returned to the United States. They had been awarded the Bronze Star. They had been decimated.

There had been times though that hadn't been so bad. Korea was a beautiful, lush place. And the people of South Korea had been pleasant and kind. He remembered riding through one village and passing out gum with fellow soldiers. The children had loved it. The mountains, the ocean, the rice paddies-these had a beauty outside of the horrors of war.

“How is it Dad?” A question from Dave brought him back. He looked up into his son’s expectant face.

“Very good son, thanks,” he murmured. More drool. He reached for the napkin again. He could feel his dentures floating too. Damn it.

“Great, Dad. I’ll put the rest in the fridge, there is plenty more.” His son paused a moment, as if unsure of something. “I’m glad it tastes good to you.” He walked away again to wrap up the remaining watermelon.

Looking out the window the man’s eyes focused on the trees outside. He wished he could go back to Korea. Now. And see it how it was meant to be seen. Interact with the people as himself, without the stresses of war. To eat the food and cross bridges without worrying about holding them. To experience the culture and way of life. To just exist among the trees, mountains and ocean there. Just once.

But it was too late. Returning to South Korea was no longer a “someday I will.” He was ninety, and if he couldn’t make it to the grocery without being exhausted, he couldn’t make a

twelve-hour flight across the ocean. He wouldn't return to Korea. He would never have a memory of it outside the scope of war. He would never interact with the people as a man, not a soldier. Just a man. A human being to another human being. Somehow the years had melted away and he was ninety. His wife would never have gone. He loved her, but she had never understood the wonders of the world that existed outside the U.S. The myriad of cultures and foods, and the unknown lands to traverse. She had never understood that people were people no matter where you went. She had been born in the town she would die in, and she had never wanted more than that. He remembered taking her and his son to the Mediterranean once. A hard earned, once in a lifetime trip, meant to be a precious memory-making experience for all of them. His wife had hated it. So, after that trip they had traveled exclusively around the U.S.

He would never see Korea again. His life was coming to a close, a few pages remained to be written and then the book would conclude. Maybe Dave would go, or his grandchildren, and they would see it. Maybe what mattered wasn't that he would never see Korea again. Maybe what mattered was that his son, his grandchildren, and anyone else could see it for themselves. They could immerse themselves in the culture, eat the food, and see the ships passing at the Port of Pusan. They could see Seoul, and the city it had become. He could be content knowing that Korea was no longer at war, and that people could come and go. Children could grow without the fear and heartache he had known. A single tear fell from his eye. It rolled down his cheek and fell, into a void of remembrance that came to a close.