

**Short Story**

# **One Day in Cherwon**

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As we advanced in the darkness, shells went off on the nearby hillside. Something made me look back. Under the flashing light, I saw Private Choi, who was supposed to follow me to counterattack, take aim at me. The soldier with fierce bright eyes pulled the trigger, and I was knocked onto the ground, screaming.

My wife woke me up. “Dear, you are having nightmares about that guy again! Look at the sweat.” She dried my face with a towel. I wondered if I had had the dreadful dream again because of the news I got yesterday.

I told her, “Sergeant Lee died. His son sent me a funeral notice by express mail.”

She quietly said, “That leech is dead now?”

“Please, don’t. He and I had an unbreakable tie.”

“A hanger-on, I’d say. He was three years older than you?”

“Yeah.”

At the first gray of dawn, she got up as if she could shake away the thoughts. While she was taking a shower, I began to prepare her breakfast, squeezing fresh grapefruit juice.

As a cardiologist, my wife Younghie worked long hours in the clinic, leaving early in the morning and then returning around 8:00 p.m. I usually stayed home. Once I worked

for the municipal government of Daegu, the third largest city in South Korea at the time, but that job was thirty years ago. I was fired, and I hadn't found another position yet.

Still in my pajamas, I served Younghie a glass of fresh-squeezed grapefruit juice and hot scrambled eggs. "Eat well, dear. A full day is ahead of you."

She was skimming through the front page of that day's newspaper before going to work. As the head of a clinic, she had to know what was going on in the world, and she had such limited free time.

Her forest-green knit pantsuit complimented her complexion and was stylish on her slender frame. When she was young, she had resembled Audrey Hepburn. Now she had gained a little bit of weight with age, which made her look better, I thought. She was twelve years my junior—sixty-four years old. Her skin was still clear, her short hair nicely coiffed. My hiking friends envied me. "How did a guy like you get such a pretty and capable wife? I wish I could live idle like you do."

I had to bring up a subject that I'd been thinking of telling her about for a long time. I managed to say, "I am taking a trip to Cherwon this morning. I may not come back today."

"I thought Sergeant Lee moved to the southern coast near Busan?"

"His son can have a funeral service without me. I am going to Cherwon instead. It's October, that time of year again. I've got to go and see the battleground before I die. Look at the picture his son sent. He wrote that his father before he died had told him to send this to me."

I showed her a small yellowing photograph of Sergeant Lee and me, which had been taken just before we were dispatched to the battle of White Horse Hill. I did not remember how the picture had been taken and did not know how Sergeant Lee had kept it for so many years. I owned nothing to remember the wartime stories; in fact I had destroyed all the fragments. This fading memento showed my lieutenant's insignia next to the sergeant's head—I was a head taller than him.

Younghie, who had been taken by my spruce appearance then, closely looked into the photo. Was she thinking of our younger days? Her parents were greatly disappointed in her choice. I was alone, without a single relative, about which I'd explain later. I owned nothing but my two little balls. Her parents' assessment of me was "What's the use of the good looks when there is no content?"

In her parents' eyes, I was not worthy of her. Perhaps they were right—Younghie was the most eligible young lady in Daegu society then—a well-bred, good-looking medical student. Their objection had only fanned her flame.

Close to 7:00 a.m., my wife had to leave for work, and I had to get ready for my trip. I told her, “I am taking some money from our savings account.”

Driving the black Grandeur out of our driveway, she impatiently shot back, “When did you get permission from me before taking out money?”

She shouldn't have forgotten that I was the one who made it possible for her to focus on her career. She wouldn't have been able to accomplish what she had done without my help. It is true that we lived on her income the last thirty years and bought this nice brick house in a quiet residential area with her money, but I maintained the household and raised our two children. A helper lady was coming that day, so I gathered the laundry to be washed. I left her a note to clean today the windows also.

In October, several red pomegranates were hanging from the tree, and the quince fruits were ripening yellow. Younghie came home late every day. Even when she was home, she worked on the computer, so the housework and gardening were my responsibilities.

“In Cherwon, it may be colder than here,” I thought. I wore hiking pants and a jacket that I bought at a subway station shop. Lined with soft white flannel, they were warm and would be perfect for my trip. My wife bought her clothes at pricey department stores, but the underground garment shops were good enough for me. I put extra socks and underwear into the knapsack and left home.

The train station was crowded. I bought an 8:30 a.m. ticket for Seoul and got checks and cash in large bills, plus some spending money in small bills for my trip from our bank branch in the station. I went down the escalator to the platform. As I settled into my seat and looked out the window, the train was leaving on time. I traveled with hiking friends once in a while, but never took a trip alone. This day I finally got to do what I had meant to do for a long time.

The train was passing Waeguan, a suburb of Daegu, and then Nakdong River Bridge. This was a major battleground during the Korean War. As I closed my eyes and leaned against the velvet seat, things that had happened here went through my mind in a flash.

In August of 1950, all the bridges along the Nakdong River Perimeter were blown up to prevent communists from advancing farther south toward Daegu. Then forty thousand communist soldiers were ready for a full-scale attack from the northwestern side of Waeguan. For South Korea and the United States, Daegu had to be defended by all means. So, ninety-eight Boeing B-29s made a raid out of Japan and carpet-bombed for twenty-six minutes. As a result, thirty thousand communist soldiers perished. Each minute, 1,150 people were killed—it was an unthinkable tragedy. The area was burnt to the ground, but Daegu was defended.



The Battle of Waeguan was the turning point in the war against the North Koreans and Chinese. The communists had pushed almost to the southernmost reach of the peninsula, which would have effectively ended the war. The Waeguan battle was the first real victory for South Korea and the United States. In order to accomplish this, they had to do what would be unthinkable today—blowing up a bridge still crammed with refugees.

That year in September, I was a nineteen-year-old college student hiding in my cousin's attic in communist-occupied Seoul. My father hid me there after the communists visited our house a few times to recruit me. While hiding in the dark attic, I spent my time listening to the radio. Then to my horror, I learned that the district where our house was located was under severe American bombing.

When I ran to our district, our house was nothing but heaps of ashes. I found the charred bodies of my parents and younger brother. When other people rejoiced in the recapture of Seoul, I prowled the streets like an insane person.

Then one day I was recruited by the South Korean army via random questioning on a street corner and was stationed at the front, near the thirty-eighth parallel. Winter came; the snow was several feet high. We fought with frostbitten toes as the front suffered repeated advances and retreats.

Fighting on the frontline, I was alone in my own cocoon, going to pieces inside. Haunted by the memories of the heaps of ashes at my home site, I wished to disappear from this planet.

As time went by, I began to think, “I am the only one left among my family. I cannot just die like this on the cold mountain. I’ve got to survive somehow.” Eventually I decided to become an officer and applied for the infantry school, though I knew that platoon leaders would have more chance of being killed during war—but at least I would not get killed while I was getting trained.

In the fall of 1952, I was put into the Battle of hilltop 395 as a platoon leader of the Ninth Infantry Division— named so because the hilltop was 395 meter above the sea level. On the night of October 10, everybody fell asleep after several days of fierce combat. If there were another battle, we would shoot while half asleep. Then when cannons and gunfire stopped and everything was still, we would suddenly wake up because of the silence. The Chinese army, which would usually attack during the night, had changed its tactics, hitting us with elite troops that morning, so we again had lost the dominant hilltop position.

It was around 10:00 p.m. We got a radio message to mobilize to get the hilltop position back. Without delay, I yelled, “Advance, advance,” but the soldiers would not follow me. They saw too many soldiers become bullet baits. Despite the danger, I had to lead my platoon. Thanks to Sergeants Lee and Kim urging the soldiers to go forward, we were able to advance to the slope.

Then shells were fired nearby. With a strange hunch, I looked back. Under the flash, I saw a soldier taking aim at me. Since I suddenly looked back, he was surprised and dropped his rifle. Did I get it wrong? Was it an illusion? But my gut feeling was that he was aiming at me. And he was so surprised that he dropped his rifle. I had heard that a soldier might shoot at a platoon leader who would order an advance in spite of dangers. When I had heard that kind of story, I’d thought it impossible, but it had happened to me. I didn’t have time to do anything about it at the moment, so I just remembered that the soldier was Private Choi.

That night we finally regained the hilltop position. While we were resting, I quietly called Sergeant Lee.

“This is about Private Choi,” I whispered.

“You mean the guy who stole someone else’s rifle after losing his own?”

“Yeah. During our advance, something made me look back. He was aiming at me. I almost got killed while no one was watching. Keep your eye on him.”

“OK, I’ll see to that.”

I tried to act as if nothing had happened between Choi and me, but he didn’t look at me straight. He seemed to know that I knew. That day around 5:00 p.m., we lost the hilltop position again after a gruesome close combat with bayonets. I lost several soldiers, but Private Choi was still alive, showing up with his darkish face. As a platoon leader, it’s unthinkable for me to wish for my people to be killed, but I didn’t want to see that guy again.

That night, during a lull in the fighting, I again called Sergeant Lee. After the rifle theft incident, Sergeant Lee had slapped Private Choi in the face and kicked him. In the process, the small-framed sergeant bumped against the bear-like private and fell to the ground in front of the soldiers. It was clear that the private had not actually pushed the sergeant, but the sergeant did not forget that incident. A small pepper is hotter; once out of his favor, he was unsparing. Even before I opened my mouth, Sergeant Lee whispered, “Lieutenant, that bastard is still alive.”

“That’s why I called you.”

“Let’s do it before it’s too late. You never know when he will do it again.”

I pointed to a large rock in the distance. “Look at that boulder; do you see the whitish one?”

“Yes, I see it.”

“If you go down behind the rock, there is a creek.”

“I know.”

“I will wait there with Sergeant Kim. See if you can coax him and bring him there. No one should know about that. Around eight p.m., OK?”

“Sure.”

The night air was cold as we were waiting for Sergeant Lee and the soldier. When we had started the hilltop operation, it was a full moon, but now the half-moon was up. From somewhere I heard a cricket faintly chirping. Under the rain of heavy artillery fire

for weeks, the entire landscape had been burnt to the ground. How in the world had a cricket survived the intense burning and was now chirping in the October night? The same sounds as the ones that I used to hear in our Seoul house in the fall. Thinking of my parents' and brother's bodies in the ashes, I choked. It had been two years since, but it was just like yesterday.

I heard footsteps and then Sergeant Lee's voice. "Private Choi, you've fought so hard. Job well done! I hid some liquor behind a rock. Before the battle starts again, let's share a bottle of *soju* for reconciliation. OK?" To let me know that he was there, he talked clearly, raising his voice. I'd heard Private Choi liked liquor. The way Sergeant Lee talking about *soju* on the battleground, when even drinking water was scarce, made me smile in those tense moments.

Sergeant Kim stealthily went behind Private Choi and stuffed a towel his mouth. The soldier turned his face back, astonished. Sergeant Lee kicked his leg. As he crumpled, I appeared in front of him. Under the moonlight, Private Choi recognized me and flinched.

"Son of a bitch," I muttered. The low voice sounded grim even to my own ear. Under the dim light, a look of terror flashed across his face.

"Dared to point a rifle at the lieutenant?" Sergeant Lee spat, tying the private to a tree with the rope he had brought and then aimed his gun at him.

I said, "I will have to take care of him." I directed at him with my own weapon. Private Choi's heavy body struggled, and the tree shook.

"Stay still." Sergeant Lee hit Choi's head with his rifle butt.

One shot in the moonlight. And then the blood pumping out from his heart flowed over the ash at the creek side. He and I were the same age. "Why did I have to do that? A dark shadow may befall my life because of this." Those were brief thoughts. We had to take care of the body and return to our position as soon as possible.

That night, around one o'clock, the hilltop was right in front of us; but because of the enemy's machine-gun fire from there, we couldn't approach any more. My colleague Lieutenant Kang and his two soldiers approached the hilltop with their hand grenade pins off, blowing up the machine-gun nest. The trios were killed right there, and hilltop 395 was retaken.



Private Choi was treated as one of the day's casualties. Sergeant Lee came to me and informed me discreetly, "Lieutenant, his hometown is Cherwon. The notice will be delivered to his mother and brother there."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

The next day, while our troops changed positions, the enemy attacked again, resulting in more casualties. In this battle, Sergeant Kim, who had stealthily gone behind Private Choi and stuffed his mouth with a towel, was killed. He had trusted me, no matter what I said. With the report, Sergeant Lee and I paid a silent tribute.

Now, the incident was a secret only he and I shared. We knew that in wartime if there are good enough reasons, an officer could kill his subordinate, but I was afraid of his bereaved family. Why was I so afraid of them? Was it because of the fact that I myself didn't have any family? Sergeant Lee, who was with me to the end, suffered piercing bullet wounds to his leg on the last day of the battle. He was transferred to an evacuation hospital.

During the ten days of battle, the hilltop had changed hands twenty-four times after repeated attacks and counterattacks. It was one of the most intense position-grasping battles for a small hill during the course of the Korean War. Afterward, the ash-covered bald mountain, due to the repeated artillery fire, looked like an aged white horse lying down—after the war it was known as *Baengma-goji*. *Baengma* means a white horse and *goji* a hilltop.

The fighting ended on July 27, 1953, when the armistice was signed. I was twenty-two. Except for the six months I was in the infantry school, I had fought the entire time at the front. But thanks to my ancestors watching over me, I had survived and could hold memorial services for my parents and grandparents.

I had grown up in Seoul. During the vacations from school, I always went to our hometown; my grandparents lived in a suburb of Busan, where Nakdong River met the South Sea. My grandparents, who had been shocked by the tragic loss, passed away while I was fighting in the front.

After my discharge from the army, I often went to the wetland. I comforted myself, watching reeds sway in the winds from the sea, herons dance in groups, migratory birds fly high in the sky—I was truly alone.

At thirty-three years old, I had just passed the Grade Three civil servant examination. I was dreaming of a stable family life, which I had missed for so long. On a hot summer day, I dropped by West Gate Market to buy a cool hat and snooped around stalls. I thought the guy who tended a street stall looked familiar—his face was sunburnt bronze and his clothes grubby—but I didn't know who he was. He recognized me right away though. He called, "My lieutenant!" At that moment, I heard Private Choi's moaning, his mouth stuffed with the towel, and saw terror flash across his face. As Lee recognized me, I found myself cringing inside. But I pretended to be innocently happy to see him.

Embracing the smaller man, I said, "Oh, Sergeant Lee, it's been such a long time! Let's have a drink." I found myself exaggerating my delight, hiding my true feelings.

Sergeant Lee looked me up and down and asked me where I worked. After emptying several cups of *maggeoli*, a milky white rice wine known as a farmers' drink, he quipped, "Lieutenant, you seem to be doing well."

He almost sounded cynical. Since he was three years older, I talked to him politely, using honorifics, "You don't have to call me lieutenant anymore. We are not in the army."

"You still call me sergeant. How do I call you?" As he got drunk, he slurred. "I am a street vendor. When it rains, I have to close down the stall. When a policeman comes, I have to clear away and run. I don't have the down payment to rent a store."

I was dating Younghie then, saving as much money as possible to get married. Since she was from an affluent family, I had to take her to expensive restaurants and nice places on weekends. Her parents had not approved of our relationship, mainly because I was too old for her and was alone without a single relative to support me, but we already frequented hotel rooms during weekends.

To keep my Grade Three government job, I had to keep my record clean and shouldn't have been bothered with my past. Besides, many of my peers were eyeing my position. So I had to take some of my savings and give the money to Sergeant Lee for his store rental.

When Younghie was in the third year of medical school, she got pregnant, so her parents had to allow us to get married. At first my wife was too busy with her studies to pay attention to our finances, but by the time she finished her residency, she began to show interest in our household accounts. One day she brought up our savings account and questioned certain withdrawals. "What are they? It was not a few times but pretty

regular.” So I had to confess what had happened on that October night when a single cricket, having survived weeks of artillery fire, faintly chirped.

When I think of it now, the problem was that I was promoted to a good position too soon in my career. In my early forties, I was already overseeing the building constructions under the jurisdiction of the Daegu municipal government. Local builders would not leave me alone. I tried to avoid their bribery as much as I could, but I was trapped sometimes. Knowing how lucrative my position could be, Sergeant Lee came to me whenever he needed money.

In the spring when I was forty-six, I was involved in a hotel construction bribery case, and my face was splashed across the front page of the local papers. I was fired from the government career that had been going well. After that it was impossible for me to go back to a government job, and that kind of work was all that I knew.

I saw too many horrible things when I was young. And then at the peak of my career, I was disgraced by the incident that had made my name a headline in the papers, making me lose social standing. Still, I was soft at the core—a kid burned his hand in a fire. I didn’t have the confidence to start over as an individual proprietor. That was how my loner’s life had started.

One day, Sergeant Lee invited me to the maggeoli house that we had frequented before. We were drinking along with our sliced blood sausages. He stammered, “Lieutenant, I cannot say that I was not a part of your problems. Let me buy you some maggeoli to comfort you.”

I slurred, “We took the same boat the minute that guy crumpled bleeding at the creek side. Bring more drinks.”

We had never talked about Private Choi before, but that day we drank ourselves to a stupor talking about him. One good thing about being unemployed was that I got free of Sergeant Lee. Now his underwear store was right on track. He was well dressed, and his complexion was glowing; my own tall stature lessened, and my face was worn out.

With too much time on my hands, I had too many idle thoughts. That face in terror, that body doubled up under the moonlight haunted me. I had killed him with my own hand. I couldn’t erase his image in my head. Thoughts like “Was I mistaken?” or “Did he really take aim at me?” troubled me. Time passed, but I was still under the bondage of my youth.

When I said I was going to Cherwon, my wife must've thought I was going directly to White Horse Hill, but I intended to go to Private Choi's village first. I was able to get some information about his family through the household demography data system. According to what I found, his mother was ninety-four years old and still living in a village called Munaemi in Cherwon County.

I got off at the Seoul Train Station and took a bus to Cherwon. From the town square near county office, I hired a taxi to Munaemi village, which I reached around 3:00 p.m. *Munaemi* meant across the water. Indeed, across the river, I saw a village of about sixty or seventy houses at the foot of a mountain.

In front of the village, golden ears of rice swayed in the October winds. The Cherwon plain has long been a major granary of the nation, and the rice from this area was known as "clean rice." It was less polluted, due to its proximity to the natural environment of the Demilitarized Zone, which for decades had been untouched by human activities.

Having crossed the bridge over the river, the taxi drove the lane between the rice fields. A man in a worn-out sweater walked along the lane, showing his back. I got out of the taxi and approached him. His bronze face was deeply wrinkled and looked like leather. Perhaps he was about my age.

"I hope you don't mind my asking. Where does Mrs. Choi live? She is in her nineties."

"You can follow me." He and I walked side by side while my taxi followed us.

"I'm sorry to bother you like this."

"That's OK. Do you see the tin-roof house there? That's her house. Her mind is still clear. She prepares her own meals. Only her youngest son comes here to see her once in a while. Her oldest son was killed a long time ago in the battle of White Horse Hill. May I ask who you are?"

"I knew the oldest son. I've been planning to visit his mother for a long time."

"Is that right? Her oldest son and I grew up together in this village. He was a big burly guy, but surprisingly he was crafty and full of tricks. I thought that wherever he went, he would at least take care of himself and survive no matter what, but... You live and learn!"

I changed the subject, "What does she live on?"

“She gets the benefit for the war dead. He became a dutiful son after his death. It may sound strange to you, but if he were alive, he wouldn’t have been this punctual with the payment every month.”

It sure sounded strange to me. Did he mean that Private Choi was not a good son? If he lived, he wouldn’t have done as well for his mother? He had also said Private Choi was crafty and full of tricks. Didn’t they get along well while they were growing up?

He brought me to the corrugated metal gate of a small tin-roofed house. “This is her place.”

Through the open gate, I saw an old, withered woman leaning on a cane and looking up at the mountain. Her arms were like dry tree branches. I could tell she was once a big person like Private Choi. Turning her wrinkled face to me, she said in a thin voice, “You are here to see me?”

“Yes, your son and I were in the same troop when we were in the army.”

“You mean you were with my son?” Leaning on the cane, she walked to the flat bench in the middle of the yard and sat. “Whew,” she said, heaving a sigh and massaging her hip. “You come and sit here.”

So I sat at the far corner of the large rectangular flat bench made of wood.

“Were you near my son when he was shot?”

I barely nodded.

“Did he go comfortably?”

I was silent.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. “Why did I even ask that? How could he go comfortably when he was shot? I’ve had this giant boulder pressing on my chest all my life.”

Her words brought to my mind the white boulder I had pointed out to Sergeant Lee so long ago, and the way we’d handled her son near the creek below that boulder. If my mother had been alive, she would’ve been about this woman’s age. How did our fates end up intertwined like this? I felt my own chest tighten, and I couldn’t breathe.

I finally managed to bring up the subject I had come to discuss. “I don’t know how you’ll feel about this, but I brought some money for you. Winter is coming. Get some fuel for the cold winter. I spent a few winters near here and know how cruel it is. This is

fifty million won<sup>1</sup> for you. I prepared some in cash and some in checks for your convenience.”

I handed a bulging envelope to her emaciated hand.

“Why do I get money from you?”

“I was indebted to your son.’

“That was a lifetime ago.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“I got the ‘killed in action’ notice when I was thirty-nine. That drained the hope and energy out of me. I didn’t know the real meaning of hopelessness until then. When I lost my husband two years earlier, it wasn’t like that. While my son was buried, could I still eat and sleep? That seemed unthinkable. But I ate and slept. How humiliating!”

Listening to her, I was sweating blood. It looked like at any moment the old woman would attack me like a mad dog, foaming at her mouth and screaming, “Screw you—will the trivial sum of money give you peace of mind? No way!”

I had to make a quick excuse to get out of there, so I barely managed to speak to her, “So long; I have to leave now.”

“Already?” She looked up at me, with an expression on her face as if she were asking, “Don’t you have something else to tell me?”

I hurriedly got out of the gate and into the waiting taxi.

The sun was setting in the west beyond the October fields. “Shall I take you to Cherwon Hotel?” the driver asked.

“Yes,” I barely said and rested my head against the backseat.



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<sup>1</sup> About \$50,000