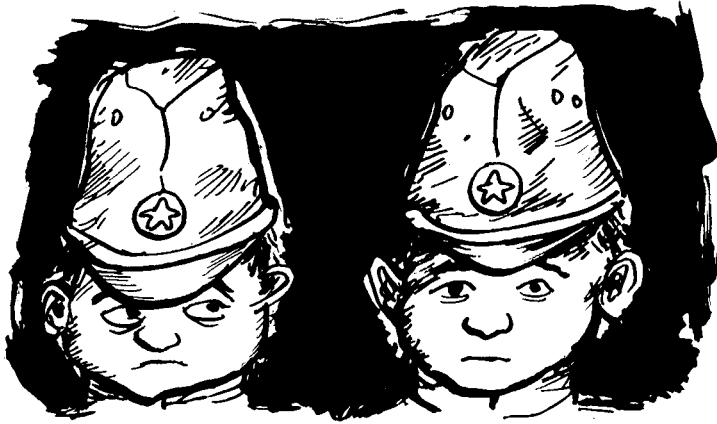


ADVENTURES IN TIME TRAVEL

Historical fiction by the winners of
the Young Walter Scott Prize 2020





DAEJEON STATION, 1945

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London

Runner up in the Young Walter Scott Prize
11-15 category

Author's introduction

I set the story in Seoul, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. What is not terribly well known is that many Koreans moved north to Manchuria and established the Yanbian Autonomous prefecture, a Korean enclave in China. When the Japanese invaded Manchuria, many of the Koreans in Yanbian fled back to the relative stability of Korea, even though it was still under Japanese control. Koreans were forced to assume Japanese names, the Korean language was banned, and Korean history was eliminated from teaching. This was the world in which my grandmother grew up.

None of us knew about this part of my grandmother's past until I asked her about her childhood for a school project, and I was fascinated and appalled by the idea of suppressing your identity, and by the changes that must have occurred at the end of the war when the Japanese suddenly left.

I was particularly interested in the Korean boys who were taken off to fight in the war by the Japanese and by their return to Korea at its end, in the midst of huge uncertainty and instability as the regime and culture shifted. I imagined their return, and the emotional impact their absence had – not on the boys themselves – but rather on those who had watched them go. The story is written from the perspective of a woman of my great-grandmother's generation who had lived through all the changes and migrations, and who had seen her sons, boys my age, go off to war. We see glimpses of her past, focussed around the train station from which she fled to Manchuria, into which she returned, and finally where she waits for her sons to return.

DAEJEON STATION, 1945

Has God forsaken my son?

Will I never see my beloved Sang, my first-born, my sweet Persimmon, again?

The Japanese surrendered 53 days ago, and every day since I have been waiting here in Daejeon Station, this unchanging brick building, oblivious to all the traumas of my life that have begun or ended on its platforms. Today is the last day of September, and the persimmons on our tree were finally ripe this morning — a good sign? They were — no, are — Sang’s favourite. I packed a few in a small basket to bring with me to the station in case today is the day he returns. My little Myung Sung, Bright Star, is running around the platform in her summer dress that I cut from an old hanbok — sun-yellow, the colour signifying safety and good luck. I have told her to be careful to avoid the American troops. They look like giants, and they are not friendly to us. I think they see us all as chinilpa, collaborators with the Japanese. Are they just new occupiers? I am glad the Japanese have finally left Korea, but what will become of us? Will the Americans make us change our names again, this time to American ones?

Thirty-five years ago, when I was just nine and Daejeon Station was still brand new, we crowded onto a train with hundreds of other families fleeing north to Manchuria to avoid the final Japanese annexation after five years of conflict. It was hot and my parents seemed angry and afraid. My brother’s little hand was clutched in mine, and I tried not to show him how scared I was while he stared up into my eyes. I had been put in charge of him while we got ready to go to a place I had never seen or heard of, for reasons I didn’t know or understand.

I knew my father didn’t want to go. He hated the Japanese and how they had been taking over his country. He seemed to think it was a stain on the character of Koreans to give in to them and he did not want to run away. My mother’s view was that family comes first and that staying meant danger and hardship. We left in the end, of course, but my parents’ fights were terrifying.

Twenty years later, dark clouds were gathering again, and I understood what my parents had been through when they decided to uproot our lives

and move to Manchuria. We had helped build a little corner of Korea in Yanbian Prefecture and for a time, things were good. We were many miles from home and had left behind a lot of what we knew, but in China we could still be Korean. I met my husband, Ji-tae, at university — a brilliant historian, whose family had also fled Seoul. We had our two sons in those Manchurian years — in 1927 and 1929 — and we hoped that we would live and raise our family in Yanbian in peace. We were happy then, for a while, with our healthy boys and Ji-tae now a professor at the university.

That happiness didn’t last.

By 1931 the Japanese war drums became too loud to ignore, and I was forced to persuade my husband that we couldn’t be in Manchuria when Japan came, as my mother had convinced my father all those years before. Eventually Ji-tae relented, even though things would be hard for him in Seoul; my parents were a different story.

If my father was stubborn about fleeing Seoul, he was unyielding about going back, knowing that he would have to embrace the Japanese occupiers we had fled. I didn’t see a choice; to be there during the invasion was too dangerous, and the Japanese were too powerful to resist. It was clear the Japanese were coming, and that when they came it would be terrible. It turned out to be even more savage than I imagined. Ji-tae and I took our sons to Seoul, where we had family and a place to stay, leaving my parents behind. We never saw them again.

We arrived back in Daejeon Station in 1931, on another hot August day, having avoided the shark’s teeth only to find ourselves in its belly. In the 20 years that we had been gone, Japan had been digesting Korea and reforming it in its own image.

In Manchuria we were Koreans; upon our return to Korea we had to pretend to be Japanese. Under Soshi-Kaimei, the Name Change Order, we were no longer the Cho family and became Yamamotos instead. In public, Sang became Akio, Chun was Matsu and Myung Sung, my Bright Star, my autumn surprise, born in Seoul, was Miyoko. We have tried and tried to hold on to our Korean names and ways at home, but it has been a time of terrible humiliation, especially for my husband, an educated man, a scholar, forced to be a labourer under Japanese rule. Japanese has been a struggle for us, though the children have learned it well, maybe too well now that we can hope to be Korean again. Will it last? I pray it will last.

In those years since our return, Japan has never stopped seeking to oppress all of Asia. Many Koreans were sent to Japan to toil, especially after Japan entered the international war in 1940. Girls and women were being taken away too, and I felt lucky that I was too old and Bright Star was too young. Wartime was hungry and hard, but for all those difficult years, we had each other.

And then, in 1944, we didn't. For two years the Japanese had threatened conscription and finally in December, they came for my boys and took them away. We saw them for the last time in rough Japanese uniforms, being pushed onto a troop train in Daejeon Station on a dark winter night, cold and frightened, shipped off to be soldiers of the nation that had driven us from our home twice. They were terrified on the night they left, mere boys – only 15 and 17 – sent away to face death on the side of their enemy. For almost two years I have shed salty tears, fearing for my little boys taken from me. With no news at all since the spring, I have felt lost, wrung dry, bereft.

But Chun, my second-born, arrived back in Daejeon a month ago, just two weeks after the surrender. He is no longer the happy boy he was, no longer has the light in his eyes that he did. Chun hardly speaks, and never about what happened to him during the 18 months that he was gone. The boys were separated at the front in China and Chun does not know where his brother was sent. I should be happier to have one boy home but being half-happy feels the same as being completely sad, a half-broken heart is still broken.

My husband Ji-tae has been gentle with me, but I know he fears the worst. I am not ready to give up – surely a mother would know if her son had died? In my heart I still believe he is alive. Would God be so unkind to me? It is hard to be sure, He has been so unkind to Korea already. Maybe I should stop coming to Daejeon, and care for the family I have left. But how can I stop, while my Sang is still lost?

The trains arrive in Daejeon Station at irregular intervals, some with cargo and relief supplies, some with desperate families fleeing devastation, some with more American soldiers to take over our streets. It is late now, the sunbeams horizontal through the high station windows. I will wait for one more train and then take Bright Star home and cook our family dinner. It will be meagre, as it has been for months, just rice and kimchi with a little tofu that I have made from our remaining soybeans. Maybe

tomorrow I will not come to the station, maybe Ji-tae is right.

The last train stops in front of us, steam hissing and brakes squealing as it slows into the station, with an acrid whiff of sulphurous coal smoke. The smoke clears and the doors clank open along the length of the train, emitting ragged refugees, burly American soldiers, and haggard Korean boys wearing the tattered remains of uniforms. As always, I scan their faces – hopeful at first, and then with a sinking heart. As I am about to turn away, one more boy, tall and thin, gets off the train. He looks around, his head turns towards me and our eyes meet.

It's Sang, home at last.