

Of Inhuman Bondage

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Han casually glanced at the framed photo hanging on the wall and was so astonished that for a moment he almost forgot to breathe. He could feel his heart beating wildly as he went nearer for a closer look. It reminded him of someone and he stood stunned and stupefied, failing to understand how there could be so much similarity between two persons belonging to two diametrically different nationalities!

The photograph, the half bust of a stern looking man with a slight smile on his lips promptly stared back at him. Beneath was imprinted:

Rob Young

Born: 2nd September 1938

Died: 14th March 2006

“Your breakfast is ready!” a radiant looking middle-aged woman, entering the room like a whiff of fresh air, cheerfully announced.

“Lisa, who is he?” Han decidedly ignored the information and enquired inquisitively.

“My father”, the British lady sighed, a pall of gloom shrouding the smile on her face. “He died few years ago in a car accident.”

“Oh! I am sorry!” he stated apologetically, but could not simultaneously help asking “E..rr, did any of your ancestors hail from the eastern part of the world? He looks quite different from you all!”

“Your breakfast is ready!” Lisa reminded him, dodging the question and slowly left the room.

She left, but the puzzle about Rob Young’s origin didn’t leave Han. It stayed with him while he went to his room to get ready for office. It went with him to office, stubbornly showing up again and again in everything that he did that entire day.

Han, a Japanese American, worked in a reputed software company in California. Born and brought up in US, when he first learnt that he was being deputed to Nanking in eastern China for a three-month long project, he was quite excited. He had heard about the place from his grandfather, one of the Japanese generals who had taken part in the assault on the city way back in 1937. *Sofu* (his grandfather) used to talk a lot about the exciting sights and exotic smells.

“Surrounded by mountains and hills on three sides, with the Yangtse River running through it and lots of lakes in the vicinity, Nanking is a very scenic city. And the cuisine is really tongue tickling! Remember to try the salted duck! Though less famous than its cousin the Peking duck, it is still very tasty as is most of the food in China. Also there you get such delicious wantons! Little chunks of finely ground pork wrapped inside paper-thin dumpling skin which literally melts in your mouth!”

But upon his arrival, Han had been pretty unimpressed by the city of Nanking and its surroundings. To begin with, the road leading to Nanking was lined with factories spewing nasty smoke out of tall

stacks. The famed Yangtze River, with dozens of dull-looking boats chugging up and down its waters, too looked murky and grey, resembling dirty soap water.

Initially, he was also quite intrigued by the Chinese way of striking a conversation which almost always started with "chi1 [fan4] le5 ma5? (Have you eaten today) instead of, "How are you?" as is customary in America. He began relating to it only after he was enlightened by his colleagues about the thousands of years of alternating plenty and penury that had woven a special attachment about food into the Chinese culture. In this country, food is looked upon as a privilege, not an entitlement and a meal is considered a celebration in itself. Unlike in America, where overdose and opulence is the order of the day and starving is considered some esoteric concept, here in China people in the apartment block just down the street might be starving. "Might be" here did not represent a remote possibility like in America.

Since then Han religiously ensured that he did not waste even a single morsel while he ate his meals with his hosts, Lisa and her family.

Everyday, during dinner, he noticed an old lady silently seated in the far corner of the hall. She never spoke or stirred, just vacantly stared at the ground beneath her or the blank wall on the opposite. He always found her in the same place, in the same posture and she was so still that at times her presence seemed like a statue. She was Lisa's grandmother and after learning of the Lisa's father tragic demise, Han had automatically assumed that the shock of her son's sudden death was the cause of her present state.

But Han's hypothesis was incorrect. Lisa's grandmother present state was linked to her turbulent past as Han learnt one day from Lisa. Decades ago, just before the assault on Nanking took place, she was a bubbly and beautiful teenager, happily oscillating between her just-happened engagement and impending marriage. She, a nurse working in a hospital, was returning home when the Japanese soldiers picked her up and carried her away. A day later, a Good Samaritan passer-by discovered her lying unconscious on the roadside and carried her to the hospital. But her miseries didn't end there. While recuperating in the hospital, she learnt that everyone in her house - her parents, her brothers and sisters and even her fiancé and his family- had been massacred by the Japanese soldiers in a matter of just half a day.

After being discharged from the hospital, as she had nowhere else to go to, the seventeen year old girl returned to an empty home full of painful memories of her loved ones. There, some months later Lisa's father was born. With the help and support of the neighbours who were still alive, she raised her son. He grew up, got married and once more the house reverberated with the carefree cackling of children. But Lisa's grandmother never got back her power of speech. The impact of the incident that had sabotaged her life, made her mute forever. She heard everything but spoke nothing, not even a single word, communicating only by gestures and with the passage of time, even the frequency of that mode of response too reduced drastically, till it was absolute zero.

Suddenly, the entire mystery about Rob Young's origin unfolded and a curtain went up before Han's eyes. He was able to decipher why his father and Lisa's father looked so similar, like long lost twins. But the truth was hard to take in and even harder to come to terms with.

A few days earlier Han had visited the Nanking Massacre Museum, initially out of mere curiosity than anything else. He was actually too much of a cynic to believe that a museum can impact people in any way other than a bit of nostalgia. But after entering the gate of the peaceful little compound, he discovered to his dismay that it was impossible to remain undisturbed. The visit turned out to be a revelation of sorts for till now he was only aware about the heroic war figures scored by his grandfather and his companions. He didn't have the slightest inkling about the horrible atrocities and the extent of pain that an entire generation had gone through. And he realized that during those six weeks, the 300,000 people in Nanking were not simply murdered. They were beheaded, burned, bayoneted, buried alive, or disembowelled. It's not just that they died – it was how they died. The savagery of the killing was as appalling as its scale.

Han generally loved walking down the streets in downtown Nanking, amidst hundreds of delicious smells of freshly cooked foods. He loved to stand in front of the fruit vendors, who stocked varieties of fruits and allowed all of them to ripen in the natural way, each taking its own sweet time. From the site always emanated a pleasantly sweet aroma, so refreshingly different from the stale grocery store smell encountered in America. But that day after coming out of the Museum, Han felt curiously empty-seeing nothing and smelling nothing.

But even till then, the Nanking incident though undeniably unfortunate, was just a part of history. But once he realized that it had a close connection with his present, intricately involving someone he had respected and looked up to all his life, he just could not remain a mute spectator any longer. He was forced to review everything afresh in a new light. And he was forced to think about his grandfather in a way he had never thought of before.

After Nanking, his grandfather had subsequently migrated to America with his family, where, during the Second World War, after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, persons of Japanese ancestry were suddenly evacuated by the government from their homes to inland relocation camps. These people, who also included his grandfather, were forced to leave their homes and belongings at a very short notice and live in crowded and unsanitary conditions in the camps. It was only in 1945, when Allied victory seemed certain, that the detainees were allowed to return to rebuild their shattered lives. But the anticlimax was that there was absolutely nothing left on which to make a fresh start. Everything which had once been theirs had just evaporated.

But *sofu* was a spirited man and not the one to take things lying down. He mobilized the masses to launch a relentless crusade for redressing the wrongs. He was a satisfied soul only in 1988, when the government apologized to the Japanese Americans for the wartime mistreatment and gave each surviving internee a compensation of \$20,000. Han's grandfather often used to say that though no

action was adequate to write off the enormous wrongs of the past, a meaningful attempt to redress and an acknowledgement of the past errors to help the victims attain a sort of closure.

But shouldn't that logic apply in the case of Lisa's grandmother too? Should *sofu* not acknowledge and apologize for his mistake and attempt to compensate the person whose life had been sabotaged by his deliberate inhuman act? But leave alone the issue of paying compensation; he would probably be adamant to even admit his wrongdoing. The same man, who had cried for the cause of justice in a foreign land, had not uttered a single word of regret for the heinous war crimes committed by him and his country men in Nanking. To him and others of his generation, whatever happened in Nanking was something to be proud of, not something to be ashamed of!

Because of the detention in American camps, *sofu* had undoubtedly undergone a lot of mental agony and material loss but was it in any way comparable to the trauma that he had inflicted upon an innocent young girl? To him, at that moment, she was perhaps nothing more than a faceless object of desire, to be enjoyed and tossed away thoughtlessly, someone devoid of any emotions or feelings! But later in his life, had he ever wondered what happened to the young British girl he had violated and tortured? Did he ever realize the extent of his wrongs and regret or repent for his misdeed?

Han wondered, as he stared at the human fossil before him. For seven decades she had led a stunned existence, feelings bottled up inside her so tightly that they had turned to stone, making her just a living mummy going through the motions of life mindlessly.

All these years, *Sofu* had remained indifferent to the result of his actions. But Han could not remain so. It was an injustice committed by one of his kin and he owed the unwritten responsibility of rectifying it as best as he could, though he knew it would mean stirring up a hornet's nest and invoking the extreme displeasure of his near and dear ones. But Han was unperturbed. Lisa's grandmother hadn't been able to live peacefully; at least she deserved to die in peace, which stood a chance if and only if the wrong doer himself came and apologized. He wouldn't be able to reverse what had happened, but at least his humble admission and tears of repentance might be able to soften those stubborn stones.

"Dear *Sofu*," Han started to write, "Just got back from a walk. The weather was sunny and warm, and as I trudged along a beautiful street lined with cherry blossoms and aged Wutong trees, I was remembering what you often said – that only an acceptance and understanding of the past wrongs can create a better future for mankind....."