Ben Woestenburg

Saint Freda

paperbytes

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Saint Freda

During the Korean war, I thought it might be better for my career if I worked as a photojournalist at the front; it would be easier than being a combat soldier. Thinking along these lines – and with no small degree of naivety – I hoped to evade the war completely. That I did this purposely, I say with a great amount of shame and regret, feeling as much a coward now as I felt then. I was motivated by selfishness: if I took my fate into my own hands, I'd assure myself of a position with a reputable newspaper Stateside when I got back. I'd like to believe I went into the job with my eyes wide open, but I know I didn't, because I still found myself confronting my own demons and hidden fears, witnessing horrors I'm sure everyone else faced under those more than strange circumstances.

I was hired by a small Ohio newspaper, whose editors allowed me to work as a freelancer while still in their pay, which meant I was starving more than I was eating. I don't remember how I managed to talk my way into a job I was obviously unqualified for; I'd like to think it was the blustering self-confidence I exhibited during that first job interview. But now, of course, with the benefit of hindsight I'm thinking – perhaps unjustly, or with some hint of conceit – that it was the ready self-assuredness of my youth, rather than the outrageous lies on my résumé. It doesn't matter. I was hired and shipped off to Korea within the month.

I was a recent graduate of the city's local community college, and I wonder what my editors were thinking of when they hired me. I was always afraid I'd receive a telegram telling me I was fired for not sending anything back the editors could use. As a result, I'd grab my cameras once a week and take pictures of General McArthur, his staff, and various other people and sights in the city – as well as the

peasants' constant struggle to live in the outlying districts – all of whom seemed to live their lives as if they were untouched by the horrible events that surrounded us.

I went to Korea on a ruse, though, because I had every intention of completing the great American novel I was working on at the time – the same novel every other budding young author in the country was working on. I don't know why I thought writing it in Korea would help me – but I wanted to be the next Norman Mailer, Herman Wouk, or James Michener, (taking my inspiration from the examples they set), which meant I spent more time working on my novel than I did covering the war. Oh, I sent stories and pictures back home once or twice a month, but I only worked on them for two or three days – I think it was evident in the quality of work I sent home – because I was using my time to hammer at the novel I was certain would bring me a Pulitzer. Those were the dreams and enchantments I held onto in my youth; where the impracticable visions I had of war

seemed more like reckless idealism – something all young boys hold onto and carry into their adolescence – until the thought of going to war is a Romantic adventure – (picture Lord Byron here going off to fight the Turks and trying to free Greece from tyranny) – as if there could be glory or honour in this age of automatic weaponry.

In Korea during the fifties – or, at least, from what I remember about it – I mistrusted everyone. I couldn't look at another man without thinking he was waiting to stab me in the back the moment I rounded the next corner. I wondered if every woman I met was a whore wanting to take me for everything I had, or else some civilian willing to open her heart and take me into her home. But I loved Korea and everything about it; I loved the simplicity of the people, the scenery, the distinct countryside where it seemed I could slip back into the nineteenth century, back to a better day, a simpler time for all of us – or maybe it was just my idea of what I thought it should be like: quaint, antiquated, and charming?

I wasn't the first Westerner in the Orient who wanted to lose himself in the midst of a foreign culture, and certainly not the first to let philosophy and enlightenment wash over me and show me there were more important things in life than dealing with deadlines and trying to make ends meet. The simplicity of that time was a reflection of my hectic lifestyle – my need for a place to call home, where I could hide from the world without answering questions – and I suppose that's why I was thinking I could complete a book at twenty-three. I knew I'd have to live a full life before I could write about it, and what better way to understand life than as the silent witness to war? I remember my Dad telling me it was the worst idea I could have come up with, and knowing that he fought in the First World War, surviving the trenches, didn't distract me in the least; that was something he had to do. I was looking for different answers.

I thought Rudi was the answer I was looking for; I thought he was a man not unlike myself. He first came to the Orient after the Great

War – a more innocent time when people like my father actually believed they'd fought "the War to end all Wars"; a time when a generation tried to reconnect with what it had lost – the youth it threw away without a second thought – thinking as the youth of the day always thinks: This will be over before we even get started. I suppose I was just as guilty as my father's generation for thinking I could remain untouched throughout the whole thing – never thinking it could happen to me; but nobody can go through something as horrific as a war and not be touched by it in some way.

I MET RUDI in a bar somewhere in Seoul, in one of those small, out-of-the-way places none of my friends went to because it was said to be tied in with the drug trade, mixed up with that mysterious triangle of Hong Kong Triads, New York city mobsters, and Parisian gangsters. I thought, if I want to write an article for a magazine, what better story could I tell than the dark side of army life everyone here was trying to

hide from the folks back home? I first noticed Rudi because he was a Westerner like myself, and one tends to hold onto people like that out there; it's as if there's an understanding, an awareness that's almost shared – as much as it's implied – with something as innocent as a glance. Rudi had the look of a shell-shocked veteran. His eyes, two pinholes with dark circles underneath, were red-rimmed and sunk deep into their sockets; they stared at me from under half-closed lids, as if into nothingness most of the time, as if at a movie only he could see.

He was sixty, he said, but I thought he looked more like seventy, and when he spoke, I realized I was probably closer to the truth than he was. His head was covered with a thick mat of coarse white hair, the same sort of hair my mother had at that age; his skin hung loose on his arms, and his face was a network of wrinkles burned nut-brown by the tropical sun. The grey hairs on his chest were poking out through the missing buttons of his torn white shirt, which was sweat-stained and unwashed. The left sleeve was partially rolled up on his forearm, and he had a

battered package of cigarettes hanging – almost balancing – in a torn breast pocket along with a pen, which seemed to hold the cigarettes in place. His mustache was thin, greying, and well trimmed but stained yellow from nicotine. His teeth were black and broken, which made the skin of his face hang loose, like that of an emaciated peasant.

His parents had died on the Titanic when he was fifteen. They left a sizable inheritance behind, but it was nothing extravagant. He and his brothers were to continue with their educations, but not in the private schools of Berlin where they'd been for as long as he could remember; they'd have to go back to Vienna. They would live under the guardianship of a cousin, an Englishman named George, an international banker who helped turn their modest inheritance into something more substantial. Rudi spoke of the man with devotion, and I could see there was a deep respect for the man, as much as there was love – insofar as a man like Rudi can express such sentiments.

When the Great War broke out, Rudi was already in his first year at

medical school. He liked university life, he said, but two years later, he enlisted. Because of his medical training, he went to a field hospital as an ambulance driver. He was tossed into a maelstrom, he said; it was like living in a world gone mad. He was there – at the front – for almost two years, he added, two years of hell: he would sleep only three or four hours a night for a time, and then weeks would pass when nothing happened, so that a man could be lulled into thinking the world was at peace. Things went differently on the Italian Front, he said, reaching into his breast pocket with shaking hands to pull out a cigarette. When he said he saw things a man shouldn't see, I agreed, remembering my own short encounter with the war here, and how I hadn't been to the front since. A man can lose touch with himself as easily as he can with God, and I wondered if that was what happened to him.

Still, he was an interesting man, and I saw a story in him I thought I might be able to sell to a magazine somewhere, and told him as much. I wondered how a man who lived in Vienna and was educated

in the best schools in Berlin could lose himself to such a degree that he ended up here, in this little bar in Korea? He said the war had destroyed a lot more than the old Empires of Europe by allowing the likes of Hitler, Mussolini, Lenin, and Stalin onto the world stage; his brothers had died because of it. His youngest brother died of the Spanish Flu, and his other brother somewhere in the Alps. George died on the border, shot as a British spy. There was nothing to go back to, he said with a shrug that was almost an apology. It was easy letting himself get lost, he added; that was the easiest thing he'd ever done in his life. He boarded the first available steamer to the South Pacific, and never looked back. He'd come across a dead German soldier and taken the man's papers, giving up his past, his name, and his life for a life less ordinary; an uncertain future hopping among South Pacific islands picking up languages and dialects. He told me he spoke four languages fluently and a dozen different dialects with some smattering of success. He said it to me evenly, not like a man bragging about his accomplishments and

hoping for praise but like a man telling you he did what he did in order to survive: simply, honestly, humbly. He made his way out to the Philippines, he said, and from there, on to Hong Kong; it was inevitable, he said, that he should end up in China. "But how did you end up here? In Korea?" I asked.

He looked at me through his half closed eyes and smiled, scratching at his cheek slowly, lazily – which, if I'd been older and knew more about life, would have told me what sort of a man he was.

"I'd need a drink to tell you that story," he said with a smile. He looked at me wistfully through the bottom of his beer glass as he stubbed out the remains of his cigarette. I quickly ordered him another drink.

"There are times when a man has to have a drink before he can talk," he said with another smile.

It was a weak smile. I saw a mournful expression pass fleetingly across his face. Then he crossed his arms, pushing his sleeves back as he

leaned on the dirty table and looked at me seriously

"You'd have to go back to Manchuria, in 1937," he said when the beer was placed unceremoniously on the table in front of us. I looked up at the waiter – a man in a stained apron who affected a smile and left as quickly as he could, bowing and apologizing to me, making a mockery of his own ill manners. I told myself it wasn't worth the effort to argue with the man.

"I saw a lot of things travelling through the islands and living among the people there – things that would have shocked me in my previous life. I left Hong Kong for the Chinese mainland some time in 1932. I spent a year chasing the Dragon in and around Kowloon – you know what that means, don't you, chasing the Dragon?" he asked, nodding and smiling when he saw that I did.

"I was addicted to the pipe," he said after a moment. I could understand that all too well, I told him, remembering a few friends who'd gotten lost in their own search for the Dragon. "I still haven't beaten it,"

he said matter of factly. "I've just changed venues," he added.

I looked down and saw the bruises and scars of needle marks traced along the inside of his left arm – a dark, thick line, black and filthy. He looked at me knowingly, as if to forgive me for thinking the less of him. He shrugged a shoulder, lazily, reached up to scratch at his cheek again and take a drink, looking off into nothingness as he struggled to pull another cigarette out of his battered package. I suppose he was waiting for me to come to terms with whatever prejudices he felt I might have had.

"Let's just say that I ended up in the employ of a local warlord in Manchuria, some time around 1937," he said as he lit the cigarette, the smoke floating lazily around him – and for a moment I pictured him sucking on a pipe, smiling through another opium dream.

"It was at the time of Japanese expansion – when they were reaching out and trying to control everything they could: China, Korea, the South Pacific – everything. And though they hadn't touched our

little part of the world yet, they would soon enough. In fact, things had already been put into motion that would tax my belief in everything I thought I knew, or understood. I'd question my own sanity about it before too long, telling myself it wasn't possible, these things couldn't be happening the way it seemed they were. It's like the first time you make contact with God – not talking to God yourself," he added quickly, wagging his cigarette in front of me, "but perhaps there's someone you see, or recognize, or even know; something – someone – who has something about them you can't explain any other way than by saying that it comes from God.

"It's a difficult thing for anyone to admit to in this day and age. Religion, I mean. It's like saying you've always believed in God just because you went to church; after all, we celebrated the Saints' Days when they came around, and we put our pennies in the poor box – but we never really believed, did we? Not people like you and me?" He said it with the self-assurance of a man who probably hasn't questioned the

idea of God for more than thirty years; I told myself it was probably lost somewhere inside the caverns of his poisoned brain , and I wondered if this was why he hid himself inside his dirty habit. I doubted a man who lived that way could even ponder the existence of God. I told myself that I knew his story already; his god was the poppy, the last of the Mystery cults, and he celebrated the ancient rites to his god with the ultimate sacrifice – his own addiction. That was the beginning and the end of this story – there could be nothing more for a man like him.

"It didn't matter if I was sincere with my prayers or not," he went on; "religion was always a solemn occasion in the Empire – something celebrated by the State as a holiday because the Emperor was a devout Catholic. Nothing else mattered. I simply went to church because everyone else did," he added with a laugh – short, crisp, sardonic. "You couldn't tell me – as a man who'd lost his parents in one of the greatest maritime disasters of all time – that praying for them

would've helped to bring them back, or saved their condemned souls. Later, when we found out my father was an embezzler, George told us if they'd actually landed in America, he doubted if they would've bothered coming back. 'They would've sent for you boys,' he told us quickly – and we believed him because we wanted to – even as he tried convincing us that he would've made certain we were reunited. But I knew it was all a lie. Was I supposed to pray for their souls now that they were dead and condemned as sinners? I can tell you right now, though, I would've counted it among one of life's blessings if they had survived, and we lived in America. My life might've turned out differently," he added with a slow nod as he absently scratched at his cheek, taking another drink. Suddenly he remembered his cigarette, and dropped it on the floor.

"My being here isn't so much about me, as it is Freda," he said after a moment. He seemed to stare out into nothingness, at the lights above

us as he said it – and then he turned to look at me with his dark, pinpoint eyes, as if he was trying to determine whether or not I would believe anything he said.

"I think – just like everyone else did at the time – that I wanted to believe in her," he smiled. "We needed to. She was our Joan of Arc in a way – and you know what happened to her," he added. "I don't know if Freda heard voices, had visions, or anything as fanciful as that; but I think she must've seen something. I'd like to think a person doesn't do what she did and not see something.

"They came into the compound with the rest of the refugees. They'd been on the road for at least a day or two – there were five of them – coming in from some place I'd never even heard of before. It was one of those isolated places that used to be a Buddhist monastery before the missionaries took it over – one of those places made up of mud, brick, and wood, you know the type I mean, with huge timbered walls meant to keep invaders and bandits out five-hundred years ago, and

abandoned for the last fifty years. It never stood a chance against the Japanese. But they never knew it was the Japanese army because they were isolated, like I said, and had no contact with the outside world except for those few times a year when they crossed the valley to the neighbouring village – to pick up seeds and what not, for next year's crops. That's the only thing that saved them from the same fate that befell the others.

"I remember talking to Su-mei and Lin later – he was one of those hot-headed young men who thinks the answer to everything is to fight – and they said they were sent out by Alex's father to buy seeds. The rats had gotten into the storage shed, Su-mei said, and if they didn't find seeds somewhere soon, it would be a difficult year for them.

"I never paid any attention to them when they first came in; they were just another rag-tag collection of refugees seeking shelter with the Warlord. I'd see them when the Warlord did. They'd picked up a cart along the way, though, loading it up with foodstuffs and bedding, and

they were willing to share it with everyone – in fact, that was the only reason the guards let them in. Our own food supplies were running low. Lin told me they came across a village on their way in, and everyone in it was dead, but I'm getting ahead of myself here.

"It was Alex who intrigued me. He was a white man like myself. Later, when I asked him what happened, when he was talking to the Warlord, he looked at me like I was the Devil's spawn – like I was an ogre out of some children's book – or the enemy, his own personal enemy – and I was here just to defile his Puritan's piss-ass piousness with the stench of my breath, the sound of my voice, and the double meaning of my words. I tried to take into consideration the fact that he'd been through a great deal – hell, they all had – you could see that from the moment he levelled his eyes at me. They were deep-set eyes, penetrating, with a blue colour as soft as cobalt but an intensity as hard as coal. He came across with the attitude of a single-minded young man, determined and stubborn, with an inflexibility you could see in the depth of those eyes and

the tightness of his clenched jaw, too. But now that they'd reached their goal and everything was out of his hands, he seemed more than willing to take credit for having brought them to safety of sorts, even though you could see it on him – and he wore it like a bad shirt – that he thought he was at an impasse. He quoted long passages from the Bible to us, citing them all by chapter and verse, and speaking for all the world like he was full of the fire and brimstone Lin and Su-mei said his father had; as if his words could protect him from the madness about him. I went to my quarters afterwards and looked up some of the passages he quoted – at least as many as I could recall – in an old battered copy I'd brought with me from Vienna all those years ago. I've memorized some of the better ones over the years. I still know them – or parts of them," he said with a smile, "but I've probably forgotten more than I ever knew, since I lost the book years ago. Or did I throw it out in guilt?" he asked himself carefully.

"It doesn't matter. Lin told me that Alex wasn't like that before – all that fire and brimstone stuff, I mean – not until they found what they

did when they eventually made it back to the mission. Su-mei agreed with him, nodding her head and speaking up quickly. They said Alex was the last person they'd have expected it from. They said if there was anyone who'd be taking over from his father, they certainly never thought it would be Alex. He had a younger brother – his mother died giving birth to him, Su-mei said – and Alex never stopped blaming his father for it because there was no one at the mission to help her when things went wrong. I suppose he blamed his brother for her death just as much as he did his father; people have a tendency to do that, I hear.

"When they left the mission to get seeds that morning, it was with that same sense of adventure that punctuates the young at heart – at least that's the feeling I had from everything Lin told me – but when they returned, it was to tragedy; modern warfare came to invade their idyllic existence. I asked him to tell me what happened, but he avoided the issue; perhaps he thought by not talking about it, the nightmare would go away?

"Su-mei said they thought it was thunder when they first heard it. Alex said it had to be close, but there was no lightning – at least, not like any lightning they'd ever seen before. There were flashes in the distance, but there was no rain, and there were no storm clouds overhead. When they saw smoke drifting lazily into the sky, they were certain the mission had been struck – I suppose that sort of thing happens all the time out there – and they made their way up the goat trail, tripping in potholes, and falling over each other in their hurry to reach the top.

"'Alex and Freda were there first', Su-mei said. I watched Lin swallowing hard as Su-mei struggled for the right words. He was looking at me closely, trying to determine if I could possibly understand how they both felt.

"Lin was a big boy, with a fighter's body to match his temperament. His eyebrows were delicately arched most of the time, but he had a habit of knitting his brows so that they bunched up into a tight

knot and his eyes grew narrower. I could see that he wanted revenge, but I could also see that it went against everything he'd been taught, and it was confusing to him – like he was fighting it inside his mind – or his heart – and it was twisting him apart. I suppose he thought Alex would feel the same way he did, but when he saw Alex quoting Biblical texts on his knees beside Freda, he didn't know what to do. Su-mei said it was as if Alex's father had invaded his son's mind and taken him over, body and soul.

"'It was a horrible find,' he said to me at last. As soon as they crested the hill, they saw Alex on his knees beside Freda. Alex was weeping, holding on to her – perhaps thinking he could draw some of his strength from her – but it was like she didn't even know he was there. She was praying fervently, zealously – like neither of them had seen her before; the tears were running down her face, and her tiny body was racked by great, heaving sobs that looked as if they were exhausting her. Lin said he could remember hearing the mission bell ringing

out and echoing across the valley with a doleful melody. I suppose falling bits of timber were hitting it as the bell tower burned, because before too long, he said, it toppled over and fell in on itself, tumbling across the yard until it came to rest up against the wall, the echo of its lyric lost in the roar of the fire. He said that hearing it seemed to bring him out of his trance, and when he looked up, he saw the figure of Alex's father nailed to the mission wall. The old man's naked body had been slashed so severely that the flesh hung off it like that of a partially skinned animal – he looked as if he'd been flayed alive, like one of the martyred saints.

"The blood ran down his arms and thighs in thin crimson stripes, like crimson spider webs, Su-mei said, and his limp head lay to one side; but his eyes were open – starlng out into the emptiness in front of him – and his lips were moving, muttering, like he was praying to himself. He was alive! They fell to their knees in front of the man, and Lin says he looked over at Freda murmuring constantly. Alex's

father seemed to find strength from somewhere deep inside himself – as if God had raised him up and he was looking out at the fields of Heaven in front of him – and he lifted his head, looking out over the small group below him, blessing them with his last words. Lin said he thought Freda must have gotten too close to the old man, because her face was covered in blood. It was all over her hands, he said, and her smock; even her feet were wet with blood. Suddenly though, unexpectedly, the wall fell back on itself and an explosion of sparks danced and swirled on the billowing clouds of smoke, and they could see that everyone else inside the mission was dead. They'd been laid out in the centre of the courtyard: men, women and children – as if they had been put on display, Su-mei said. They had bullet holes in their heads, and it looked as if most of the women had been raped – young, old, indifferent, it didn't matter – and some of the children had been defiled as well. They all entered the mission together – except Freda – looking at the destruction. It meant more to them

than any of them understood; it was the only home they'd ever known. The doors were blown in off the hinges, and Lin said he thought that they had been struck by lightning. I knew as soon as he told me that it was the cannons, but I'd learn about that soon enough.

"Of the five of them, Su-mei said, Wei was the youngest. I confess, I never did get the chance to know him as well as I could have during that time – or should have. But at fourteen, Su-mei said, it was the first time he'd even been permitted to leave the mission and make the trip down to the village. Lin said Wei was excited about sleeping out overnight – just like any other boy would be, I suppose-but he was also quick to say the boy didn't handle it well. He kept them all up for most of the night, Lin said, frightened at every sound he heard. He was homesick, Su-mei was quick to point out – even though the mission was just over the top of the trees. Lin said Wei was worried about his younger brothers. He said Su-mei went to him and held him in her arms, rocking him, until he fell asleep. She was like that,

he said, like a mother hen protecting her brood. You see, Lin and Su-mei were born at the mission – or came to it when they were still young – but he said Wei and his brothers had only been there three or four years. I suppose it was hard for him to share the sounds of the night with the dreams he had as well.

"Lin said Wei was hysterical when they entered the mission compound. He began sorting through the dead, pulling at them in a desperate search for his brothers; he was unconcerned about the blood covering his body, and detached from everything he saw, or touched. Alex was just as bad. Lin said that, of the five of them, only he and Su-mei were able to look beyond the tragedy and think about what had to be done. Lin was sure it was bandits – who else could it be except a rival of the Warlord's? It was a deliberate declaration of war thrown into the face of Feng-shih, Su-mei added. He said they both understood they'd have to make the trip out to the Warlord; it was the only way they'd be able to avenge the massacre, Lin said, dealing

from strength. He told Alex as much. Being the oldest, Alex was supposed to be responsible. He was nineteen, Lin said; Freda was seventeen, and both he and Su-mei were sixteen. But Alex was in no condition to do anything. He was looking for his brother's body as eagerly as Wei. There were forty-seven bodies to look through; forty-seven individual lives they'd all shared a part of theirs with – but Alex and Wei wanted the only common connections they had to themselves, and wouldn't rest until they found them. Lin said Alex kept quoting scriptures to himself, but the tears were running down his face so fast, and the emotion was draining out of him with so much intensity, that he'd have to sit among the dead bodies trying to collect himself.

"Su-mei went to help Wei, while Lin went with Alex, and together the four of them found the bodies. Lin said Freda was on her knees the entire time – even when they began to dig the mass grave – praying. Before they fell asleep, Su-mei told him to go out and get her. He said she hadn't even bothered to wipe the blood off her face, that it

had dried in her hair and down the length of her face and neck. Sumei cleaned her up the best she could, and then she lay down with Wei and they went to sleep.

"I need another drink," Rudi said at last, and I agreed.

I called the waiter over and ordered another round, trying to imagine the grizzly find and how I would have reacted to it. They were young – too young perhaps – but tragedy doesn't seem to take age into consideration, does it? I wasn't so far removed, as far as my own age was concerned, that I couldn't understand how they would have felt. But trying to understand one person's loss is difficult if you haven't suffered the loss of a close friend, or parent yourself; I hadn't. I was an innocent as far as that went, and it would be years before I could fully comprehend what the old man was telling me. At the time it was just a story; something that grew from a simple magazine article about Rudi, the seventy-year-old addict, into part of a novel I'd never complete. I'd carry it

around with me for thirty years before I felt I could do it any justice.

The waiter came back with our beers and put them on the table, saying something to Rudi that I didn't understand. The old man nodded slowly, thanking the man, and then he stood up. He told me he'd be right back and picked up a small canvas bag he had beside his chair and went out to the back room. I could hear him talking to someone – it sounded more like arguing – their voices getting louder, and then a door slammed and everything was quiet. I felt uncomfortable; I suspected the old man was probably trying to buy heroin to keep himself functioning for one more day, and I didn't know how I was supposed to react to that. I decided the best thing for me to do would be to ignore it. I could hear a radio somewhere in the kitchen, sounding tinny and not quite on the station, and the whir of a fan with a broken blade somewhere just as far off. I watched a fly bumping up against a dirty window pane.

Rudi came back fifteen minutes later. His thick white hair was brushed back just as though he'd run his hands under the tap and

dried them on his hair. He seemed to be standing straighter, as if he had found something that made him feel younger, and look younger – and I suppose in his own mind he had – though he still looked like the same pathetic junkie to me. There was a distinctive odour about him, however, sickly sweet, like rose water, and it seemed to ooze out of his pores as he sat down and placed his bag on the floor, kicking it under his chair. I looked at his arm as he leaned over and saw the unmistakable redness of his latest puncture wound.

"It's disgusting, isn't it?" he asked me when he sat down and took a short sip of his beer. I thought it might be better for me if I didn't say anything, and he went on. "I need it to make it through the day. Every day," he added. "I used to use it to hide from life, now I need it to live my life," he said with a slow shake of his head. "It's strange how life can do that to you," he added as he fished for a cigarette.

"I'm not here to judge you," I said slowly.

"Judge me?" he said with a smile as he scratched at what I thought

must be a permanent itch on his cheek. He pulled a cigarette out of the broken package with a precision I never would have expected from him half an hour earlier. "Do you think a man willingly does this to himself?" he asked me. "Do you think I woke up one morning and said to myself: 'I think I'll become a heroin addict?' It's all part of the story of how I got here, and it goes back to that time in Manchuria."

"You mean with Lin?" I asked.

"Freda," he corrected me. "This story's about her. She's the only one that matters," he added as he took another sip of his beer and closed his eyes slowly, putting the cigarette between his lips as he searched the table for a match.

"Then tell me what happened," I said, sitting back in my chair.

He smiled, looking at me through half-closed lids as he spoke to me slowly, precisely – as if he was sitting somewhere else, and his body was the vessel he used to take him there. He lit the cigarette slowly, deliberately, and sat back, scratching at his cheek slowly.

"They made their way across the valley and into the hills, keeping off the main roads and sticking to the trails the peasants had been using in those same parts for centuries. They didn't want to come across the bandits, Lin said, and it was a quiet trek. No one was talking. Alex led the way once he finally agreed that going to the Warlord was their only chance. He didn't know the way any better than anyone else, but it helped him to keep his mind off everything that'd happened in the last twenty-four hours. Lin followed behind at a distance; he didn't want to have to face Alex any more than he had to, and he certainly didn't want to have to look at Wei. Su-mei and Freda were talking with Wei, trying to console him. Alex walked alone. Lin said Freda was herself again. She had no recollection of the day before; nothing at all. She only remembered a part of the morning, she said, hearing the guns – the thunder, she called it – and seeing the smoke; but after that … nothing. I suppose it was all for the best.

"They had little or no food, Lin said, and as the day wore on they

were getting hungry, but he says he tried to be stoical about it, and not complain. Freda kept saying that God would provide for them, and he did in his own little ways. They came across wild berries and fruit – and then they stumbled on an orchard in the middle of the trail, with a stream of fresh water that broke across the rocks, coming out of the mountains somewhere to the north. It was strikingly beautiful, Sumei said, with rich, verdant grasses and weeping willows swaying in the gentle breeze.

There was the gentle hum of insects and a full chorus of unseen birds – an idyllic setting resplendent with the natural beauty of God's sylvan handiwork, she said – or something like that. I've always imagined it like that, too; like a painting you've seen, but can't remember the name of – like a tree-lined path paved with apple blossoms in the Spring.

"It was short-lived however. The orchard belonged to a small village they found on the other side of a clearing. It'd been destroyed. The bodies were lying in front of the huts, some of them naked, others

burned; all of them dead. Lin said it was as if the world had come to a sudden end, and they were the only survivors. They did what they could for the dead, and cleaned out one of the huts where they spent the night. Lin said that night Freda walked through the village alone, and he found her some hours later in a small hut after Su-mei told him to go out and look for her. She was kneeling in front of a broken crucifix, her hands covered in blood, and her face too. He thought the blood was from moving the bodies; she said she didn't know where it came from. He thought nothing of it, and told her that it might be safer if she came back to the hut and slept there for the night. She let out a sigh and stood up. She seemed different, he said; he noticed there was something about her that had changed in the course of the last twenty-four hours, but he dismissed the thought as quickly as it came to him, because he assumed they'd all changed in one way or another. He only had to look at Alex for confirmation of that, I suppose. They found what little food there was left, and

packed whatever they could onto a cart they pulled the rest of the way: Lin pulling, with Wei, Su-mei, and Freda pushing. Alex was still walking in front.

"They set out for the Warlord's palace, Lin said; I had to smile at the idea of that modest compound being considered a palace. It was large enough, but with all the refugees who'd been coming in over the course of the last week, it was looking smaller – crowded, cluttered, and in total disarray – with a cloud of blue smoke that hung in the air constantly – choking in its thickness, and stifling too – all from the cooking fires that were burning daily. There was a babble of voices that kept up a constant harangue as neighbour fought with neighbour; the closeness and cramped quarters too much for some of them to accept; that and the fact that they'd either lost everything, or left it all behind – all of them. There were over three-hundred families that showed up seeking protection. They were let in reluctantly, and because there were so many people now, food was becoming the single most important issue to all of us.

"Lin said the fact that they had their own food was the only reason they were let in at all – but I already said that.

"As I said before, I saw them when they arrived, but I didn't pay any attention to them. I knew I'd see them soon enough; the Warlord insisted on seeing at least one person who represented the new arrivals, hoping to collect whatever information he could from them. Most of what we learned was of little use; the news was usually two or three days old. From what we'd gathered so far, we knew it was a small company of soldiers – no more than three-hundred men – but they had at least two, possibly three cannons, as well as armoured vehicles and trucks to pull them. We knew it was only a matter of time before they found us.

"Do you know anything about China? The China of twenty or twenty-five years ago?" he asked me casually, reaching up to scratch his cheek again.

I shook my head slowly, reluctantly, somewhat hesitantly, and wondered how I could call myself a war correspondent when I didn't know

anything about the causes and effects of the war I was supposed to be reporting. Rudi simply nodded as if he understood, or perhaps he expected that sort of an answer – saying something along the lines that it was always like that; nobody ever bothered trying to understand China, and now they'd lost it to the Chinese. I didn't understand what he meant at the time – and I don't doubt for a moment that he knew I didn't either – but he went on anyway.

"Feng-shih lived in luxurious, opulent splendour – as befit a Warlord of his stature," Rudi said, with a slight smile. I assumed that this was an aside to himself: his voice tinged with irony and his smile a contemptuous sneer; in those eyes, peeking out from the half-closed lids, the laughter seemed to dance.

"He was sixty-three years old when I first met him, and though he'd inherited his position from his father, he'd held onto it with an iron will and dogged tenacity – no, a determination – for more than forty-five years. In his lifetime, he'd survived famine, flood, invasion, petty wars

and outright rebellion; he saw the collapse of the mandarins, the rise and fall of the Boxers, and the disintegration of the Manchus – the last of the great dynasties – and all of it, a result of the Tai-ping rebellion his father took part in before Feng-shih was even born. And who says the sins of the father aren't visited on the sons?" he asked with a slow smile. I thought perhaps he was thinking of his own life, and the sins of h1s own parents, rather than the Warlord's.

"Feng-shih once stood with Chiang Kai-shek, supporting the Nationalist Party and his army – all the while knowing Chiang Kai-shek was eager to overthrow the Warlords and establish a new central government. Feng-shih believed Manchuria couldn't survive without the power of the Warlords, but he also knew it was easier to stand with Chiang rather than against him – or at least until he didn't need him any more. A Warlord had to understand patience as much as he did party politics, and Feng-shih couldn't be faulted for not understanding one or the other.

"Feng-shih was a shrewd politician when it came to making alliances and backing the right party; he was always three steps ahead of his enemies. He once even supported Feng Yu-hsiang – have you ever heard of him? He was called the Christian General because he forced his troops to convert to Protestantism, or at least his version of it." He laughed lightly. "Feng-shih called him 'General Christian', as if it was his name. He also supported Yen Hsi-shan as well, another petty Warlord, only a little more ambitious as far as his plans for China went: He wanted to put himself in place of the fallen Manchu dynasty. He wanted it all. Well, these two men formed an alliance and marched on Peking – even holding it for a short time, too – until Chang Tso-lin, yet another local Warlord (they do seem to come out of the woodwork, don't they?) – defeated both of them and ran them out of Peking. That was way back in 1924 – ancient history as far as you're concerned. When they both tried to occupy Peking again in 1928, Feng-shih stood with them this time. He sent over fifty thousand troops with weapons – you know, can-

nons and that sort of thing? – but – and I don't know if either one of them knew about it or not, or even cared by that time – Feng-shih was one of the principal supporters of Chang Tso-lin back in '24. Politics makes for strange bedfellows they say, and looking at Feng-shih's career," he said with a slow shake of his head, "I can understand why.

"He backed the Communists when it suited him, and betrayed them just as quickly. When Chiang Kai-shek broke away with the Kuomintang – that was what they called the Nationalist Party – but when he broke away because he said the army was full of Communists and left-wing elements, he essentially turned his back on the Russian support that ultimately led to his downfall. So Feng-shih turned to the Russians for aid, claiming Chiang Kai-shek betrayed him as well. He needed guns, he said, because he knew the Japanese were looking at Manchuria as if it was their Manifest Destiny – that's the right expression isn't it?" he asked.

"It was looking like they were going to march right in and take everything, which is what they ultimately did. The Japanese set up a

puppet regime and put the last Manchu emperor, P'u-yi, on the throne as a figurehead, calling their new state Manchukuo. Feng-shih would have made a deal with anyone to survive, and he did.

"Feng-shih withdrew further into the mountains after that, where he grew, harvested, and sold opium to any and all takers, which is where I knew him. I had minor business dealing with the Triads in Hong Kong – as if any business dealing with those bastards is minor," he added gently. "Feng-shih dealt in guns because he was basically an arms dealer. He believed it was better to deal from strength; but the only guns he had were old and useless. His army, once standing at fifty-thousand, sometimes even up to seventy-thousand men, was decimated by disease and guerrilla fighting with the Japanese. They finally left to join the fledgling Communist army to the south. A civil war was breaking out between the Communists and Chiang Kai-shek. But Mao was garnering a lot of support with his eloquence. In the end, it was a matter of joining together to fight the common

enemy, or being destroyed from both sides. Long and short of it? Feng-shih lost his army to Chairman Mao and the Long March, and he was left with no more than two-thousand men. They were the old and weak, the ones unable to make the trek south, and whose party politics had outgrown their youth. Feng-shih collected taxes from the surrounding villages using these men, and dispensed a barbaric code of justice according to his own interpretation of what had to be done. But he was old, and time wasn't his best companion. He became addicted to his own opium, looking for relief because of the gout in his foot, and he often smoked it as he sat on his judgment seat. Paranoid, delusional, overly suspicious, and apprehensive; he suspected everyone was trying to overthrow him – so much so, that he killed his oldest son in a rage.

"I remember when Alex and Lin were brought in to tell us about the mission. Feng-shih was sitting bundled up on his cushions in what he liked to call his throne room; a gorgeous room of black lacquered panels and parquet floors – sumptuously decorated with huge vases from

who knows how many different dynasties? – with paintings, murals, and jade and ivory sculptures standing in every available nook and cranny; there was sunshine coming in through a top window somewhere. He liked Western music – I don't know where he first heard it – and he had a wind-up gramophone somewhere that played old jazz records. The room was alive with Bessy Smith, Billie Holiday, and a dozen other singers I've never heard of, but that he swore by.

"He always had his water pipe beside him, and a cloud of smoke hung over our heads like a thick fog when Lin and Alex came in. Feng-shih was looking for all the world like a true Mandarin Warlord with his long drooping mustaches, flowing silk robes, and sheathed fingernails. Because they came to him thinking he was their only hope, it was an impression he felt he had to make, something he wanted to convey to the refugees. He had his hair tied back in a long queue – a long, twisted, grey braid he sometimes played with to amuse himself. I sat on his left side holding a mouthpiece and smoking opium, while his

youngest son, Feng, was on the other side, looking at the two of us with open disgust.

"Feng was his heir, and the old man was grooming the boy by showing how he felt the world should be ruled – 'his world' he called it; he still referred to this northern corner of Manchuria as 'his world', and refused to call it Manchukuo. Feng was the youngest son of Feng-shih's fourth wife; educated abroad, he had his own ideas – and that can be a dangerous game for a man to play – any man – but even more dangerous when you're playing with a man as paranoid and delusional as Feng-shih. Feng sometimes spoke to me about the political atmosphere in the country, because he knew I'd been to other places in my life. He couldn't understand why his father supported Chiang Kai-shek's reasons for turning on Sun Yat-sen, or betraying the Communists; there was little the old man did that made any sense to Feng.

"It was Feng-shih who questioned Alex that day and denounced him for being a Christian – I suppose his recollection of 'General

Christian' still bothered him, even though the man was in exile somewhere in Hong Kong – because he swore at Alex for being a coward, and told him he was of a right mind to raise an army and fight himself – even though he knew they were Japanese soldiers and we didn't stand a chance. Lin spoke up with all the eagerness of youth, and said he'd gladly support any move against the bandits. Old Feng-shih applauded his bravery, and told Lin he could be guaranteed he'd be there if it came to that. Alex quoted something out of the Bible to us, and Feng-shih laughed. I can't remember what it was, but it wasn't the usual 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.'

"Feng-shih sent them away after that. They had nothing to offer as far as information went, and almost as soon as they were out of the room, Feng turned on his father and asked what he could've been thinking to say something like that to the boy? 'What is there to stop the boy from telling everyone the Warlord's going to raise an army and fight the bandits himself? And why didn't you tell him it was the Japanese army we'd

be facing, instead of letting him think it was bandits?'

"I told Feng I'd talk to the two boys and explain what was happening. I had my own reasons, of course, thinking I'd be able to talk to Alex. Feng-shih surprised us both, however, by saying he was thinking of raising an army and facing the invading troops. He said he still had a standing army of almost two-thousand soldiers, and with all the refugees here, they could easily wipe out a force of three-hundred Japanese – especially if he was there to lead them. He pointed at Lin as a good example of the desire he was certain would burn in the hearts of every man, woman and child out there, saying there was no emotion stronger than vengeance.

"I went to see Lin and Alex later that night, just one more shadow among the leaping shadows of the hundreds of different camp fires. Alex refused to have anything to do with me, believing me to be an associate of the Warlord's, and therefore an evil man. He left the small tent Su-mei, Wei and Freda had built by using the wheels of the

old cart they brought, and sat under the fading moonlight to read his Bible – the only thing he'd been able to save from the mission. I sat with the others in the leaping shadows of that make-shift tent made up of old blankets and ripped-up tarps, while they told me everything that had happened to them over the last two days; rather, Lin and Su-mei told me. There was a small fire that Lin kept poking at with a stick as he spoke, and the sparks would dance and leap into the night sky, looking for all the world as bright as the stars above before they faded and dwindled back into nothingness.

"It was the first time I saw Freda. She was a tiny slip of a girl – a whisper, my mother would have called her – with small, delicate, wire-framed glasses that seemed to magnify her dark eyes and sparkled in the light of a dozen different camp fires around us. She had long, straight black hair, and it hung down to the small of her back. She looked more like a girl of twelve than the young woman of seventeen they said she was. She was sitting with Wei wrapped tightly in her arms, her hair cascading around the

two of them and shutting the world out as she rocked him back and forth, humming to him softly; the boy was asleep, looking peaceful and contented behind that veil of soft hair. She had an aloofness to her, a shyness – almost a hesitancy – it wasn't perplexity, skepticism, doubt, or anything like that – but something more along the lines of an unassuming modesty – because she looked away whenever I looked at her. She was plain, though not unattractive, but still, there was something about her – something that drew me to her. I wouldn't say it was magnetism – because I've seen that in other people over the years – but it was something more than that, if that's possible. And the whole time I was there, children kept coming to her, looking for her blessings, I imagine, reaching out for a little piece of her – just wanting to touch her before they drifted off to sleep – looking for a compassion she seemed to exude as some people do confidence – their mothers bowing, smiling, not even pretending to understand what it was all about, but asking for her forgiveness just the same because the children insisted on coming out.

"There was a sort of peacefulness that lay over the camp as well. Where the people were at each other's throats just days before, now they seemed at ease with each other, as if feeling reassured that everything would work out for the best; that they were in safe hands. I could feel it myself. There was just something about the girl that seemed to captivate people and inspire them, and I guess I was no exception.

"When I left that night, it was with a reluctance that seemed to wash over me. I wanted to stay near her, and feel the warmth that radiated from her. I felt cleansed beside her, as if all of my sins over the past years were forgiven, and I was reborn.

"No sooner did I wake up than I heard people saying Freda had come to see them in their tents last night. They said her hands were dripping with blood, and the droplets smelled sweet, like the first scents of spring flowers – like cherry blossoms, and wild flowers, lilac or lotus blossom – while others were saying they saw a crown of blood on her forehead looking like a halo, all shimmery and misty. Lin said it was

impossible, because Freda had been asleep beside him through the whole night. But the people insisted on it, and swore convincingly that they had seen her in their tents – all of them – looking like she needed their help. I wondered why she hadn't come to me – or why I hadn't seen her if this was supposed to be some sort of vision – and then I thought that maybe I wasn't as clean as I thought I was; that sitting beside her and feeling I was being forgiven was a lot different than asking for forgiveness – or being forgiven.

"Have you ever felt bad enough you wanted to ask God's forgiveness?" Rudi asked suddenly, opening his eyes and looking at me closely, carefully, trying to gauge whether or not I could believe something like this was possible for a man like him; as if a man like him could even think of letting God into his life – or ever did.

"Like wanting to go to confession?" I asked.

He nodded slowly.

"I'm not Catholic," I said, regretting it almost as soon as I said it.

I'd always wanted to understand the draw religion had, the hold it had over people. My Dad came back from the Great War a changed man, letting himself drift away from his idea of God so much that he insisted we not go to Church. I didn't think I'd ever understand how a man could lose touch with God like that – especially on the front lines during the First World War – but war has a way of making you see things differently, doesn't it? It was something my mother would never understand. They would sometimes have terrible fights, and finally reached a compromise of sorts. My brother and I would watch her walking down the street with our younger brother and sister to the Baptist Church, and all the while I was wishing I could go with them just this once. My brother didn't seem to mind missing church, and when my younger brother and sister were old enough, they chose not to go to church either. I'd still wake up on Sunday mornings and watch my mother walk toward the other side of town in her

Sunday best, her hair fixed up perfectly and a light scarf over her hair in case a gust of wind came up from the river. I was eighteen years old before I finally got up the nerve to walk my mother into church and sit beside her. It was one of the happiest days of her life – and mine.

"I think I can understand it, though," I said. "Asking God's forgiveness I mean." And I thought I believed it, too.

"How about another drink?" Rudi said. I nodded slowly, calling the waiter over.

After the waiter put the drinks on the table, I waited for Rudi to go on with his story. A few new customers came into the bar – soldiers who immediately sat away from us at the bar, talking loudly, arrogantly, the way soldiers do sometimes, talking a language I didn't recognize – and I remembered thinking to myself, as they leaned across the bar to talk to the waiter, that my first hunch about this place was right. I looked at them thoughtfully. A man can't be too careful, I told myself, and then turned my attention back to Rudi, ignoring them.

Rudi was staring at his beer, watching the water droplets slipping down the side of the glass, as if he were trying to avoid the soldiers. His eyes narrowed somewhat when he looked at me, and I wondered if maybe he was mixed up in the whole thing. It was possible, I told myself. I remembered him saying that he went to see the Warlord about opium in the first place. I told myself I was looking for a connection here, that it was a mistake on my part – it was just a coincidence, a chance encounter and nothing more – and he was looking away from the soldiers to distract himself. I wondered what he saw in that fogged mind's eye of his; perhaps he was still back in Manchuria, reliving the ordeal over and over again even as he told it to me – perhaps he told the story to himself constantly, looking for answers he couldn't find. I hoped he didn't think I had any explanations. "Do you think you'll ever have God's forgiveness?" I asked him at last, and he looked at me slowly, forcing a smile. "I gave up asking for forgiveness a long time ago," he said simply.

"Does that mean you believed in Him enough to have asked in the first place?"

He laughed gently – a warm laugh that came from somewhere deep down inside, muted, soft, almost tender in its easiness, and he began talking again.

"Freda was an amazing girl," he said as he reached for a cigarette. "I think I learned to accept that the first night I met her. The fact that almost everyone in the compound dreamed about her that night was something I thought none of us could understand – but I think I was wrong; I know that Alex looked at her differently after that, though, and Lin, too. We all did; but like I said, I thought it was simply because no one really understood what was happening. I know I didn't. Of course, Alex did; but he had his own interpretation of it. He said it was a message from God to him. He said that we should follow her devotedly, unconditionally was the word I think he used, and he started quoting

from the Bible again, only this time there were people listening. They all wanted to believe in her – and why shouldn't they? Look at what they'd given up. They'd lost everything they had. And here she was, Alex said, standing in front of them as a new kind of saviour – not a redeemer or a deliverer – but certainly a message from God, and a sign of hope for the future, he said. I suppose everybody needs hope of some sort," he added dreamily, lighting his cigarette.

"I don't think she wanted to be what Alex wanted her to be, though – or what he said he thought she was. Maybe he recognized whatever was in her first? Who knows? He was certainly closer to God than I was, or anyone else there. Freda said that she wanted to devote herself to God; but as a saviour and the people's hope for the future? I don't think it crossed ber mind in that respect," he said, shaking his head.

"I knew she needed direction, and a purpose in her life – just like everyone else does, I suppose – but not like that. Not the way Alex

saw it. People were coming to her like she was some sort of an object to be worshipped; treating her like she was something that should be revered, or even exalted – as a way for them to get closer to God – and she didn't like it; not that way. I think they wanted to believe in her; they wanted her to talk to God for them so they could all be a part of it; they wanted to touch her, and to let her love wash over them – like it was something she could hand over, or parcel out to them a little bit at a time.

"She just wanted them to leave her alone; but it was too late for that. It was too late for a lot of different reasons, but it all started when a mother brought her daughter to see her. The child was sick, convulsing, and with no medication to give her, I don't think the girl would have lived for more than a night or two – at most a week, but then, only if she'd had the proper medical care. Freda took the girl in her arms and held her to herself, rocking her back and forth and humming a gentle melody that Alex later said came to her from God.

She draped her hair over top of the girl and shut the world away from the child and herself.

"The girl was feverish, but almost as soon as Freda held her in her arms, the girl started to settle down. Her convulsions gave way to a gentle slumber, and the fever dropped. Freda sat with her eyes closed, rocking her, still humming to herself, kissing the girl's forehead once in a while because she was like that: she loved children. There was a crowd gathering around her, and Freda closed her eyes, praying for the girl. There was a gasp that seemed to come out of the crowd all at the same time when she finally looked up; people fell to their knees and some of the women wept openly because they could see a small trace of blood on Freda's head. It came out of her like sweat, and if I hadn't seen it for myself, I would've never believed it. Her hands started to bleed, and the girl was covered in Freda's blood. Her mother started to wail insanely – probably thinking Freda had killed the girl or something, I don't know – but the girl opened her eyes and

looked up at her mother, smiling awkwardly when she saw the crowd around her. She looked up at Freda, who just as suddenly opened her own eyes – perhaps because the vision was finished – and saw the people around her. She saw the blood on her hands and looked down at herself, then began weeping softly.

"I think Su-mei thought it would be for the best if she took Freda into the tent, thinking Freda needed to be alone.

The people would have followed her in there, too, but Lin stood up and barred the entrance as Alex rose up among them and started preaching the word of God. I don't think it took long for word of the miracle to spread around the camp, either – and that was exactly what they were calling it – a miracle, I mean – because it wasn't long before Feng-shih and his son came out to see what was going on. He saw the child and the blood her mother frantically tried to wipe off her face, and he went to see Freda. Lin let him pass reluctantly – I could see that he wanted to follow Feng-shih and his son into the

small tent – so I stepped in behind them quickly, before Alex understood what was happening and came thundering over with his fire and brimstone threats.

"We had to crawl in on our hands and knees. It was close and cramped inside the tent; the heat was stifling, almost overbearing, and I could feel sweat beading on my face right away. My shirt was sticking to my body and I could feel my heart racing. I looked at Feng-shih and his son. They were confused by everything they'd heard and seen, concerned and baffled that they were losing control. Speechless.

There was an odour in the closeness of the tent – not just the opium that hung on Feng-shih and myself like tobacco does a smoker – but something that was sweet and fragrant, distinct in its nostalgia – something distant, and out of the past. It reminded me of the world I had left behind a lifetime ago. I could feel myself strolling through the dusky Vienna woods, the dead twigs breaking under my boots as I trekked

over a mossy carpet of sweet-smelling leaves. I could smell the freshness of the flowers and the newly mowed grass – as if the reapers had just sliced it down and their scythes were still flashing in the late afternoon sun. I could taste it on the breeze as it came down through the hills. It was a scent that assailed my very being. I can't explain it – I doubt if anyone could – because it made you feel safe, and secure, like you were home and there was someone there to take care of you, and you knew you were loved. It was like all the memories of childhood suddenly came back at you in that one, brief, recognizable moment, and you couldn't escape it. And why would you want to?

"Feng-shih was no fool. He may have been delusional because of the opium he constantly smoked, but he knew enough to step back and let circumstances take care of themselves; to look at things from the outside, expanding on every possible scene, good and bad. He looked at Su-mei wiping the blood off Freda's face – she still looked like she was in a daze – but I think she was overcome with emotion.

He looked at Wei curled up in a corner, his cold, vacant, unblinking eyes staring at Freda.

"I think it's possible that she recognized in herself what everyone else wanted to see in her; the one thing everyone still denied because it was simply too fantastic to believe, and the only thing she knew it could be. There were voices. Feng-ahih could see it, and he recognized it, too; he knew he would have to use it, exploit it – I could see it on him as clearly as Freda could. He was too obvious, his insincerity honeyed in a gentle, sombre tone. He looked around the small tent, at Su-mei huddled beside Freda, at Wei, that silent, muted boy, and asked Su-mei if Freda did this often. Su-mei said that it had begun a few days ago. And then he asked her if it came from the White God. Su-mei looked at him, frightened of what he'd do if she said no, and probably even more afraid if she said yes; so she said nothing. But the tears welling up in her eyes told the story simply enough. She looked as confused as I felt, and as frightened as I've

ever seen anyone. Her dark eyes were darting from the father to his son, trying to fathom what it was they wanted from her – from Freda, I mean – and she sat back in defeat, sunken. The tears came to her eyes in earnest, rolling down her cheeks slowly. She tried to hide behind her long, dark hair, and I could see the sobs taking over. She put the bloodied rag to her face and inhaled deeply: she's taking strength from it, I told myself. I've often wondered what sort of fragrance she found in it.

"Feng-shih looked at her and grunted. He'd made up his mind and crawled back out of the tent, squirming back out the same way he squirmed in. As he crawled his way past, he looked me in the eye – measuring me, I think – because he told me to follow him. He told his son in a loud voice to break out the guns. He said he'd heard a voice. He knew how to use the people around him as easily as he did his surroundings – because he said it in such a way that he made it look as if he was trying to hide what he'd heard. He wanted them to

believe they'd overheard him, that he'd spoken too loudly because of his excitement, because he said Freda told him her god would watch over everyone. There was nothing he'd have to fear with her god beside him. Hadn't she healed the child? He said, with a god like that at his side, he'd be able to lead the people to victory over the Japanese.

"It was madness, of course; sheer lunacy. The people believed him, though; Lin believed him. This was Feng-shih after all, and his name was legendary in these parts as far as his craftiness went. Before the Japanese, when he was the Warlord they all feared, before everything, there was his father and the legacy he followed. Freda and Su-mei tried to talk Lin out of it, but he wanted his vengeance. Wei wanted to go with him, and Su-mei would have forbidden it, but Lin gave him a rifle and asked him if he could carry it. That was all it took. A strange boy, that Wei. After he buried his brother, he never spoke again, and withdrew farther into himself, wanting to remain anonymous. When he found a way to avenge the murder of his brothers, he took it. There was

a hardness to his eyes. He was focused.

"Su-mei said Freda never even spoke to the Warlord – that it was a lie he told to use Freda's strangeness. No one wanted to believe her. The order went out and every able-bodied man in the camp, from fourteen to sixty, was issued a rifle and limited munitions. It was a rag-tag army at best, and if numbers can inspire an army, this one was a revelation. They believed in the Warlord as he sat on his white charger, his sword in his hand and his hand at his hip. He was a picture, and a posture, a promised return to the glory of the past, to an age where he ruled himself. No matter what Freda said, or Su-mei, even Alex, there was nothing they could do to prevent it. They left the next morning.

"Alex refused to go. He stood in front of the Warlord's horse, looking up at him in defiance, and when Feng-shih pulled his pistol out and placed it against Alex's forehead, Freda reached up and put her hand on the gun. The old man raised the gun and pointed it at Freda, and for a moment it seemed that time hung still there, too, waiting to

see what would happen. I wished I could've been as brave as that, but it only lasted a moment – a heartbeat or maybe even less – because Fortune favors the brave, not the foolish. He pulled on the reins angrily and spurred his horse forward, screaming for someone to open the gates."

Rudi looked at me for a long time. I thought he was going to stop talking. He sat there with his eyelids fluttering quickly and moved his head slowly from side to side, scratching at his cheek lazily and rubbing a hand across the grey stubble of his beard. I could hear the broken fan blade tick-tick-ticking in the distance. The back door slammed suddenly. I looked up and noticed that the waiter was talking to someone in the kitchen. Rudi opened an eye slowly, almost cocking a brow as he tried to focus on the man. He caught a glimpse of him and then, sitting up straighter as he reached for his forgotten beer glass, looked back at me.

"I don't have to tell you what happened, do I? Old Feng-shih always claimed to have two-thousand soldiers on hand – old, brave, battle-hardened veterans – but the number was closer to seven-hundred when they finally lined up in the compound that morning. I guess the deserters thought it was more prudent to live than throw away their lives with us. And with three-hundred farmers armed with outdated rifles (those same ones you Yanks brought to France during the Great War) – and whatever else they could find in the way of weapons – all of us walked out foolishly to face three-hundred Japanese soldiers with machine guns and cannons. It was a slaughter. Feng-shih was killed outright with the first volley; his horse was blown up from underneath him – and I could hear the Japanese screaming and laughing when they saw it happen – because they knew we'd be lost and confused without the Warlord to tell us what to do. That was when they opened fire.

"Wei rushed for the guns in a frenzied attack that looked more like suicide than anything else. He stood up and rushed the line like he

was on the Eastern front in Poland – and he was shot down before he even took three steps. Lin would've gone after him, but I grabbed him by the foot and pulled him back. I asked him if he thought it was a game he was playing at? I looked at young Feng and recognized the friqht and defeat in his eyes even from where I was standing – it was a look I'd seen too often when I was driving the ambulances on the Italian front. He saw the futility of the attack and called out a hasty retreat. At that moment I felt Lin go limp in my hands, sinking back down, stunned, dazed, confused, the blood trickling out of his mouth like drool.

"Of the seven-hundred so-called soldiers, four-hundred were killed outright. We carried Lin back – a three-day march through some of the worst terrain I'd been through in a long time – fighting exhaustion, bugs, heat, and starvation; with equal parts cynicism and fear of the Japanese soldiers sent to harry our every step. There were at least eighty-five wounded, from superficial to the stretcher-borne

like Lin, and rather than leave them behind – that was what Feng wanted to do – I made certain we brought everyone back. I couldn't leave them behind; these men were farmers, and deserved to die with their families – not left alone, forgotten. I know it sounds cliched, but on the front lines during the Great War, I saw what it meant for a man to die alone.

"We made it to the compound three days later. Feng seemed to think taking the long way around would deter the Japanese behind us – that maybe we'd lose them. I told him it didn't matter – it was a futile gesture – I knew they'd find us soon enough, and then we'd be forced to either fight or run. I think Feng was thinking of the latter," he said with a grin. "He wasn't his father's best choice for an heir, and he knew it as much as I did. He didn't have the same capacity for ruthlessness his father did, or the cunning: that would all come later.

"Our arrival brought panic; I don't think anyone expected the losses to be as one-sided as they were. I doubt if we inflicted any

casualties on them at all. The battle was what I'd call a débâcle, a bitter defeat – 'resounding' would be a better word," he said, "and our return was nothing more than a harbinger of doom. No one knew it at the time, but the Japanese were only hours behind. They'd bring their full force against us, and there was little we'd be able to do. They had cannons, mortars, flame throwers, automatic rifles, and machine guns – we were lucky to escape when we did.

"At least, that's what I told myself, and still tell myself," he said slowly, shaking his head slowly, with melancholy, as he fumbled for a cigarette.

I could see tears in his eyes, and wondered if he'd go on with the story. I thought the memory of it might be too much for him and that I'd be forced to pick it out of him one piece at a time. But he went on in spite of the tears.

"I told them to bring Lin into the throne room, along with the other wounded. Freda and Su-mei were following me – both of them

were too hysterical to be any use – while Alex was calling for God's vengeance on both Feng and me for having led Lin, Wei, and the others into battle. When he found out the Warlord was dead, he used that as one more rallying point in his sermonizing. I told Alex to shut up, and the girls, too, then told Su-mei to spread cushions on the floor and told the stretcher bearers to put Lin down gently. The wounded came in slowly after that – warily – afraid they wouldn't be permitted to enter the throne room. I didn't care any more.

"I had to look at Lin for my own sake. I didn't want him to suffer any more than he already had, and told Feng to bring morphine if he could. Lin was a mess. The bullet that had hit him had torn up his insides and shattered his hip; I could see bone fragments poking through his bruised flesh. He was drifting in and out of consciousness, delirious with fever, and I knew the most I could hope to do was to make him comfortable. The room quickly filled up with wounded men, their anxious children dumbstruck by what they saw,

the women wailing and imploring their strange gods; I found myself moving from one man to the next, determining who would survive and be lucky enough to make it through the night. There was no medication to speak of, and I began to rip silk sheets for bandaging, doing what I could for everyone. I felt overwhelmed; helpless, incompetent, and powerless; it was as if the floodgates – once they were open – simply crushed me in a sea of suffering humanity, and I was drowning beneath the endless cries of pain. Everyone was reaching out for me – the women and children I mean – begging me to help them; to do something.

"Su-mei was sitting on the floor, holding Lin's hand. She was kissing it tenderly, holding it against her cheek, begging him not to die; telling him there was so much to live for. I didn't know what to do, and sat back on the cushions to wipe a weary arm across my face. I was exhausted and wanted to sleep, but Feng showed up with the morphine and an old syringe, and I was back on my feet again. Alex said some-

thing about it being the Devil's poison, and I asked him if he'd rather I let Lin suffer for the little bit of time he had left? And what about the others? I asked. Should I leave them as well, because he didn't want them to have the Devil's poison running through their veins either? I tore myself free of his grip, and looked at Lin. I asked Alex if he thought his prayers would take away everyone's pain, or just Lin's.

"Lin seemed to have improved. The bleeding had stopped and a peaceful look came over his face. Su-mei stopped crying; she realized something was happening. I noticed there were others who were beginning to sit up, and their wives and children – one moment distraught and grieving – were just as confused as I was. Men with broken bones moved them; men with open bullet wounds touched them. Fevers abated. The room began to fill with a murmur of voices, with laughter – the same nervous laughter people have when they can't explain something and simply accept it as is – and I could hear Feng muttering under his breath that he didn't like what was happening.

"And then I heard Alex proclaiming in a thunderous voice – a voice that was full of confidence; with that certainty of faith and conviction men like him always hold on to, like a sickness – that it was the work of God; that rather than have me infect everyone with the Devil's poison, God had given them back their life through his handmaiden, Freda. And there she stood in front of us – on the raised podium where Feng-shih used to sit and dispense his so-called justice – her hands slowly lifting up from her sides, and her head falling back as she looked heavenward and exalted the Lord. People fell to their knees in front of her, weeping. She was covered with the Stigmata. Her face was bloodied where the thorns would've been, and her side was red where the spear would've pierced; the blood dripped out of her hands and fell to the floor in thick, dark clumps. Even her feet were covered with it. She looked down at Lin and knelt by his side, placing her bloodied hands on his hip and the gaping wound in his side. I saw it close – as if it'd never been there – and I

felt myself weaken at the knees. Feng reached out a hand to support me. I could hear him telling me it was more of her wizardry, but I knew he knew better.

"I knew it was the handiwork of God. There's nothing anyone can say that'll convince me to look at it any other way, either. I saw the faces of all those men in that room – I saw how they sat up and looked around with the same look of confusion that must've been on my face – because there was no explaining it. I don't think they cared if it came from God or Freda; they were alive and that was explanation enough for them – and me, too, I suppose.

"And then the Japanese came. I guess we all thought that with Freda there, there was nothing that could go wrong; I suppose we all thought that way to some extent. Believing in it because that was what the Warlord said. I mean, how could we seriously be expected to believe that God would let us die, when he'd just healed everyone? Was God going to abandon everyone after they'd witnessed a miracle

like that? What kind of god would allow anything to happen to us now? But the cannons kept firing, and the mortars seemed to find their targets, because I could hear horses and mules screaming outside. It was the most terrifying sound I'd ever heard. The explosions and their concussions blew windows out, and walls collapsed. People went running out into the compound screaming hysterically, and Feng grabbed my arm and told me we had to get out of there. I asked him how he expected us to leave, and he looked at me strangely. He said his father had prepared for attack years before: there were passages and tunnels under the compound that would take us to the other side of the hills. It was where Feng-shih kept his opium. There were at least three-hundred kilos of raw opium we could take with us to Hong Kong and turn into a fortune. We needed a mule to carry what we couldn't carry ourselves. I asked him about the others. Were we just going to leave them here to the mercy of the soldiers? He said he didn't care about them one way or the other. They could follow if

they wanted to, but it would be a lot easier if we went alone. And once we were out, it would be every man for himself. I was willing to agree to that much at least. I was sure Su-mei, Lin, and Freda wanted to live. For some reason, I didn't care about Alex anymore".

"Did you hate him that much?" I asked slowly.

"I don't think I hated him at all; I just didn't understand him," he said as he scratched his cheek absently. "I didn't know what he wanted, or what he was planning. But I knew that whatever he was planning, it obviously involved Freda. I guess I was thinking that he'd lead the people out and I'd be free of them – the responsibility, I mean – and that everything would eventually work out for the best. I knew Feng had his own ideas, and I was already committed to following him. I didn't want to become tangled up with trying to take care of refugees. It would be hard enough taking care of Feng and myself, and whoever else was coming with us; I'm not what you'd call a leader of men.

"I went to find Su-mei and Lin – they were both with Freda near their small tent – but I went to find them, thinking they'd be able to help organize the refugees, and we'd all be free to leave together. There wasn't much time to figure things out; we barely had time to take the essentials with us – food, clothing, bedding, weapons – because the mortars and cannon shells were raining down around us. We'd be lucky to get out of there with anything. I couldn't believe no one had been killed yet. It seemed everywhere I turned there were shells falling around us and bursting. The dust and smoke filled the yard, choking me, raining down on us in clumps of dirt and rock. Feng was trying to find a mule for the opium. I wondered how much three-hundred kilos of heroin were. He was still yelling at the soldiers to grab whatever supplies they could. I told Lin that we'd be able to leave right away if he could get everyone together, and he ran back into the palace and corralled as many of the people as he could, herding them toward the tunnels. He had Su-mei running and collecting

the people he missed, gathering children and packing them up like little pack animals, while Lin armed the farmers, taking everything they could use.

"Then I saw Freda in the middle of the compound. She was on her knees, praying, and Alex was right there beside her, screaming up at the mortar shells and cannon balls, waving his battered Bible like it was a shield. I was amazed that nothing was landing near them. There was a small collection of faithful followers around them – mostly women and children – and Su-mei was quick to get them out of there and started herding everyone towards the tunnels. Feng pulled the huge doors open and turned on the lights, they flickered and wavered, giving off a dull, anemic glow. He went running to the front of the tunnel with three mules he'd somehow managed to string together. It was time to leave.

"I called out for Alex to follow us, but he looked at me blankly, shaking his head slowly. I think he wanted to leave – or at least I'd

like to think a part of him did – because he stood up. But he looked down at Freda and said something to her. She shook her head, slowly, deliberately, looking up at him as if she'd just had some sort of vision, and he fell on his knees beside her again, clutching his Bible to his chest. Su-mei was standing with me, screaming at the two of them to follow us because we couldn't wait any longer. I was thinking it might be too late already. The mortars and cannons started to slow down, and I guess we all thought the same thing, because a wave of panic seemed to wash over the crowd. The soldiers were coming.

"Feng came back to the doors – the people were running through the tunnels hysterically now – and he came back to tell me that everything was ready. He had food and bedding, and there were thirteen soldiers coming with us. We had enough arms to defend ourselves if we had to, but we had to leave now, before the soldiers blew the doors in. But Freda and Alex were still in the middle of the compound. Feng screamed at them to hurry, but they stayed there, as if

they hadn't heard or understood. Feng grabbed my arm when I said I was going out there to get them, and he pulled the doors closed just as the gates of the compound blew apart. The soldiers were in.

"Feng dropped the locking timber into place and started down the tunnel, pausing to look at me when he saw that I wasn't following him. He told me that I had to leave now, because it wouldn't be long before the Japanese found the tunnels and then we'd all be dead. I picked Su-mei up and dragged her, half carrying her through the tunnels, finally stopping long enough to let her climb onto my back. The lights went out after I'd gone about a dozen steps – it couldn't have been any more than that – and I knew the generator was gone. It was dark, and the walls seemed to close in around us. I could hear Su-mei crying, her tiny fists beating into my back.

"We came out on a small hill overlooking the compound. Lin had everyone gathered into a group, hidden behind a copse of trees, and they were staring down the hill into the compound spread out below.

There were fires breaking out in several of the buildings – the Warlord's palace the first to go. I could hear the light refrain of a record in the distance. Bessie Smith I remembered, but the name was beyond me. I put Su-mei down and turned to watch Freda and Alex.

They were visible – even from up there – and though they were tiny and almost obscured by the distance, it was easy enough to make the two of them out. I pushed my way to the front of the crowd.

"The Japanese came in quickly, swarming around the two of them like army ants on a struggling carcass. The soldiers seemed amazed to see the two of them there, and the platoon parted, flowing back around him as the officer came wading through. I asked Feng if he had his field glasses and he gave them to me.

"They didn't help as much as I thought they would, but I was able to see Freda. The officer looked like one of those frustrated samurai type – he kept slapping his thigh with a small walking stick – screaming at the two of them. He put the stick under Freda's chin and

forced her to look at him, and then turned to Alex, pointing at him. He had a sword at his side and he pulled it out with a sudden flourish, holding the blade against Alex's throat. He slapped Alex across the face, kicking him viciously, and then turned to Freda again.

"He stepped back from her quickly, and I saw the soldiers move away from her, as if they were afraid. And then I saw why. Her hands were still covered in blood, and there was still a crown of blood on her forehead. It was there when the soldiers first came in. I know it was. I saw it on her when I left. The officer said something to his men, but they didn't move. He screamed at them insanely, and then a couple of men stepped forward and pulled Alex to his feet. He pointed at the wall and then Alex was stripped naked.

"We could hear Alex screaming as they held him and nailed him to the wall. The screams ran right through me; I could hear the people behind me groaning – some of them falling to their knees and whispering futile prayers – still others weeping outright. The officer

grabbed Freda by the hair and forced her to watch Alex – she had fallen to the ground in front of Alex as he was being nailed to the wall – begging them to spare him, I suppose – but the officer began to slash at Alex with his sword. I think it was the worst thing I've seen in my life.

"He grabbed Freda by the hair again when he was finished and then I suppose he told his men to nail her to the wall as well. They stripped her slowly – as if they were afraid to touch her – and because her long hair covered her nakedness the officer cut it off and let it fall around her feet. I was certain they were going to rape her – I could see the officer fondling her and kissing her breasts – but then he backed away and they lifted her up beside Alex and nailed her to the wall. She didn't make a sound, but I could see her lips moving. I suppose she was praying, or begging for her life. He didn't flay her alive though, and I was grateful for that. I just wished there was something I could do for her."

"You didn't shoot her?" I asked

"We were too far away for that – not with the old guns we had. We could see the soldiers beginning to search the compound now, looking for us. They knew we had to have left through some sort of tunnel system, and when they finally blew the doors open that led into the tunnels, it felt as if the world had come to a halt. It would only be a matter of minutes before they caught up to us. Alex and Freda were quickly forgotten. Panic set in.

"I looked at Feng, but he didn't seem to be anxious. There was an explosion – muffled, muted, but very real – I could feel it in the ground below my feet – and I could see the smoke as it came out of the tunnel and filled the compound. Almost as soon as we heard and felt the first explosion, others followed, and then the entire complex went up in flames. The concussion of the blast washed over me in a wall of heat, and the dust and smoke obscured the sun for a while. When the dust settled, you couldn't see anything that would've told

you this was where one of the greatest Warlords once held his seat of power. It was gone.

"We left Lin and Su-mei with the refugees. I told them to make their way to the Russian border, it was only a matter of some days away, I was sure. We were headed for Hong Kong. It took us several months. We avoided the Communists, the Kuomintang, the Japanese, bandits, and everyone else we met along the way. But we made it at last. And I was grateful to be out of China and somewhat safer on British soil.

"But I said Feng had his own ideas about things, and he turned the opium into heroin, tripling his fortune. He was able to sell it to the Hong Kong Triads because he knew them from when his father had sent him to Hong Kong for his education. He was more than aware of what was going on in the world, and we only managed to escape Hong Kong before the war started. I went with him, of course; I had to. By that time I was addicted to his heroin. He used it to keep me with him at first, and then he used it to control me. He still does.

"We stayed one step ahead of the Japanese all the way through the war and managed to convert the heroin into a cache of money I should've been able to retire on quite easily. But it seems there's always one more thing that has to be done, and one more deal that has to be finalized. Like this one," he said with a strange smile.

"You mean with the soldiers?" I asked. He nodded slowly. "Feng wants me to deal with them because he knows they don't trust him just because he's Chinese. I'm a European, he says. I look like them – I might as well be one of them – and that's all he has to say. I can't argue. I need the heroin. He's a smart one, though, Feng is. He doesn't let me have the stuff because he knows I'd leave as quickly as I could – or else purposely overdose – which is why he gives it to others to supply me along the way – "

"Like the waiter?" I said quickly. He nodded again, grinning.

"It's the only way I can take care of business for him. I live for my business," he smiled.

I LEFT THE BAR because Rudi told me it was time to do his business. He told me if I stayed I might become mixed up in something that would hurt me. He seemed nervous for some reason, and then he whispered that he preferred to deal with Americans, Australians, Brits or Canadians, and that these men – Turks – were a little too crazy for his liking.I put my beer glass down and sat back before I left, looking at Rudi closely. He gave me a half-smile and told me to go.

As I went down the sidewalk, smelling the garbage thrown into the streets, the thousands of bodies pressed up against me, the fried onions, and the spices in the air, I wondered what I could believe of his story. The story was a gift, because – to a young, ambitious, anxious man like me, who felt trapped on the wrong side of the globe, as much homesick as I was frightened and amazed – it was an invitation home. What was there to prevent a man like him from finding his way back to God? I asked myself. But then, like my own father who'd drifted so far away from the idea of Heaven, Rudi had given up on

God years ago. Long before any of this had even happened. Or could have happened.

Freda stuck in his mind so firmly – whether her story was true or something he created in his own drug-induced stasis – because he actually saw God through her. It was up to me to decide if it was real. She'd proven God's love to him with her own sacrifice – through Lin, Su-mei, even the refugees – but he didn't recognize it, or else he refused to. Knowing that he could turn his back on her and everything she did or stood for – by denying God and Freda for the sake of the opium – helped convince him that he was a condemned man. Knowing this, he went on living his life as if he were a prisoner, a prisoner of his own sins.

About the Author

Ben Woestenburg lives in Surrey, "just a short drive outside of Vancouver", where he works in a sawmill on the Fraser River. He is happily married and still hopelessly in love with his wife Renu, with whom he shares two wonderful children. This is his first story to be published.