

#### 4. In the Willow Shade

### 柳陰



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It was in Shenyang that I met Park Shin-jun, a young man from Korea, born and brought up beside the Taedong River.

He was the type of man whom one encounters but rarely in the wilderness that is life: a person worthy of one’s most cherished memories who would long have a place in a corner of one’s heart. Rather dark of complexion, Park had a broad but elegant forehead and feet that seemed out of proportion to the rest of his body. With his quietly gleaming eyes, he had the intelligence and slight tendency to melancholy common to literary youth. In his tight-fitting oil-stained khaki working gear, with narrow sleeves and underlength trousers, he looked even taller and slimmer than he was—like a bamboo pole. In reality, what lay beneath that sackcloth attire was a soul that matched any bamboo pole for goodness, simplicity, and straightforwardness.

Among my many classmates, and especially among the Koreans, Park was the first one that I got to know—on account of his love for art and literature, as well as his quiet but straightforward nature—and we became the best of friends.

At the time, we were enrolled at the Manchuria Automobile School. In the mornings we practiced driving, and in the afternoons we received training in auto mechanics from Lieutenant Hirotsu, a retired officer who, with his big “Jintan” mustache, looked just like the “mustachioed man” on the billboards.<sup>1</sup> There were two practice grounds:

1. Jintan 仁丹 pills were an extremely popular throat medicine and cure-all throughout the Japanese Empire of this period. The distinctive advertisements, featuring a cocked-hatted and epauletted military officer with a fine mustache, were widely known. The brand remains popular in Japan today as a breath-freshener. In Chinese, *rendan bu* (xu) 仁丹鬚 (鬚) (Jintan whiskers) became synonymous with the indigenous term *bazihu* 八字鬚 (八-shaped whiskers, i.e., mustache).

the first was the school quadrangle, where first-term students practiced the basics—going forward and in reverse in a straight line. From second term more complex driving skills were taught for which the quadrangle was rather too restricted, so we moved on to the second circuit.

Number 2 Practice Ground was where the main road swept out, about one kilometer past the southern suburbs. It was surrounded by wire fencing. To the west it faced Military Camp A across a motor road. Hidden in the shadows of the round concrete blockhouses' gun-slits, the soldiers' steely gaze was constantly fixed on our practice circuit. For all the world like the most dutiful of sentries, a triangular wooden sign naming our school and stating the purpose of the site stood proudly on empty ground by the entrance, where some grass was growing. Two awnings had been set up on the north side of the circuit, looking like a pair of white clouds. Almost all of the students whose turn to drive had not yet come were sitting or lying or huddling in groups under the awnings, chatting, resting, waiting. This is where Park and I first met, but later the two of us spent more of our time in the shade of a row of leafy willows above the road, to the east of the awnings.

In North China, willows like these are everywhere. Their branches formed green curtains trailing down to the ground, shutting out both the burning sun and the noise. When the odd gust of breeze coursed through the trees, the twigs and the leaves would lightly, dreamily pitch and toss, gathering delicious coolness in their embrace.

Behind the willows was a vineyard, where great bunches of grapes grew, their skins covered with white bloom.

Through the willow fronds we could see the much bigger, blue curtain of the sky above. And we could see the yellow-earth spaces of the practice circuit lying exposed under the burning heat and ferocious glare. Over to the north we could also see the city of Shenyang, wreathed in billows of smoke and dust that resembled a silent prairie fire.

In the shade of those willows Park and I whiled away the sweltering hours, in conversation, in silences, and in brooding.

He spoke Japanese with exceptional fluency and accuracy. Through Japanese he had read widely in world literature. He had a habit of stripping off one willow leaf after another and putting them in his

mouth as he talked. With his mouselike small sharp teeth he gnawed each one to fine shreds, folding it in as if between the cogs of a machine. Fold it in, mince it with his teeth, then spit it out. And then it began again as he plucked the next leaf. . . . Chewing willow leaves became almost an addiction with him.

Amid his gnawing, folding, spitting, and plucking, our conversations and our friendship were quietly woven. One day, after we had been discussing the relationship between literary works and the lives of their authors, we began talking about the traditions of early marriage and arranged marriage in Korea. Park's ardent words and bitter tone and his intense personal engagement with the topic were very convincing: in Korea, the land he loved so fervently, the younger generation's most precious asset was being neglected, devalued, and wasted in the name of something utterly irrational. But what made an even bigger impression on me was the way the fiery darts from his burning eyes targeted the unconscionable silence and empty sighs of other people.

Then he changed the subject to Korean folk songs. Park believed that in any country the best and most direct reflection of life—especially the moral life of the two sexes—was the folk song. He sang for me an extremely moving folk song that brimmed with the suffering and recriminations of a strange love affair: "Arirang."<sup>2</sup>

We lay on our backs in the willow shade, our hands behind our heads, letting the smaller curtain of the willows and the big curtain of the sky take us in their soft, serene embrace.

Arirang,  
Arirang,  
Arariyo,  
Arirang,  
...

2. Believed to be very ancient in origin (perhaps as early as the fourteenth century CE), "Arirang" is Korea's best-known song, a kind of unofficial national anthem. In this song of lovers' parting Arirang is the name of a mountain pass, but has not been identified with any actual place.



Park didn't really have much of a singing voice, but the beautiful musical phrases and rhythm of the song took me away to that sad, far-off country described by its lyrics.

When he finished singing he suddenly propped himself up on one elbow, looked at me, and asked: "Have you read *Resurrection*?"

When I said I hadn't, he sat up and said, "That's a shame! It's a really good book. In it Tolstoy teaches us . . . why a man must cherish the love in his heart!"

A few years later I had the opportunity of reading *Resurrection*, but I couldn't find what Park felt to be so good about it. I reckoned the reason the book had moved him so much must lie in a remarkable coincidence between its content and his own life. But then again, what if it was actually the book that had inspired him to imitate the religious redemptive motivation of its protagonist, Nekhlyudov?

But these thoughts came later. . . .

One day the weather was very hot, so that the might of the sun could be felt all around.

A boxy 1934 Ford, old and battered beyond recognition, juddering despairingly, was slowly staggering and crawling round the practice circuit like an unruly old mare carrying the weight of its great age on its back. Boiling water foamed out from the radiator, which had never had a cap, hissing as though the engine were a winded monster gasping for breath. The steam and the blue smoke of overheated engine oil enveloped the hood in heat and mist. Every twenty minutes, from the dusty shadows of this pitiful automobile there would come a broad, somewhat impatient yelling. Directed at the cotton awnings and all around, the shouts came from our practical driving instructor, a Korean with a Japanese name: Mr. Yamada was calling the next student to the car. . . .

"Next! Park—Byung—yung. . . ."

On one side the clamorous city of Shenyang lay sprawled in the windblown dust like a nouveau riche caught with his trousers down and no time to make himself decent. To our west, in Tiexi, which means "west of the tracks," factory chimneys were opening wide a thousand mouths, belching filthy, sticky smoke, blackening half the sky.

One had to raise his eyes above this dark satanic miasma to see, far to the east, how the sky displayed a continental vastness and profun-

dity, and how in its infinite immensity it gathered the entire expanse of the Liaodong Plain to its bosom.

Park Shin-jun was gnawing his umpteenth willow leaf, staring fixedly, levelly, and silently north to the grimy city of Shenyang with his intense, limpid eyes. On an area of grass bathed in the torrential rays of dazzling sunshine, several white and yellow dots, like flowers—stray dogs—were tearing around, frolicking, rolling around like footballs.

"Just look at those coal fumes, and all that dust!" said Park, pulling a face as though some sand had just blown into his mouth. "This city will never be clean!"

And so, as he stripped the willow leaves with his teeth, he told me how this "uncleanable city," buried in coal fumes, clouds, and dust, was nevertheless expanding at an unbelievable rate. It was like a warehouse: once the door was opened, anything could go inside—hooligans and gentlefolk, dross and gold, ideals and depravity. The record for population growth stood at ten thousand new residents in a single day.

"How do you know?" I asked, my eyes wide.

"The South Manchurian Railway keeps statistics!" answered Park.

"That's an amazing figure! But I don't like this city at all. One day I will definitely leave."

A few minutes of silence followed before the conversation turned to our respective reasons for coming to Manchuria.

"Let me guess," I said, half jokingly. "You came here to realize all your hopes and dreams. Am I right?" As I spoke I was thinking of all the people who at that time were surging like a ferocious tide—almost blindly, rabidly—into the New Found Land that was Manchuria.

Park had been born and brought up in a comfortably-off family in the countryside by the Taedong River. He had scarcely been weaned from his mother's breast when his father arranged for him to marry a local girl when they both grew up. But when Park did grow up and formed his own ideas about the future, it was another female he chose: a childhood playmate. Eventually he and his sweetheart reached and passed through that make-or-break moment in their relationship, that point of no return that society allows only married couples to pass. But just at this time, Park's parents and those of that poor other girl put pressure on them to marry. And so my friend Park decided to show a clean pair of heels, taking off for Manchuria.

That was in September of year 12 of the Showa period, the twenty-sixth year of the Republic of China. . . .<sup>3</sup>

When I heard this part of the story I became very interested, and so when Park paused slightly in his relation I couldn't help interjecting a question: "So did you and your sweetheart have an agreement that you would come here first, and when you had got things ready you would go and bring her to join you here?"

"No!" he replied, shaking his head. "That would have been good thinking, but at the time she and I never thought of that."

"You should have thought of it," I said.

"You're right, I should have."

"And so, what became of her?"

Park sighed, and a shadow of worry and depression fell over his shining eyes. After some hesitation he said, "Her family found out about our relationship and her father was very angry. He wanted to force her to marry . . ."

"Oh, so she married someone else?"

"She ran away."

"Where to?"

"Nampho."<sup>4</sup>

"Nampho?"

"That's right, Nampho."

"What did she do there?"

"At first she was a waitress in a coffeehouse."

"And now?"

Park sighed again, and looked at me as he hesitated. Then he shifted his darkened gaze toward the driving circuit. . . .

"She's a prostitute!"

I was stunned. The conversation came to a halt.

And so, we . . . kept silent.

I looked at him. He sat with both knees drawn up; his body was turned toward me, but his face pointed in the other direction, and he seemed to be gazing into the far distance.

3. 1937.

4. Nampho is a port city at the mouth of the Taedong River, about 50 km downriver from Pyongyang.

As a fresh breeze came blowing, the willows' skirts gracefully flounced and began to dance as trippingly as young girls.

Our classmates' merry laughter rose up from under the white sun canopies. They sounded so boisterous, so utterly uninhibited.

Suddenly, Mr. Yamada's sonorous voice called out from the practice ground: "Next! Park—Shin-jun . . ."

After Park had left I lay down again, looking up at the sky. Quite naturally, my thoughts turned on the unhappy fate of my friend and the girl now reduced to prostitution. What melodrama, what unexpected twists in the plot, what a miserable denouement . . . I had never expected such a remarkable story. Personally I was disappointed by my friend's reaction to his problem. I couldn't understand why he meekly allowed himself to be manipulated by Fate. Nor did I understand how he could tell his own story as if it was someone else's and nothing to do with him, shaking his head and sighing, but not taking any action.

I truly felt like weeping for that woman.

The sunlight flowed down, as heavy as water. The baking sky was flickering like cicadas' wings.

I closed my eyes.

Somewhere a peddler was crying his wares, and from even further off the breeze brought the faint, crisp sound of a horse's bridle bells—di-ling, di-ling, di-ling . . .

Suddenly, a sharp voice that I knew very well rose up in the direction I was facing. It was a metallic sound, with the quality of a hysterical woman's voice.

"Sheesh!"—the voice was yelling—"Damn! This is just too much . . ."

I opened my eyes.

An extremely short man was in the act of stooping to part the swaying willow curtain and enter the area of shade. This was my second Korean friend, whom I had got to know through Park Shin-jun. He was nicknamed "Mr. Misfortune," but his real name was Kim Tae-ki. Apparently there were two reasons for the nickname: one, he had a wife six years older than him (it seemed the age difference was not the point here, but the fact that theirs was an arranged marriage); two, at the age of fifteen he had become the father of a daughter.

"He's a sacrificial victim of the system of early marriage and arranged marriage," Park told me, fuming. "An absolute masterpiece of



the type. Just think about it, what can a young man in his situation ever hope to achieve?"

Even so, although he had been forced at such an early age to shoulder the burden of the trivial intricacies of family life; although he had been cruelly tossed into the dizzying, rapidly swirling whirlpool of life, Kim had somehow lost none of his bright and cheerful, youthful outlook. And there was another side to him that attracted me: his ardent and innocent curiosity about the meaning of all things, his refusal to rest until he got to the bottom of every last obscure secret of life. Indeed, when I looked at how, faced with a mountain of ugly and chaotic mundanity, he still managed to preserve and maintain a childlike purity, this resolute personal struggle of his aroused in me the kind of compassion one might feel for a small bird caught in a thunderstorm.

At any rate, it seemed to me to be a virtue in itself that in spite of forever being either in the frying pan or in the fire he still adhered so closely to what he believed to be important in life.

With all the innocence and self-confidence of a child he would ask me: Was Taiwan so hot that people needed to take cold showers? Did bananas grow wild everywhere, even on hillsides and in the wastelands? As wonderful as Taiwan was, wasn't Korea even better?

I told him about the cultivation and management of bananas, their actual distribution, and the different habitats to which they were suited.

He listened intently, his head slightly tilted, thought for a moment, and said: "That's not how I imagined it. I thought they grew all by themselves, all over the hills and filling the valleys, and you only had to reach out a hand to pick one."

What a poetic imagination.

Regarding the grasping principal of our school, Kim said: "Why on earth does anyone have to be like that?"

Now, as he spoke, his pale, malnourished face—which soot, heat, dust, sweat, and fatigue had turned the gray-green color of yesterday's *mantou*<sup>5</sup>—constantly emitted steam. His yellowish eyes stared wide in

5. *Mantou* 馒头: steamed buns, typical of the wheat-based traditional staple food of north China, as opposed to rice in the south.

surprise. His yellowing double-breasted cotton jacket, apparently unwashed for quite some time, gave off the uniquely human sour smell of sweat and natural body odor combined. On his feet was a pair of rubber-soled shoes covered in patches.

He was slight as well as short, with a long slender neck; among his tall, strapping compatriots Kim looked like a mutation. He gave the impression of being a creature whose physiological development has suddenly been arrested due to some biochemical change in its body—a premature degeneration.

Wiping the sweat from his face and taking off his misshapen, discolored hunting cap, Kim breathed loudly through his wide-open mouth.

"Are you done?" I asked him.

"Yep!" He spoke Japanese with a very heavy Korean accent.

"Goddammit . . . !" He let loose a stream of curses at the unbearable heat.

"Hey, Kim, are you and Park from the same part of Korea?" I asked him, after a pause to let him catch his breath.

"No, he's from Hwanghae province; I'm from North Cholla. We met here in Manchuria."

"Did you know he had a sweetheart? And that she's now . . ."

Kim stopped fanning himself for a moment and gave me an inscrutable look.

"Didn't he mention it to you before?" he asked. "Well, he doesn't like others to know about it."

"Is it true she's become a prostitute?"

"Probably."

"Where?"

"Pyongyang. Park only learned about it recently. He's very upset."

"Is there no way he can go and get her out of it?"

"I don't know. . . . Apparently not."

Holding the hunting cap in his hand, Kim watched the practice circuit.

In the raw hands of an inexperienced driver, the Ford—or rather, the old mare—was howling bitterly and helplessly on her knees, as though goaded by a brutal, pitiless rider. In the car, although I could not make him out through the swirling dust, steam, and smoke, was our friend Park Shin-jun.

All of a sudden, I had the saddest feeling.

It seemed incredible that that simple, straightforward guy, stitched into those sacklike clothes of his, could be carrying such an unspeakable wound—a wound he lived with every day and carried with him wherever he went, even now as he tried to learn to drive.

And on the other hand, there was she, that poor young woman!

Having watched the circuit for some time in silence, Kim finally shifted his gaze from it to my face.

“Zhong, are you taking the test this term?”

“It’s almost upon us already. When is it again?”

“At the end of the month.”

“What about you?” I turned his question back at him.

“I’m not taking it!”

“Me neither,” I said. “This is only our second term. Taking the test would just be a waste of eight yuan.”

“That doesn’t matter so much. What I mean is . . .” Kim stopped and thought, but did not say what it was he meant.

With his brows knotted in a frown, he seemed lost in his own thoughts. All the while he kept fanning his face. His hair was very fine, like that of a newborn babe; it was light in color, more brown than black, and the ends curled up all around his head. His hands were very thin and wrinkled—like those of an old person.

“I’m going to pack it in,” he said, after fanning a while longer. He spoke calmly, his head bowed. . . .

“What?” I stared wide-eyed in surprise.

Now he looked up. In his eyes there burned a resolute will: a way of thinking carefully and painstakingly arrived at.

“I’m going to withdraw from the school. Shorties like me can’t drive automobiles. When I sit down in the cab it’s like falling into an ocean. I can’t see a thing. When a shorty’s driving he feels like he’s hanging from the gallows; it’s a living hell. There’s no way I’ll pass the test. Anyway, my circumstances won’t allow me to go on. From enrollment to taking the test and finding a job takes at least six months. Starting from next month my family won’t have enough to eat. This morning I put in a request for the school to refund my remaining fees, but the principal refused.

“Enrolling here was a mistake,” he continued, after a pause. “Even if the principal won’t let me withdraw, I’m still quitting. I need to find another way. . . . It’s different for you guys!”

From the next day Kim no longer came to classes. When I realized this a few days later I asked Park Shin-jun about it, but he didn’t know what Kim was doing either.

On the day of the test, although Park and I had not registered, we went along to watch, not only because we intended to take the test next term, but because of our intimate involvement in the process.

The test ground was just north of our Number 2 Practice Ground and separated from it only by a wire fence. Test candidates and spectators formed a dense crowd, almost completely filling the test ground, which was half an acre or more in area. In several places the crowd pressed the rope barrier out in a curve over the track. The stewards kept shouting angrily at the crowd to keep back.

It was the most beautiful day. To the south the endless blue sky, like a kindly old grandmother, cradled a few floating clouds in its arms. The little clouds looked like flowers embroidered on a bed-curtain. Through the dry, clear air, the sun—the unimpeded sun—was scattering great quantities of light and heat down to the ground.

The shape of the test circuit was an Arabic numeral 5. The car was one of the newest streamlined Buicks. One by one a hundred or more candidates took their turn for the prescribed three minutes each. As if on a great sieve, each one struggled, sank or swam, playing his role in the tautest, most thrilling of tragicomedies . . . the smiles of those who passed, the sighs of those who fell through the sieve.

Park and I mingled with the overflowing waves of people, sweating, irritated, red in the face . . . until finally we escaped the test ground.

Outside the main gate peddlers swarmed like flies, selling cooling food and drink, glutinous rice cake, and candied haws.<sup>6</sup> The sound of wares being cried, the grating of ice being scooped, and other con-

6. Chinese hawberries are a popular snack in north China. Typically, about six or seven of the fruits, which resemble tiny apples, are skewered kebablike on thin sticks and coated with a kind of toffee.



fused noises of the marketplace formed a countermelody to the surging clamor of the test ground.

Just as we went out through the gate, we heard someone calling us by name. Stopping to look, we saw a peddler pushing his bicycle toward us.

Good heavens! What a surprise. Wasn't this Kim Tae-ki?

Sure enough, here came Kim, wreathed in pleasant, honest smiles—looking for all the world as if he'd been in business for a decade.

"Are you here for the test? Or just to watch?" he asked.

The same smiling face, the same guileless, ever-cheery Kim Tae-ki! He put his bike on its stand and opened the green-painted box on the back, each side of which bore the legend "Hygienic and Tasty—Chilled Fruit Ices." He chose four ice popsicles, two cream flavor and two red bean.

"Have a popsicle!"

I stared stupidly at this smiling, happy little man for a while before coming to myself.

"So you really packed it in?" I asked him.

"Why wouldn't I?" And he smiled his happy smile some more.

I felt strangely depressed.

"So how's business?" asked Park.

"Not bad!"

After we'd left Kim and were walking home, Park said to me: "You see! See how much we are forced to suffer, just for the sake of a woman, for the sake of a bad marriage!"

In late autumn we took the graduation test, and Park and I both passed. We only awaited the arrival of our driving licenses—then we would be drivers.

While waiting for the licenses to be issued I was away from Shenyang for a few days, seeing a friend in Changchun. The day I returned, Kim Tae-ki came to my lodgings and handed me a letter.

"Park has left," he said.

"Left? Where to?" I was stunned.

"Zhangjiakou."<sup>7</sup>

7. Zhangjiakou 张家口, in Hebei province on the Great Wall facing Inner Mongolia, has sometimes been better known by its Mongol name, Kalgan.

"What for?"

"I think the letter will explain it."

I read the letter with disbelieving eyes.

"I expect you'll remember the prostitute," said Kim, who had remained silent while I read. "That poor woman. Recently she had an offer of work from a hotel in Zhangjiakou. Park didn't tell me this until the day it happened. He had had a letter from her saying she would be passing through Shenyang. He met her train, and then they went off together. . . ."

I thought about this in silence, but it was beyond my powers of imagination. I just couldn't comprehend what lay behind it all.

Then Kim piped up again: "He seemed very worked up. I think he made up his mind on the spot."

I looked at the letter again. It was in a hasty scrawl, betraying a turbulent mind.

Two aspects of this event threw me into a state of bewilderment and vexation for a long time: first, the loss of a friend; second, the hidden significance and drama of the affair itself. Although the letter asked me not to bother myself about it, I couldn't help being disturbed by such thoughts as: Was it she who asked him to go with her? Or was it his idea? And why?

Having lost Park, Kim and I also gradually lost touch with each other, all the more so as before long I started work as a driver for the Shenyang Transport Company. After almost ten hours of driving each day, I was so tired I felt like a lump of wood, so I rarely felt in sufficient spirits to hook up with Kim. From autumn into early winter we didn't see each other at all. I don't know how he lived during that period: with winter coming he wouldn't be able to sell ices; might he have turned to some other trade?

One cold winter's day, a biting north wind was blowing the thick snow from the branches and gusting into my face as I walked. I needed a new place to stay and was going to see a room at No. x, Liuqing Road. Recognizing the address, I hoped to see Kim Tae-ki while I was there.

I was in luck with the room, but I didn't find Kim. It turned out he had moved out a fortnight before and had left Shenyang. The room for rent was the very one his family had vacated.

"Where did they go?" I asked the landlady, an old Japanese woman.

“Probably back to Korea,” she replied.

“Back to Korea?”

“Of course, he didn’t want to go back. He had no option. His pop-sicles wouldn’t sell and he couldn’t find other work; his family was going hungry half the time. . . .”

I moved into the room that same day. That evening the old Japanese woman, kneeling on the tatami, smiled apologetically and, showing warm concern, told me the story of that unlucky man. She praised him lavishly as an upright and honest person, for his sincere attitude toward life and toward his fellow man, and for his straightforward and cheerful nature. Eventually I learned from her that Kim had had to give her a quilt in lieu of his last two months’ rent.

“What could I do? These few rooms are my only livelihood!” A sad smile crept onto her face, like a child who has just been forgiven for doing something a bit naughty.

That night in bed, listening to the wind howling like a wolf, I tossed and turned and could not sleep. I was thinking about my friends—Kim Tae-ki back in Korea and Park Shin-jun in Zhangjiakou.

I remembered Park’s words:

“See how much we are forced to suffer, just for the sake of a woman, for the sake of a bad marriage!”