

Cranes

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Background and key points

After Japan was defeated in WWII, Korea was liberated by Russia in the north and America in the south. These two groups helped establish the governments with two very diverse ways (N. Korea is communist and S. Korea is a Republic). The dividing line between North and South Korea is the 38th Parallel. In 1950, Communist forces crossed the parallel in an invasion that started the Korean War. In 1953, a truce was arranged, but skirmishes at the 38th parallel continued to erupt. During the war, many villages along the 38th parallel changed hands several times. "Cranes" is set in one of those villages.

The Korean War, like all civil wars, sometimes pitted relative against relative, neighbor against neighbor, and friend against friend. This story focuses on one of these relationships.

Cranes

The northern village at the border of the Thirty-eighth Parallel was snugly settled under the high, bright autumn sky.

One white gourd lay against another on the dirt floor of an empty farmhouse. The occasional village elders first put out their bamboo pipes before passing by, and the children, too, turned aside some distance off. Their faces were ridden with fear.

The village as a whole showed few traces of destruction from the war, but it did not seem like the same village Song-sam had known as a boy

At the foot of a chestnut grove on the hill behind the village he stopped and climbed a chestnut tree. Somewhere far back in his mind he heard the old man with a wen shout, "You bad boy, you're climbing up my chestnut tree again!"

The old man must have passed away, for among the few village elders Song-sam had met, the old man was not to be found. Holding the trunk of the tree, Song-sam gazed at the blue sky for a while. Some chestnuts fell to the ground as the dry clusters opened of their own accord.

In front of the farmhouse that had been turned into a public peace-police office, a young man stood, tied up. He seemed to be a stranger, so Song-sam approached him to have a close look. He was taken aback; it was none other than his boyhood playmate, Tok-chae.

Song-sam sat down on the dirt floor and lit a cigarette. Tok-chae was to be escorted to Chongdan by

one of the peace policemen.

After a time, Song-sam lit a new cigarette from the first and stood up.
"I'll take the fellow with me."

Tok-chaе, his face averted, refused to look at Song-sam. They left the village.

Song-sam kept on smoking, but the tobacco had no taste. He just kept drawing in the smoke and blowing it out. Then suddenly he thought that Tok-chaе, too, must want a puff. He thought of the days when they used to share dried gourd leaves behind walls, hidden from the adults. But today, how could he offer a cigarette to a fellow like this?

Once when they were small, he went with Tok-chaе to steal some chest-

nuts from the grandpa with wen. It was Song-sam's turn to go up the tree. Suddenly there came shuts from the old man. He slipped and fell to the ground. Song-sam got chestnut needles all over his bottom, but he kept on running. It was only when they reached a safe place where the old man could not overtake them that he turned his bottom to Tok-chaе. Plucking out those needles hurt so much that he could not keep tears from welling up in his eyes. Tok-chaе produced a fistful of chestnuts from his pocket and thrust them into Song-sam's...Song-sam threw away the cigarette he had just lit. Then he made up his mind not to light another while he was escorting Tok-chaе.

They reached the hill pass, the hill where he and Tok-chaе used to cut fodder for the cows until Song-sam had had to move near Chontae, south of the Thirty-eighth Parallel, two years before the liberation.

Song-sam felt a sudden surge of anger in spite of himself and shouted, "So how many have you killed?"

For the first time, Tok-chaе cast a quick glance at him and then turned away. "How many did you kill, you?" he asked again.

Tok-chaе turned toward him once again and glared. The glare grew intense and his mouth twitched. "So you managed to kill many, eh?" Song-sam felt his heart becoming clear from within, as if an obstruction had been removed. "If you were vice-chairman of the Communist League, why didn't you run? You must have been lying low with a secret mission." Tok-chaе did not answer. "Speak up, what is your mission?" Tok-chaе kept walking. Tok-chaе is hiding something, Song-sam thought. He wanted to take a good look at him, but Tok-chaе would not turn his averted face.

Fingering the revolver at his side, Song-sam went on: "No excuse is necessary. You are sure to be shot anyway. Why don't you tell the truth here and now?"

"I'm not going to make any excuses. They made me vice-chairman of the league because I was one

of the poorest and I was a hard-working farmer. If that constitutes a crime worthy of death, so be it. I am still what I used to be—the only thing I'm good at is digging in the soil." After a short pause, he added, "My old man is bedridden at home. He has been ill almost half a year." Tok-chae's father was a widower, a hard-working poor farmer who lived only for his son. Seven years ago his back had given out and his skin had become diseased. "You married?" "Yes," replied Tok-chae after a while. "To whom?" "Shorty."

"To Shorty?" How interesting! A woman so small and plump that she knew the earth's vastness but not the sky's altitude. Such a cold fish! He and Tok-chae used to tease her and make her cry. And Tok-chae had married that girl.

"How many kids?" "The first is arriving in the fall, she says."

Song-sam had difficulty swallowing a laugh about to explode in spite of himself. Although he had asked how many kids Tok-chae had, he could not help wanting to burst into laughter at the image of her sitting down, with a large stomach, one span around. But he realized this was no time to laugh or joke over such matters.

"Anyway, it's strange you did not run away." "I tried to escape. They said that once the South invaded, no man would be spared. So men between seventeen and forty were forcibly taken to the North. I thought of evacuating, even if I had to carry my father on my back. But father said no. How could the farmers leave the land behind when the crops were ready for harvest? He grew old on that farm depending on me as the prop and mainstay of the family. I wanted to be with him in his last moments so that I could close his eyes with my own hand. Besides, where can farmers like us go, who know only living on the land?"

Last June Song-sam had had to take refuge. At night he had broken the news privately to his father. But his father had said the same thing! Where can a farmer go, leaving all the chores behind? So Song-sam left alone. Roaming about the strange streets and villages in the South. Song-sam had been haunted by thoughts of his old parents and the young children, left with all the chores. Fortunately, his family was safe then, as now.

He crossed the ridge of a hill. This time Song-sam walked with his face averted. The autumn sun was hot on his forehead. This was an ideal day for the harvest, he thought.

When they reached the foot of the hill, Song-sam hesitatingly stopped. In the middle of the field he spied a group of cranes that looked like men in white clothes bending over. This used to be the neutralized zone along the Thirty-eighth Parallel. The cranes were still living here, as before, while the people were all gone.

Once, when Song-sam and Tok-chae were about twelve, they had set a trap here, without the knowledge of the adults, and had caught a crane, a Tanjong crane. They had roped the crane, even its wings, and had paid daily visits, patting its neck and riding on its back. Then one day they overheard the

neighbors whispering. Someone had come from Seoul with a permit from the governor general's office to catch cranes as specimens or something. Then and there the two boys dashed off to the field. That they would be found out and punished was no longer a weighty concern; all they worried about was the fate of their crane. Without a moment's delay, still out of breath from running, they untied the crane's feet and wings. But the bird could hardly walk. It must have been worn out from

being bound. The two held it up in the air. Then, all of a sudden, a shot was fired. The crane fluttered its wings a couple of times and came down again.

It was shot, they thought. But the next moment, as another crane from a nearby bush fluttered its wings, the boys' crane stretched its long neck with a whoop and disappeared into the sky. For a long time the two boys could not take their eyes away from the blue sky into which their crane had soared.

"Hey, why don't we stop here for a crane hunt?" Song-sam spoke up suddenly. Tok-chae was puzzled, struck dumb. "I'll make a trap with this rope; you flush a crane over here."

Having untied Tok-chae's hands, Song-sam already started crawling among the weeds.

Tok-chae's face turned white. "You are sure to be shot anyway"—these words flashed through his mind. Pretty soon a bullet would fly from where Song-sam had gone, he thought. Some paces away, Song-sam quickly turned toward him. "Hey, how come you are standing there like you're dumb? Go flush the crane!"

Only then did Tok-chae catch on. He started crawling among the weeds. A couple of Tanjong cranes soared high into the clear blue autumn sky, fluttering their huge wings.