Names
Joe Milan Jr.

They say at the height of Yi Sun-Shin’s last battle, dying, gasping, he demanded his nephew, his Lieutenant, to strip him of his armor and stand in front in his place. ‘Let no one know I’m dead.’ And that was it. His nephew took his place, and the battle was won. None of the soldiers knew of General’s death until after the battle. That’s what soldiers want to be. Brave. Glorious. A name.

Descendent of a hero, son of coward, and all of our names the same. That’s me. Don’t complain to me about expectation. My namesake was the greatest hero, ever. Printed on statues. Spoken with pride. Three hundred years ago he defeated armies and navies. He slaughtered Jurchens – the future conquerors of China. He was betrayed and tortured by his king and yet, he came back from that dank dark dungeon to defeat the largest Japanese fleet ever assembled, with thirteen turtle ships. Try that on the next time someone asks ‘What’s your name?’ Look for that split second of admiration, that twitch of disbelief. ‘Are you related to – ?’ Yeah. That’s me. Maybe it is envy, the kind that had my ancestor thrown into jail.

If that story is to be believed.

Not that I meet many people anymore, not since coming here – to the bunkers – tipping off the very edge of the DMZ. I’m an observer. My job is to look past the valley and the river to their side, the south side, into the mass of trees and hills and mark on maps where we can see the enemy and call in coordinates. That’s what I do. Watch and wait. Wait for the day when the skies go dark with lead and everything is battered and ruined and I stand in front of it all, holding back the wave, calling in coordinates and acting as a human breakwater, because here, they say, is where the war will be won or lost. Where the heroes will be made. For fifteen years that day has not come. When they ask me if I’d like a transfer, I always say the same thing, ‘I want to stay.’ Fifteen times I said that. When new soldiers do come, they look at me and say, ‘Yes, but fifteen years! What about rotations? What about seniority? Why here?’ Sometimes I tell them it’s for our country: for the part that hasn’t starved. Sometimes I tell them that it’s for our dear leader. Now there’s a man that knows what it is to bear a name. They nod. They respect me – at first. But then they see me day after day, they notice the lone stripe on my collar without promotion and it becomes clear; I am not that man. Not that hero. They lose their faith. A name is just a name right?

The guys are correct: I didn’t have to stay. I didn’t have to look out from this spine of crumbling trenches. There’s a phone, and I could easily ask the higher ups for a transfer. This ridge is like all the others on our side: ancient, ragged, stretching from one sea to the next; starved of green in the winter, everything living clinging to broken gray rocks. Yeah, it is ugly. The valley dips with green fields – mine fields – and breaks at the very bottom by a river. On the other side, beyond the pines – disguising the mountains, the barbed wire, the foxholes, the guns, the enemy – is the

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South. This is the furthest south anyone can go. I stare towards it a lot. Yeah, it’s my job, but I get lost in it. At night, way off in the distance, you can see the yellow haze of light coming off their cities. Like torches. Beacons. Locusts. You can only see the stars from our side. It’s beautiful when you take it all in, the light and the dark. It’s hard to leave. So, when they ask me, I say the same thing. Every year, the guys shake their heads and count their days, the higher ups pat my back and I feel rooted.

I wonder if my father saw the haze too — if he came to this river and looked back, even for a second. Back then, I imagine, this valley was beaten and ripped raw like the moon. Everything dark and cold, now buried beneath the trees.

‘Your father left to join the fight. He’s a man of Yi,’ my mother told me and to everyone in town. ‘He left in the night, so the enemy wouldn’t catch him.’ But I knew the truth. He fled: from his duty to the army, from his moment to liberate our people from the Americans, from us. If others in town knew, I couldn’t say. I was young. Maybe they believed it. Either way, people still broke into smiles when they looked at me and heard my name. ‘Wow! He looks just like him! The genes are strong.’ I had the gaze, or perhaps the glare, of the man casted in bronze. But that changed as I got older; my black hair peppered with white, my nose grew wider, my glare relaxed. I no longer looked like the monuments and no one said so. My face mirrored the age-stained photo in an envelope buried deep in the junk drawer. My father’s photo. The war took most of his things and what war didn’t take my mother fed to the fire, except that photo. During moments when my mother thought I wasn’t around, she held that envelope near the burning coals. Breathless, she stared into the ash and black, but she didn’t throw the envelope in. She didn’t speak about him, other than he had left to fight. I felt bad for her. She married the name of a hero, only to be left by a coward. We all make mistakes, and you could hear it in the way she said Father.

It was the same as traitor.

‘You’re going to do great things—my little avenger,’ she used to say. Avenger – the person who inflicts harm on behalf of others. The selfless hero who saves the rest. Yeah. That’s supposed to be me.

Yesterday, on our side of the valley we watched a deer, scratching the grass, digging for roots. It was thin, sickly. It scratched and scratched. It sniffed the weeds. Then, in a glint and flash, it was a plume of red mess. Land mine—probably. The boom echoed a second later. Everyone grabbed their guns. It was silent. Was this how it would start? The enemy firing first, the first casualty a deer? It was gone, only a smoky stained crater. The line waited for the laugh, for someone to say it was all right, ‘just a stupid deer.’ I think they all looked at me, but all I saw was what we would be — someday. A battered wet crater. Mute, I bit my tongue to keep from puking. Fifteen years, and that was the first time I had seen real blood. The first time this thing, this place seemed truly real and the startling truth gripped me.

Nobody said anything.

That one little crater, stayed with me for the rest of the day. Like when you were a kid and you stared at the sun and that purple green spot burned into your vision. I can see it even when I close my eyes. I always thought of the bombs darkening the skies the enemy charging up the hill at us in a wash of red, but tonight, as I look at the door, I can’t even pretend to imagine myself being anything other than

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what I am. How long did it take for my father to understand this? Was it when the war started and he did nothing? Was it when the war was coming to him and the army knocked on the door?

My mother could have been correct. Maybe my father really did go out there to fight the enemy. Maybe he did live up to the name, but died too quickly for anyone to talk about him. Many people died in those days, the war for the liberation of the fatherland was like that. Bodies and rubble, that was Korea. But when I look back and see my father that night, a rare night when the concussions in the distance were quiet, I just knew. Him, with his dirty bag slung over his shoulder, standing there at the threshold of the open door, looking, in all directions except back into the house, said it all. I wanted to call out to him — to scream, ‘coward.’ But I couldn’t. He slowly closed the door behind him and his quiet footsteps that, for a moment, sounded like he was sneaking up on the darkness to strangle the enemy hidden within it. I hoped—wished— that he would turn around and come back in the house with hands wet with blood. Instead, the sound of heavy, running footsteps broke the silence. I sat up. I wanted to run out there, with him. But I froze. Choked. I imagined him, running past burning farmlands, collapsing tin-roofed houses, fleeing among the people with their white linens dirtied black, running, so far and hard that when he finally made it to the ocean, he just kept running into the blackness like a man on fire. And I sat there, staring at the door.

Honestly though, it’s this — every morning, a suffocating weight piles on me as I face the doorway to the trenches. Two choices: path to the left, the maze of dirt and concrete walls that goes out to the phone, the road, the jeep, the countryside, the barren farmland, the empty homes. Path to the right, the lookout, my station, my binoculars, my grave. Those on the line are always the first to die. Every morning I hesitate behind the door — I don’t know how long, maybe it’s only seconds or minutes — fighting the urge to run left to the phone and scream into it ‘get me out of here!’ Then I think, is that what you are? Another apple not falling far from the tree? This is what bothers me most. This is what keeps me here. Every morning I have to go right. I have to. I don’t want to. I don’t want to become another mess soaked up by the trees.

At the beginning, I didn’t think about that phone. Back then I pretended it wasn’t there; I looked down whenever I was near it. At night, when soldiers asked each other ‘are you, brave?’ I always responded too quickly, ‘Yes.’ Brittle, hollow, my voice squeaked out ‘Yes, brave.’ And I believed it. I believed that I could forever walk out that door and go right, without thinking of the left. I told myself, ‘the genes are strong.’ Then I had half a thought, ‘Which genes?’ I couldn’t give an answer. Each year, it got worse — which genes? Which genes? And now — after that deer and the report of the mine — it just keeps echoing inside, which genes? So loud and hard I feel it burying me and I’m brought back to the door, that night, my slouching father tip-toeing out while I did nothing but watch, wait and listen.

Even if I went left, I think I would just keep going, forgetting the phone. I would run until my heart gave out or someone stopped it for me. They would come for me, burn me, relish in the knowledge that I was everything I was not supposed to be. It could all be in my head, maybe no one would care. I wouldn’t be the first to run. Maybe I would get away; I am the second fastest 1000 meter runner in the squad. But after the 1000 metres, if I got away, then what? I think I’d still have that feeling — like being two breaths from drowning. I tried so hard to imagine myself, different. Chest...
out and proud, fighting like the avenger everyone wanted me to be. Leading. Running is really no different than staying. Gasping, staring, waiting for the wave to come with fire.

If my eyes could burn holes, that door would be smoke.

Sometimes I hear the whispers of those who bunk with me. They call me the door man. I can see them imitating me, in front of storage doors, bathroom doors – staring, breathing through their mouths like idiots. Catatonic. When they drink – everyone drinks here out on the line – they become blatant in their mocking. ‘Let no doors know I’m dead!’

I give them a look, trying to stare them down.

‘Hero? Slayer of armies?’ They laugh. ‘Sure your name isn’t Yi Sun Shit?’ Another will add, ‘Let no one know that Yi Chicken Shit is here defending the line!’

‘And who are you?’ I squeak. ‘Who of you have the balls to stay here past one petty year?’

‘You? Balls?’ They cackle with the delight of school children. ‘Hiding behind doors for fifteen years don’t mean you got balls.’

They want me to go through the door without pause, never looking back, moving heroically – but really, how does one go through a door heroically? They want me to be angry, looking for blood. They want me to be the man that makes them less afraid. They still have hope.

No one talks about why the king threw Sun Shin into the dungeon. We learn as children that the king framed him, out of fear of him. Witnesses said he ran from a battle, deserted his post. It’s impossible to imagine a hero and a coward being one. Yet, here I am, as my father before me, with the same blood and filled with fear. I wonder if we all could really be that different. Besides, the war that made this name, was lost. China came to save us as the country nearly bled to death and was left in ruin. Abandoned. The last war was the same. There was no victory. Only death. Only trenches.

I thought it was all about choosing one direction or another, and I can’t anymore. I’ve always thought it was my fear, another traitor to my name. Soggy barley instead of rice. Fifteen years, of waiting, of staring at a damn door, fighting to be the name. And all I can think now what am I really?

Those other voices in the background would say, ‘Yes – but – yes – but –’ No. I will not play this game. I can not play this game. I’ve made my own choice.

Tonight, I will go another way. A third way. I can not watch and wait another day. My rifle is near, on the ground by the locker. It’s waiting for me; to grab it, to load it, to fire it, to kill with it. But it will wait. I’ve waited a long time, it can wait too.

It’s quiet, except for the sounds of sleep. I reach the locker and open it. I grab the only clean thing I have, a white T-shirt. I grab the rifle; it’s light. It’s ready. There will be a day when the concussions start and men scream. They are going to come. They are going to barrel out of the darkness and climb up the hill. Red will drape the hillside. But that will not be for me to see.

I tie the t-shirt onto the rifle, a good choking knot. The door looks smaller tonight. For once I know which way I really want to go. I think my father knew what was held in the darkness. The only hope men like us can have, blind hope. You can never know what’s in the dark without going into it. But I will not run. I will creep out that door. I will crawl out of the trench, away from terrified eyes – who wouldn’t say

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anything anyway – and make my way down into the valley. I will not turn around. I will zig-zag through the fields. I will wade through the river until I’m swimming in it. When I drag myself out to the other side, drenched, I will march forward, waving my flag as I surrender myself to the sheet of green and the darkness. After all, what good is a man with name if not charging forward?

Stalling, choking and out of breath – when I think I can see the shadows descending on me and I desperately want to run back – that is when I’ll tell myself, this is my choice. My choice. My genes. Only me and no one else. And I will move forward.

I am this Yi Sun Shin.