The Red Hill

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Born in Yeongcheon, Gyeongbuk Province, Ha attended Dong - University. In 1955, while a student at Dong-A, his short story, "Blood Kin" won a literary magazine's award, and in 1957, his novel Two Generations was the winner in the prestigious Hankook Ilbo Literary Competition. In 1970 he received the National Medal of Culture for his novel The Weasel. Ha's main theme is the Korean War and its painful aftermath, particularly in the rural areas of Korea. Two Generations is a story of a father and his son, the father who lost an arm in the Second World War and the son who lost a leg in the Korean War. The story ends when the one - armed father carries his one - legged son on his back, the very picture of wounded souls of a Korean village. "The Red Hill" also deals with the heart - wrenching death of two country children, blown up by the unused bombs buried in the hill over which they trudged to school every day. In Ha's stories the World War II; and the Korean War left indelible imprints on the body and soul of Korean people.
Strangely enough grass did not grow on that hill. A few blades of weed that managed to break through the dirt would soon wither away. The soil was bad, they said, it was crumbly like dry sand and red in color.

The mystery of the hill, however, was that azaleas, the kind with unusually large petals, smothered the hill every spring in a cloud of deep crimson blossoms. So the hill was red throughout the year, red with azaleas in the spring and bald in other seasons.

To the people in the surrounding villages, the hill held a tragic secret. Hundreds of men had been killed on its slopes during the Korean War. The hill was a site of the bloodiest bayonet-to-bayonet combat between the Communists and the National Army. Eventually they exterminated each other defending and capturing the hill in a series of rapid see-saw combats. Their mutilated bodies, gruesome weapons, and unused explosives were buried under the soothing quilt of the earth.

Since then, azaleas have bloomed more gorgeously than ever as if they had absorbed the young blood of those unfulfilled lives. Now, more than a decade after the war,
children went through the narrow paths over the hill to their one-story school house. In early mornings their laughter and chattering rang out to the clear, blue sky.

This morning as every morning, a group of merry third graders were walking through an azalea-covered path to school.

"Ah, it sure tastes good," said Hadong, who chewed vigorously a handful of petals.

"That crazy boy. There is nothing he can't eat," said Yunhui frowning at his wide grin.

"Why don't you just try it? It really is sweet," Hadong insisted.

"No, I won't."

"Then, what are you gathering those azaleas for?"

"I'm not going to eat them. I'm taking them to school. They will look pretty in our classroom."

"Hey, that's an idea. I will do that, too," said Hadong, who immediately launched on his job.

"Hey, we are late. Hurry up," shouted Insu, the perennial bystander.
The three classmates, followed by several children, began to run toward the school. Far down the hill was the cleanly swept school ground glistening like a sheet of notebook in the middle of green fields.

The school had recently won an award as the "model rural school" in a nationwide competition on "How to Build a Better Rural School." As a result, the Ministry of Education had designated the school to hold a demonstration class for a visiting American Educational Mission.

The school principal was excited and worried about the demonstration program. He stalked around the school like a father waiting for the birth of his child. Even weeks before he had ordered both the teachers and pupils to sweep and mop every corner of the school building. He himself picked a bit here and a scrap there whenever he found it.

Following long hours of faculty meetings, Mr. Yun, the third grade teacher, was selected to conduct the demonstration class. Though young with only a few years of experience, he was given this great honor for his outstanding performance and devotion.

As an infantry soldier in the War, Mr. Yun had witnessed, above all the excruciating horror and misery, the plight of children.
"I decided to become a teacher to do my little share in nourishing and guiding the minds of our children. Their suffering, and fear in the aftermath of the war must be slowly erased and their minds restored to health," Mr. Yun said in his first interview with the principal.

Since he came to the school, he has led his class in frequent excursions to the forests and mountains to "acquaint the children with Nature and the beauty of our country."

"Do you know, children, how many years these mountains and rivers have been here?"

"Mr. Teacher, I do. Four thousand years," Hadong answered.

"Why four thousand years?"

"Because our history is that long."

"You are right and yet wrong. Yes, our country is four thousand years old, but these beautiful things here had been made millions of years before. Think of it. Isn't it marvelous that we can all enjoy them after our many, many ancestors have had them before us?"

"Yes," the children chorused and looked around with new wonder.
"Our country is specially blessed. We have the ocean on three sides, high mountains and good fields."

"And, you can really see and feel the beauty of our country only when you have beautiful and open minds," Mr. Yun said half to himself, noting each little face around him.

This fine spring morning in his classroom where long wooden benches and desks are neatly arranged on the mud-floor, Mr. Yun bent over his textbooks in his final search for a suitable subject to be used in the demonstration. He had just made a decision and drawn a rough outline on the class project when the bell rang and the children piled into the room.

All his students stood at attention and bowed to him at the class president's commanding call, "Bow to the teacher!" Mr. Yun bowed in return and presented his plan to the class.

"Children, as you know, our class has been chosen to do the demonstration for the American Mission. They are our guests and great scholars who will come here to observe our school. So, I expect all of you to do the best you can in your assignments and class discussion."

The children became serious and tense because they were simple country children to whom big words like American Mission and demonstration sounded strange and awe-
inspiring.

Mr. Yun continued, "Our class subject will be "Our Beautiful Land" from our social science book. Now let us all look out the windows. You see the Red Hill and the beautiful azaleas?"

"Yes!"

"They are beautiful. Our land is beautiful because we have many different flowers, trees, and good crops, too. Can anyone tell me some plants and crops we have around here?"

"Yes, pine tree, poplar, forsythia, rose, rice, barley, millet...."

"That's enough."

"Our land also produces various kinds of minerals. Do you know what we have deep down in the ground?"

"Yes."

"All right, Insu, will you name one?"

"Yes, sir. Iron."

"And?"
"Coal, sir."

"Good."

"Let us again look out the window. Look at the beautiful Red Hill. Even in that hill, if you dig deep enough, you may find gold and silver, too."

"Oh, boy! Gold and silver!"

The children shouted from wonder and excitement.

"Today, I am going to divide the class into several groups. Each group will have a different assignment. Those who live in the same neighborhood will become a group. The assignments are a map of the area we live in, a geographical model, a collection of plants and minerals, and a report on our youth activities such as the handicrafts class and the school choir.

The group assigned to do the collection of minerals consisted of Hadong, Insu, and Yunhui, two boys and a girl who always came to school together.

After the school was over, Hadong, nicknamed "Clown" for his wise cracks and antics, summoned his two friends.

"Hey, why don't we dig a hole on the hill today on our way home?" he asked, a mischievous grin spreading over his
wide, rustic face. "We may find a chunk of gold."

Insu, the more thoughtful of the two, said, "You don't know how deep you have to dig. Besides, we don't have any tools. We'd better ask our teacher tomorrow."

"Oh, come on. Didn't he say we might find gold and silver if we dig deep enough? We will dig deep. Tools? We can find a stick, a piece of iron or something on the hill. Let's go. Just imagine finding a big lump of gold!"

"Have you ever seen gold or silver?" Yunhui asked. She was a diminutive girl with a little white face that contrasted with her shiny black hair.

"Well, I saw a gold ring my big sister received when she got married," said Hadong. "It is yellow."

"And we have silver spoons and chopsticks. My mother keeps them in a chest for New Year's and August Moon feasts. They are white, sort of gray white," said Insu.

Willy-nilly they decided to try. At a likely spot under an azalea bush, all three began to dig. Hadong used his hands scraping out dirt while Insu and Yunhui used the tops of their plastic pencil-holders.

The soil of the hill yielded. They had dug about two feet when they suddenly heard their tools scrape against a hard
"Wait a minute!" Insu shouted. "There's something in here."

"Let's dig, dig!" Hadong shouted.

The thing they found was round, white, and hard. It looked like the half of a dried gourd their mothers used to carry food to the rice paddies in the summer time. But it had odd holes in it, its inside was black and dirty.

"What is it?" Yunhui asked.

"I don't know. It is white like silver, though," said Insu.

"It looks awful," Yunhui grimaced.

"Why don't we take this to the teacher tomorrow? I think it is a chunk of silver. Oh, boy! Didn't I say we'd find something?"

Hadong was jubilant. He wrapped it carefully in his cloth book-wrapper, and took it home.

The next morning, Hadong went to school earlier than usual, secretly gloating over the triumph he would have in front of the whole class. He unwrapped the bundle which he had brought to school, and showed it to his classmates, beaming.
"What in the world is it?" one asked.

"I know what it is. It is a human skull," another said confidently.

"No, it is not," Hadong retorted angrily.

"I know it is."

"No, it is not."

When Mr. Yun was presented with the white object, he winced a little and then smiled.

"Do you know what it is, Hadong?"

Before Hadong could open his mouth, his opponent answered,

"Sir, it is a human skull."

"That's right. It is the skull of a man," said Mr. Yun. Hadong's grin turned into an agonizing disappointment and then anger.

"Mr. Teacher, didn't you tell us we'd find gold or silver in the hill? Well, I dug deep and found it," he said with rare defiance.
"I am sorry, Hadong. But you have to dig really deep into the ground to find such things. One or two meters are not enough. Not even one hundred meters. We will talk about mining later in the semester. For your assignment, why don't you collect metals you can find easily around here?"

The next day, school over, Hadong coaxed his friends again to look for another more likely spot and try again. Insu and Yunhui were reluctant, but they were persuaded by Hadong's determination to recover his lost face. He had even brought a shovel to school.

This time they settled on a small clearing on the shady side of the hill.

"Today, I'm going to dig more than a hundred meters," Hadong said.

"Instead of spending time like this, we'd better collect some stones and metals. You know the big day is only five days off," Yunhui suggested.

"I know, but I'm going to find gold to show that smart guy."

They began to dig in silence. After a couple of hours, Yunhui was tired and wanted to go to the bathroom. She walked into the azalea bush as far from the boys as possible. She found a shaded nook behind a rock and was
about to sit down when she was deafened by an explosion. For a moment the whole earth seemed to be crumbling to pieces.

In a few moments, Yunhui managed to recover sufficiently to venture forward. She scrambled back to her two friends. But they were gone. Only severed limbs and torn flesh were scattered over the place.

"Ah...."

Yunhui tried to run but her feet collapsed under her. By the time the villagers arrived at the scene, she was lying unconscious.

The two boys' funeral was conducted in the school ground. Mr. Yun sat rigidly through the ceremony. The mothers' wailing and the children's sobbing were too removed from his excruciating grief and guilt. He felt cold sweat on his back when he saw Yunhui's blank eyes and pale lips.

After the funeral was over, Mr. Yun turned in his resignation to the principal.

"But, Mr. Yun, it was not solely your fault that the two boys had that accident. I know how you feel, but please consider this matter again. Moreover, it is too late to ask another teacher to prepare for the demonstration," the principal said.
"I feel that I am responsible for the death of the two boys, and I do hope you ask the authorities to postpone the demonstration."

"I have contacted the Superintendent and his order is that the accident should be hushed over as soon as possible. So, everything goes as planned."

"But the children are hardly in the mood for such an important task, sir."

"But, don't you know that our school's reputation is hanging on this program?"

"Mr. Principal, I hardly feel that the school reputation is of importance when I consider the death of the boys and the psychological state of the children, and my sense of responsibility, and God knows, my guilt and grief." Mr. Yun tried to restrain his rising anger at the principal's callousness.

Finally the principal and Mr. Yun reached an agreement that Mr. Yun perform the demonstration class and resign at the end of the semester.

Despite the gloomy pall cast over the school, everything was ready for the visitors on a clear spring morning. The principal, the teachers, and the children, in their best
dresses, were lined up in front of the school building. Finally, two cars, one shiny black sedan and an Army jeep slid through the school gate. A tall, gaunt American stepped out, accompanied by his Korean interpreter, an Army lieutenant. Two other Americans, a man and a woman followed with cameras slung over their shoulders. From the jeep emerged two officials from the Ministry of Education and the local superintendent.

Following a ceremonious greeting by the principal, the company proceeded to the inspection of the school and a brief tea in the principal's office. Then they all filed into Mr. Yun's classroom where maps and models were arranged in front and children sat in rigidly upright posture.

Mr. Yun, though drained of enthusiasm and plagued by grief, had enough composure to conduct the class. He briefly talked about the subject, "Our Beautiful Land," and let some of the students report on the area's unique agricultural products, handicrafts, and some rural activities.

When the discussion arrived at the mineral resources of the area, the entire class turned toward the Red Hill as if it had made a secret pact to do so. Azaleas were in full bloom. The children fell silent.

The tall American whispered to his interpreter for an explanation, and the other two Americans, who had been dozing for some time, leaned toward the interpreter with
their tourist hands instinctively on their cameras.

Yunhui slowly got up from her chair, went to the window, and began her report. Perspiration stood on her pale forehead and her eyes wandered. The moment she turned her face toward the hill, she trembled and, accompanied by a faint moan, collapsed onto the floor.

There was pandemonium. Mr. Yun's plea for order was ignored. Yunhui was taken to the school janitor's room where several women teachers gave her first-aid.

In the afternoon, at the evaluation conference, the tall American said, "I am deeply disturbed by and worried about the girl. It is obvious that she has a serious mental or psychological trouble which should not have been neglected so long. I would like to hear her background and an explanation for today's incident."

Upon the interpreter's translation, Mr. Yun stood and slowly looked around the table. There were the detached scholarly face of the American inquirer, the unknowing curiosity in the eyes of the two Americans, and the impatient, humiliated expression of the Korean officials.

Mr. Yun turned to look out the window at the Red Hill, blazing with azaleas in full grandeur. And he could not utter a word.