Life in Translation

By Steven T. King

Chapter 1: Korea 1952

Airman Frank King looked down to check the gauges of his small twin propeller aircraft as he slid into the lead position in front of three B52 bombers.

“This is Sinatra, the road is paved and the skies are clear,” said King into his radio. Frank had received the Sinatra nickname early in his time at the Air Force Academy from his bunkmate who over heard him singing in the shower.

Sinatra led the decent to 6,000 feet and the bombers following behind him opened their bomb doors. The seven-plane squadron quickly approached a dark and silent city. There were no streetlights and no movement on the streets.

“Pyongyang must be the darkest capital in the world,” King thought to himself as he flew over the empty streets.

As the first bombs began to fall, Frank was startled by streaks of light that few past his canopy. Frank knew the sight of machine gun tracer rounds so he instinctively pushed his control stick forward and dove towards the source of the streaks.

“Targets on the ground” Sinatra quickly but calmly said into the microphone as he continued to dive. “Bombers, stay on your objective. I’ll take out the targets.”

Frank focused on the shooting positions and pulled the trigger as he dove through the streaks of green passing in the dark night. Frank’s priority was to take out the guns in order to protect the bombers and their mission. He heard the horrible of sound of multiple strikes to his hull echo through his cockpit but he stayed focused on his target and continued to squeeze the trigger until his finger was numb with pain. A huge ball of fire erupted in his sights directly in front of him and he quickly pulled the stick up and to the left to climb back into formation.

“Got’em!” Frank said into his radio. “Returning to point.” The bombers were closing their large bomb doors and veering back west as Frank pulled up on his control stick. As he climbed he felt a steady pull against his hand as the stick failed to move the plane to the left.

“Pony Boy, I have a problem. I can’t turn. I think my ruder is shot.”

“Coming down to take a look,” Pony Boy said as he dove off the starboard edge of the bomber formation to check on Frank.

“Sinatra, you are loosing fuel and your tail is shot to pieces. Try pulling to the right.”

“Negative Pony Boy, no control left or right,” sighed Frank as silence filled the airwaves and Pony Boy was not sure of what to say.

“Can you get to the sea? We can send a boat after you,” Pony Boy finally said while trying to sound upbeat.

“I am trying Pony. You are going to have to take the lead back to base. Get those bombers home,” said Frank with urgency in his voice.

“What are you going to do Sinatra?”

“I am not sure but I will figure something out. Just send the Big Mother after me.”

“Will do… May God keep you friend… Returning to base,” Pony Boy hesitated and then eventually pulled away to lead the bombers back to base.

Frank flew North into the darkness over the rural northern point of the Korean Peninsula. His fuel gauge was falling faster than the second hand on his watch and he knew he had little time. The ocean was to the east and the North China Sea to the west but he was headed north and unable to turn left or right. Frank hoped and prayed that he would find a soft place to set it down but all he saw in the dark night was miles of forests. As the engines choked out and the plane went silent, Frank took a deep breath, said a quick prayer, “God please help me!” and he pulled the ejection handle. The glass canopy over his head flew off and the one-second delay to allow the canopy to clear before the seat launched seemed like an eternity.

The seat launched Frank out of his cockpit with such force his back popped as he rocked up. As the chair reached it’s peak altitude the chute deployed without any problems. During his slow decent, Frank watched his plane crash into the trees below and burst into flames. The fire illuminated the area and it was the only light he could see for miles. He knew an explosion like that would not be missed and the North Korean army would be looking for him soon. Thankfully, a slight wind blew him east, away from the wreckage.

Surprisingly, his descent was quiet and peaceful as he slowly fell towards the dark forest. As he got closer to the trees, the fall did not seem so slow. Hitting the canopy of the forest, branches scraped and scratched him as he fell through the dense branches stopping suddenly as his feet slammed the ground and his body quickly followed. A sharp pain shot from his right ankle up through his knee and he wanted to scream in agony but resisted, hoping to remain hidden.

Frank quickly pulled in his army green parachute while still laying on the ground. He looked in all directions and listened intently for any sign of the North Koreans. All he heard was the sounds of the forest. His actions were calm and deliberate as if he had been in this situation before but his mind whorled with questions.

*Should I move towards the wreckage or away? Should I turn on the emergency beacon or keep silent? Could I run if I had to?* Hundreds of questions and possible scenarios raced through his mind and he had only been on the ground less than a minute.

Frank patted his chest and thigh pockets with both hands like a guy who had lost his wallet. He was looking for his emergency rescue radio. He quickly found the small green plastic box and turned the only dial to the on position and a small red light began to flash on a steady beat. His location was being transmitted and Frank was comforted by the idea for a brief moment. He just hoped the North Korean’s weren’t able to track him or the Marines would be faster.

He felt around his ankle and figured it was broken. He had sprained his ankles before playing basketball and the pain now was ten times worse than he felt on the court. Knowing he would not be able to move quickly, he pulled himself up to the thick trunk of a pine tree. Refolding his parachute to use as a blanket and for camouflage, he pulled it around him and covered it with leaves, pine needles and dirt. The only sounds he heard was the leaves he rustled as he pulled them around to hide himself incase someone came along. Frank sat under the cover of the forest for several hours startled by every natural sound the forest made that night. He had four hours before light would illuminate his position. He knew he needed energy so he tried to sleep but pain combined with fear made that a difficult exercise. *How fast can the Marines get here?*

When the sun began to rise, amber rays of light peaked through the trees.

“I made it through the night,” Frank whispered to himself as he woke from his restless and fearful short nap. He reached inside his utility vest and pulled out a leather bound book from his inside pocket. Putting his thumbs together, he opened the tattered pages to whatever page he happened upon and began to read.

He continued to read as the forest awoke. He heard birds chirping and saw something like a squirrel dart across the ground in front of him. It reminded him of camping in the woods on his grandparents’ land when he was a boy, except now every one of his senses was on alert status and he felt like he was part of the forest.

After finishing a passage, he slowly closed the book, held it in his hands and a smile came across his light bathed face. Injured and not knowing who or what would find him, Frank figured he was in the toughest situation of his life but he was surprisingly content, calm and hopeful.

A few moments went by and he heard voices. They were Korean voices coming towards him from behind. He tucked the book back inside his vest and pulled a branch over his face. The voices seemed to be getting closer and were coming directly towards him. Frank could tell it was a man and a woman’s voice meaning probably not military but what would they do if they saw him? Frank lay perfectly still as his heart raced and he tried to control his breathing.

Abruptly, the voices stopped and so did his heart. *Had they seen him?* he thought. Frank held his breath as he felt them approach. The man picked up a stick and poked at the pile of leaves. Frank did not move. The man poked again and then he yelled something in Korean. Frank could not understand a word he said but knew the man was talking to him. Frank held his hands in the air and said the only thing he could think of.

“Hello, Hello, Hi,” Frank said several times quickly.

“I am Frank… from America.”

The man yelled something at the woman who Frank assumed was the man’s wife and she ran back the way they had come. The man was dressed in thick brown cotton pants and a heavy long sleeved shirt that buttoned high on the throat. The man grabbed the parachute and pulled it off of Frank’s legs in a quick jerk.

Broken Korean words and phrases Frank had learned on base ran through his mind as he tried to think of something to let the man know he meant no harm. The only word he could remember was “Help!” which he learned quickly after arriving in South Korea.

“D toh-om,” he said softly somewhat under his breath and then repeated it louder. The man stopped and looked intently at him and turned his ear towards him so he might understand what Frank was saying.

“D toh-om,” Frank said and pointed to his leg.

“D toh-om?” the man repeated in the form of a question.

The man looked down at the injured leg and finally understanding, excitedly said “D Toh-oom!” and knelt down at Frank’s ankle.

He felt around the leg and with every touch, Frank winced and gritted his teeth. Words came fast at Frank and he did not understand a single one but knew the man was trying to help. Abruptly, the man pulled Frank’s arm up, lowered his head under Frank’s armpit and pulled him on top of his back. The man was much smaller than Frank but was built stout. He stepped quickly up the hill and over the rough terrain as if he had walked this hill everyday of his life. The man maintained a steady pace and never stopped to rest. Within a few minutes, Frank smelled smoke from a small fire that was cooking something and he noticed four small huts positioned around the fire.

The man took him inside the first thatch hut they came to and gently laid him on the hard, compacted dirt floor. The woman from before came in through the doorway as the man scurried around looking for something. She yelled something in Korean as she pointed in Frank’s direction but the man did not pause or respond to her. He continued at what he was doing and grabbed a blanket and small stool. She continued to yell as the man worked. He placed the stool under Frank’s injured leg and reached for a jar of dry tea. He pushed past her and walked outside holding a small black kettle in one hand and the jar in the other.

Frank could hear the woman talking outside but the man never responded. After a few minutes the man returned to Frank’s side with a kettle and a towel soaked in dark murky bowling water. He took the tea-soaked towel and placed it around the injured ankle. Frank winced in pain again but tried to calm his reaction because he knew the man was trying to help and was putting his own life at risk by helping him.

“That feels better,” Frank said forgetting momentarily the man could not understand him. Frank’s smile communicated the message when his words could not.

In thick accented English the man in his thirties said slowly, “I… am… Kim.” That was the only sentence he knew in English.

“I am Frank,” he said as he patted his chest. “Thank you for your help.”

The two men smiled at each other and sat in silence, continuing to smile again and again. It was their only form of communication to fill the awkward silence.

Kim’s home consisted of walls made of mud and the roof had straw that was about a foot thick. There was not a traditional bed but only a straw mats and blankets that could roll out of the way during the day.

The woman who Frank assumed was Kim’s wife entered the small room with a bowl and a pair of chopsticks.

“Kiami-Chi,” she said and he answered “Thank you,” in English.

Kim pointed to his wife and said, “Dae.”

“I am Frank. Frank,” he said pressing his palm to his chest as he had before. She smiled and exited with a nod of her head.

Frank ate the fermented cabbage and actually enjoyed it better than any Kiamichi he had ever tasted on base or in the restaurants in the South.

The next morning Frank awoke with this new friend sleeping on a bamboo mat next to him but did not see Dae. The sun had just started to peek over the trees and beams of light entered the room through the cracks in the wooden door. Kim awoke and stretched his arms.

“Good Morning,” Frank said.

“Annyong-hi jumushyossoyo” and Frank assumed that was good morning in Korean. He practiced it under his breath and if he awoke there the next morning he would try it out. But Frank hoped help would be there soon. He knew he was in enemy territory and despite the hospitality of his new friend, Frank knew he needed to get out of there. If the North Korean Army found him they would torture or kill both him and Kim.

Kim headed out the door leaving it slightly open and helped Dae start the fire. Frank looked at the emergency radio and it was still transmitting his location. Unable to help them with making breakfast, Frank pulled out the old book and began to read. A few stories in, he heard several men approach the huts and talk to Kim as he stoked the fire. Frank peeked through the cracked door and saw four North Korean soldiers with rifles talking to Kim. Frank placed the book back in his vest and pulled out his pistol. He covered it with the blanket and pretended to be asleep while trying to watch through the sliver of space between his almost closed eyelids.

*There are four of them and I have seven shots*, thought Frank while his heart raced and he listened intently. Dae spoke not a word and Kim was speaking quickly. Frank could see one of the soldiers began to walk around looking into the huts and he made his way towards Frank’s new home. Right as he pushed the door further open and Frank prepared to take a shot he heard Dae’s voice also at the door. She offered him a cup of hot tea and he steeped towards her to take the cup and joined the rest of the group drinking around the fire.

After finishing their tea, the men walked down the hill towards where Frank landed the day before. Frank swallowed hard and knew the woman who did not want him there in the first place had saved his life.

The couple came in and closed the door behind them. Kim wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and Dae gave him a nervous smile.

“Thank you, Komapsumnida,” Frank said and he disengaged his .45 and placed it back in his vest.

Three days later, Frank awoke as the sun beamed in through the cracks as it had every morning this week but Kim was already up and working on breakfast by the time Frank awoke. For the first time, Frank struggled to his feet using a farm tool as a crutch and hobbled out to the cooking fire. To Frank’s surprise, there was a crowd outside going about life. Kim’s parents and sister were all preparing for the day. Kim’s parents lived in the hut on the far end and stayed out of Franks view through the door for the last few days. Kim met him with a smile and pulled up a small stool that was only a few inches off the ground and offered it to Frank. Frank was no longer clean-shaven and his beard was starting to show. He had not had a shower in a week but was unsure if Kim or Dae had bathed either since he arrived.

Frank made himself as comfortable as a 6 foot 2 inch, 210-pound man can on an 8-inch squatting stool. After struggling to say “Annyong-hi jumushyossoyo” to everyone in the family, he pulled out the leather book to avoid the awkward stares and silences. As he read, he heard the sounds of a helicopter in the distance.

Kim said “He--lo,” and grabbed a white shirt from inside his hut and the radio off of Frank’s survival vest. Kim then sprinted to the top of the hill above his family village and stood at a break in the trees waving the shirt in his left hand and holding the transmitter in his right. Two green helicopters circled the hill and when Kim realized that he had the attention of the pilot, he hung the shirt in a nearby tree and ran back down to the hut with the transmitter while the chopper started to land.

With excitement in his voice, Kim returned to the hut yelling for Frank.

“Frank, Americans, Frank Americans!”

“*Big Mother had finally made it*,” Frank thought to himself as a feeling of excitement and relief filled his body.

Frank was already to his feet and hobbling along towards Kim. Without hesitation, Kim put the transmitter on Frank’s vest and threw him over his bare shoulder as he had a week ago. Bounding up the Hill, the sound of the helicopter got louder and Frank could feel the wind from the blades as they reached the clearing. Two medics and two other soldiers jumped from the rescue choppers, grabbed Frank from Kim and placed him on a green stretcher.

“We are here to take you home Lieutenant Colonel,” said one of the medics trying to be heard over the sound the helicopter.

“Thanks guys. I am grateful for the lift but I have been well taken care of thus far,” said Frank.

As the medics strapped Frank into the stretcher, he motioned for Kim to come over. Frank reached into his vest and pulled out the brown book from his chest pocket.

“Komapsumnida my friend,” Frank said as he handed the book to Kim.

Surprised, Kim shook his head but Frank pressed the book into Kim’s chest and said “Komapsumnida my friend.”

“Thank you Chin-guu,” Kim replied.

“This book will give you strength.”

Kim nodded as if he understood but Frank knew he did not understand his words. The medics picked up the stretcher and quickly moved him into the helo. Frank and Kim did not break eye contact the entire time.

Frank waved and so did Kim as Frank flew off leaving North Korea and Kim forever. Kim held the book tightly with both hands and looked at the cover. It read in Korean, “The Book”

Skip to Present Day Afghanistan:

Next to Last Chapter

Ahim and his family walked down the mobile stairs off the small plane and without excitement walked inside the Kabul Airport to check-in at immigration. It had only been two years since Ahim had escaped his war torn country but his home country was a very different place.

Immigration was orderly and calm. No bribes were asked of him and the process went rather smoothly through the lines guarded by American soldiers. Waiting for them as they picked up their bags was Ahim’s brother, sister-in-law and his niece who ran to Ahim’s wife and wrapped her small arms around Minoo. Minoo was fully covered in the blue burqa she had not worn since she fled the country two years before. She remembered life prior to the Taliban and dreamed for the day when she would be free to dress conservatively as she did in Athens but not required to be fully covered in a burqa.

The family rode in a small beat-up jeep for several hours on a bumpy road that led to a village of Kahryabad east of Kabul. The village had been a base for terrorists trying to attack Kabul and Ahim was able to get his family refugee status after the bombings started but before the soldiers began a ground war in the village.

“There is the school I taught at,” Ahim said as they drove past an abandoned building. “Does anyone go there anymore?”

“Not anymore,” his brother said. “It is too dangerous for the children to meet in large groups. Most of the children never leave their homes except with their parents.”

Minoo took her seven year-old son and pulled him closer. Her vale hid the tears that were collecting in her eyes.

The jeep pulled up outside the dusty stone wall and building that had once been their home. Ahim paid the driver and the men began unloading the bags from the jeep as Minoo stepped over the broken gate that had once protected their home. Her son Padshah heard her cries and griped his mother’s hand tighter as they approached the door to the house. Ahim came up behind them with a bag in each hand and the family stepped into the previously abandoned home together.

“We can fix it up like it used to be,” Ahim said.

“How will we do that if no kids go to school and you can not teach to make money?”

Minoo did not expect an answer and the only thing Ahim could think of to say was, “We must have faith.”

Ahim walked into the second of the two-room house and discovered some homeless people, likely refugees, had slept there and had a fire to keep warm. Black soot lined the ceiling. Everyone was silent as they each examined the home thinking back on great memories.

Ahim’s sister-in-law broke the silence and said, “You will need some new mats to sleep on and you are going to need food for tonight.”

“We will go to the market,” said Ahim. His brother and Padshah began walking to the market leaving the women alone.

When the door closed, Minoo fell to the ground and began to weep. Her sister-in-law lowered herself to the floor and leaned over her weeping along with Minoo. The tears and weeping continued for several minutes before Minoo looked across the room and saw the leather book that Taher had given them. It was sticking out of Ahim’s bag and she remembered what he said about the book. She crawled across the dusty floor for the book and leaned against the wall to read. Minoo was not used to reading with a veil on and had trouble getting through the first line of the first page so she lifted the blue mask of oppression and felt free. As she began reading the second line, a tear of comfort fell on the page and Minoo notice that it was not the first tear to ever hit that page. It caused her to examine the book closer and she could tell this book had taken some wear. The binding was thinner than the outer edges of the book because the pages were warn and she could knew it had been wet and used before.

The story comforted her as the words flowed from the browning pages. She turned page after page forgetting her sister-in-law was even in the room. She had already started trying to clean an area to prepare the food and let Minoo have some time alone

The men returned from the market, each carrying rice sacks filled with food and supplies. Ahim began to put things away when he noticed his wife pull her veil back down. Not because her brother-in-law was back in the room but she really did not want her son to know she had been crying. She closed the book and placed it on the dusty shelf, and it was the only item in it’s place at this point.

She dusted off her blue garment and moved towards the kitchen. It was a small corner of the main room with a concrete counter and a single burner fueled by a small propane tank and she started water to boil.

“How was the market,” she asked the group but it was only appropriate for her husband to answer.

“It was different and the same. Mostly the same venders as before but many of the stalls were empty. Many had left for quieter areas.”

“Do you think we can find someone to import tomatoes like we had every day in Athens,” Minoo asked.

“Not during this time of year and we could not afford it now if we could find imported tomatoes.”

Minoo continued to prepare dinner and Ahim knew his wife was disappointed.

A few minutes later all five of them gathered in a circle around the food that Minoo had placed in the floor to eat. Ahim lead his family in asking for a blessing from God and each of them held their hands in front of them as if water was going to be poured into their hands.

“Amen,” Ahim concluded the prayer and each person made a motion over their heads as if they were wiping the blessing over their heads and face.

Just after they began to eat, they felt and heard a massive explosion in the distance. The dishes on the floor in front them rocked back and forth and dust fell from the ceiling. Ahim’s sister-in-law did not miss a bite but the newly returned family could not ignore the sounds they heard outside and the fear that filled them within.

The rumbling continued through dinner and into the night. When it finally stopped, Ahim’s brother and his wife decided to go home, kissed their family goodbye and walked home.

Minoo placed Padshah on the new mat in the back room of the house and pulled a thick wool blanket around him.

“It gets colder at night here than in Greece,” she whispered to him.

Ahim came in the room with the book in hand. “Padshah, I want us to read this book every day as a family and one day you will be able to read it to me.” Ahim sat down, crossed his legs while opening the book and placing it in his lap to read.

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When word got around the village that a schoolteacher had returned to town, parents started to bring their kids to his home. It was not safe to take them to the known school because the rebel fighters would use the schools for refuge or actually attack them for political purposes. But taking them to Ahim’s home seemed much safer in their minds. By the end of the first week of being back, seven boys sat in a circle around Ahim.

All of the books had been stolen or burned so the only book Ahim had to tech with was the one that Emod and Taher had given him in Athens. The stories Ahim read and taught enthralled the children and they wanted to read more. The young boys enjoyed the hope and security the stories provided. It also intrigued them to ask questions and Ahim was able to teach about history, politics, government and economics.

“Everything in this world is related. You can not separate the air from the sky nor can you separate economics from politics,” Ahim said to his class as the recently repaired glass in the windows shattered. Another explosion had rocked the house and this time it was much closer than Ahim had ever heard before.

“Move into the other room! Quickly.”

Minoo herded the boys inside the room and told them to gather together in the corner away from the window. She took cover blocking the room’s door and trying to see what was going on out the front window.

The volleys of fire continued and Ahim tried to see who was outside but he could not see anyone from his vantage point. He could tell the difference from the sound of the Russian-made AK47s and the American machine guns from when he had fought against the Russians as a younger man. The Americans were close and the local rebels were in the distance. The boys in the other room remained silent in fear as two of the American soldiers advanced just on the other side of the wall. They were so close that Ahim could see the sweat beading on their faces as they focused on where the shots were coming from. Ahim whispered to the soldiers, “We have nine children in here. Please do not draw fire this way.”

One of the soldiers looked away from his target for a brief moment, nodded his head in acknowledgement and moved to the adjacent house across the street as the shots continued to echo through the streets. When he reached his new shooting position, his partner followed.

Soon the shots in the distance lessened till eventually all the shooting ended. Ahim knew the American’s had killed them off one by one. The soldiers continued to advance in tandem farther down the street. The only sound that could be heard was the shuffling of their boots over the sandy street.

After several minutes of silence, Ahim called for the boys to return to the main room to begin studying again. Ahim took the book and began reading again. Minoo began to sweep up the glass and dust from the first explosion that rocked the house. She held back her crying in front of the students but when she returned to the back room she notices a long vertical crack that went from the celling to the floor. For some reason, this was more than she could hold back. She closed the door, laid across the mat and cried.

Similar events continued weekly and sometimes the battles would last for hours. Ahim no longer feared the world he departed a few years before nor did he fear death. Now he had a greater understanding of life and had little to fear. Mino’s feelings of fear slowly faded as she returned to the life she had once known. She had a routine and it suited her to take care of the boys who assembled in her home each day.

“Father, will we ever go back to Athens,” Padshah asked his father one night before bed.

“I do not know but not in the near future. We must live the life we have been given here. We must be thankful for the time we had there and be thankful for the time we have together.”

Padshah went about his studies and pondered his father’s words for days.

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When spring arrived, class started earlier because the sun rose earlier and the boys were be able to help their families in the afternoon. The problem was that the students did not want to leave because Ahim was a great storyteller. He knew that if he could get the boys excited about something beside the conflict all around them, they would be more likely to succeed. They spent time learning and playing outside in the safety of the dust yard inside the block wall of their small property. Ahim made sure the boys could get home before dark and would spend the rest of the evening with his family.

The family ate the simple meal Mino prepared and afterwards Ahim got up and went to his leather bag.

“What are you doing,” she asked.

“I have a surprise for you.”

Ahim pulled a paper bag from his satchel and grabbed a knife from the kitchen before sitting back down. He reached in the bag and pulled out two, ripe-red tomatoes. Minoo smiled and wept at the sight of them. Minoo had pushed the idea of tomatoes from her mind but her loving husband had not forgotten about something she enjoyed so much.

“Where did you get these?”

“One of the boys father’s is able to import produce for the Americans and I paid him to get me two tomatoes for you.”

Ahim cut one of the tomatoes into wedges and all three of them enjoyed every bite. They saved the other for the next meal.

The sun went down while the family huddled together and read. Minoo lit the candle because the electricity was still not working since they had returned six months ago.

Without warning, shots pierced the hardened mud wall of their home blowing out large holes and throwing dust into the air that extinguished the candle. Fear took over the entire family as they felt the walls shake from the explosions and watched as more bullets entered their home. Ahim laid on top of his wife and child holding each of their heads with his hands. They heard both American and Taliban guns all around the house in a constant barrage of fire. All of the sudden, something exploded just outside their home and an American soldier was thrown through the wooden gate Ahim had built a few months before. The explosion blew open the door on the house and Ahim could see the soldier lying in the open, unable to move. Ahim heard him moaning in pain and without hesitation Ahim jumped up from the floor and ran to the door. Ducking as he ran the six feet outside of his house he grabbed the soldier by the shoulder strap of his vest and pulled him back across the threshold into the safety of the house.

“Stay here,” Minoo commanded her son as she ran for towels and blankets.

After getting the soldier inside, Ahim closed the door and knelt beside him. In clear but simple English, Ahim asked, “Where does it hurt?”

“Everywhere,” the soldier grimaced. “My legs! My back!”

Ahim could see that his left thigh was bleeding fast and black grit stuck to his bloody face. His helmet had been lost in the explosion but his armor took most of the blast saving his life from the shrapnel.

The shooting continued outside as Minoo began dressing the wounds with the few towels they owned. An American voice came over the hand held radio attached to the soldier’s shoulder strap.

“Franklin, where are you. Franklin come in!”

The message repeated as gunshots flew through the air. Franklin reached for the radio but moaned in pain as he tried.

“No,” Ahim said and he reached to key the mic for him.

“I am hit. I am in a house on the south side of the road. Friendlies are in the house. Friendlies are here.”

“Understood,” came through the small speaker and Ahim keyed the mic again.

“He is in the third house on the left without a gate.”

“We are on our way,” said the voice.

Minoo leaned over the soldier’s shoulder to wipe the blood and grit from his face.

“I am Franklin,” he said and Minoo leaned back and realized she was unveiled in the presence of a man who was not her husband. She quickly pulled her vale across her face and continued to work.

“I am Ahim and this is my wife Minoo.”

“Thank you.”

Shots and explosions continued and help did not arrive. After about ten minutes a voice came over the radio again.

“Franklin, We can’t get to you. There is a sniper in the building across the street pinning us down.”

Ahim crawled to the window and the outline of the gunman hanging out of the window firing on the Americans. He went back to Franklin and keyed the mic. “I see him. When you hear the explosion run around the back of my house and enter the back gate. It will be unlocked.”

Ahim ran through the small house and unlocked the back wooden gate and propped it open with a stone. Then he grabbed Franklin’s rifle and a grenade from Franklin’s vest and moved to the doorway. Ahim stood up and after looking a the riffle for few quick mements to figure out how it differed from the AK-47 he knew from previous Afgan wars, he began firing towards the building where the gun was perched. The gun was more powerful than he expected, but he quickly gained control and continued to fire. The then took a grenade from the soldier and threw it in the same direction. It hit just short of the window hitting the wall exploded one floor below. The gunman was forced to retreat inside the building and three soldiers made a run for the back of the house. As they ran Ahim fired a barrage of shots at the window to hold the sniper down. After they moved through the gate one of the soldiers took up Ahim’s position and began firing at the window.

“Get inside!” yelled the soldier over the gunfire.

Minoo held the door open as the two American soldiers ran inside and Ahim followed quickly behind. One took a position on one knee at the front door and covered his partner who had quit firing on the window but held that position.

“I am Sergeant Colman,” the man who had been speaking on the radio said to Ahim.

“I am Ahim.”

“Nice work! Thanks for your help.”

“No problem,” Ahim said humbly. “Your man is hurt.”

“Walker, find out where that rescue chopper is,” the sergeant yelled.

“Understood!” and the soldier by the door began calling into a larger radio.

“11 minutes Sergeant,” Walker answered quickly.

“Then we have 11 minutes to take out those guys across the street.

Ahim held Franklin’s hand because he did not know what else to do. Minoo, now veiled, held her son in the corner and tried to comfort him.

Franklin passed out and Ahim was not sure if he was going to live so he began to pray. Minoo also lowered her head and prayed with her son for this man who she only knew his first name. The sergeant began explaining his battle plan to other soldiers as they moved towards the door.

“We will be back in a few minutes.” Sgt. Colman said.

The two men ran out the back door to join their third and the room was quiet again. Not knowing what else to do, Ahim knew the book gave him comfort when had been in dire circumstances so he asked Minoo to bring it to him as he held Franklin’s hand.

Blood ran down his fingertips and as Ahim opened the book he left bloody fingerprints on the edges of the pages. Ignoring the dark red stains, he quickly turned to his favorite passage and began to read the story in English to the dying solider.

Moments later there was a large explosion followed by numerous gunshots from the Americans and Ahim paused. There was no return fire.

“They got him,” Ahim said to his new friend who did not respond.

A few moments later Sgt. Colman and the others returned to the back door. One threw a can of red smoke on the roof of the house while the others guarded the doors. The sound of a helicopter could be heard and the red smoked blew sideways across the street. Within a few moments two men carrying a stretcher came in the door and began working on Franklin.

Ahim retreated to the corner with his wife and son and held them as they all watched the action in their home. The soldiers quickly got him strapped on the stretcher and lifted him up.

Ahim ran to hold open the door and asked the medic, “Is he going to live?”

“I think so thanks to you,” the medic said.

Franklin was strapped in with his hands cross across his chest and he was still unconscious. Ahim reached for his arm and placed the book on his chest under his two bloody hands as they carried him outside and ran right for the helicopter. The other soldiers jumped on board and Franklin left the refuge of Ahim’s home alive and with a gift.

Last Chapter

Walter Reed Medical Center, Washington D.C.

Franklin was asleep in a hospital bed as his family entered the room to see him for the first time in over a year. His wife, two sons, mother, father and elderly grandfather filled into the tight room. Tears filled Amy’s eyes and she cried as their children ran to the bed. Franklin’s grandfather, dressed in a light jacket and a green veterans hat with a purple heart pin pined to the left side, sat down in the chair as Amy began speaking to Franklin. He finally awoke to the most precious sight he had ever seen and water flooded his eyes. Merrick and Dea, timidly climbed on the bed afraid of hurting their father and Amy moved around so she could hug him and let his parents see him.

“We are so happy to have you home,” his mother said as everyone enjoyed this happy reunion.

“Frank, get over here Amy said to her grandfather-in-law and the family reposition to allow him to get in closer.

From his bed, Franklin told the story of what happened and how an afghan man named Ahim had saved his life. Amy could not stop crying the entire time he spoke because she had been so scared and was overwhelmed with emotions. It was a moment the entire family would never forget and one they hoped would not end. After a few war stories Franklin wanted to hear about how Merrick’s baseball season was going and Dea was doing in school.

“I hit .375 this season and we are going to the playoff,” Merrick said with excitement.

“And Daddy, I drew this photo of you at home taking me to the park in your chair,” said eight year old Dea.

The door opened and a nurse came in. “I am sorry but you have to leave or go to the lobby. I need to do some work with Franklin and then you can come back in a few hours.”

Everyone began saying goodbye and slowly moving towards the door but Franklin’s grandfather Frank was focused on the leather book sitting on the end table. It looked familiar and he recognized the words on the aged cover. Frank reached for the book and began flipping through the tattered pages. His eyes swelled up with tears as he realized what he was holding.

“Come on grand-pa, we have to go,” Amy said.

The nurse noticed Frank’s hat and said, ‘Sgt. Frank is a veteran and veteran volunteers can stay with the soldier as long as he wants.”

Frank did not respond but tears began to fall as he noticed the stains of blood, the smears of dark soil on the pages, and the wrinkles of fallen tears.

“Where did you get this son,” he asked his grandson.

“The medic said the man who saved me gave it to me as they put me in the helicopter.”

“I can not believe it,” Frank said.

“You can’t believe what grandpa?”

“Do you remember the story when I was shot down in Korea?”

“Of course, I have heard it a thousand times and I am sure I will tell my story a thousand times to my grandchild.”

“Do you remember that I gave a book to Kim when they put me in the helicopter?”

“Yes,” Franklin answered as the nurse drew some blood from his arm.

“This is that book,” Frank said.

“What?”

“This is the book I read in North Korea and is the exact same copy I gave Kim.”

The nurse continued her work as the two talked. She could not help but be intrigued by a story that brought an old soldier to tears.

“But how can this be grandpa. I got the book in Afghanistan.”

“I don’t know but I can prove it to you.” Frank said. “My dad, your great grandfather was a coal miner and everyday he took this book to work with him. And every day he would read it during his lunch break sitting in the coal mine.”

Frank took the book and turned to a specific passage.

“This was his favorite story,” Frank said, as he pulled hard on the pages exposing more of the page that had been held tight by the binding. He held the book up to his face and blew across the inside spine and a fine black cloud of dust filled the air. Coal dust had collect inside the pages and been held in the spine for almost a hundred years.

Frank passed the book to his grandson’s outstretched hand and he looked through the pages. There was red desert sand in the binding and dark soil smudges on some pages. There were drops of water that could have been tears that wrinkled pages and left spots and there were deep scratches and bloodstains on the dark brown cover. The book was filled with evidence of those that held it before. The edges were tattered and torn. The pages were browning and the cover was pretty beat up. It was obvious this book had been used but the question remained in both of their minds, “How did the book make if from Korean in 1953 to Afghanistan fifty years later?”