**“In Contrast”**

Two days ago, maybe three or four, Tom died. Cancer, stage 4. Can’t remember when he developed it, when the coughing started, or even when he died; the concept of time didn’t mean much to us anymore except during lunch hours. He was coughing his lungs out before he was forced back on his post. His request for sick leave was rejected, of course: sick leaves hadn’t existed for us for a long time. I don’t even believe for a second that they read his request. The day before he died, Tom was still hard at work, clearing the railroad track for the next deluxe bullet train, in the highest heat wave ever recorded in human history.

Cancer didn’t kill him, well, not exactly. It did put him under, bedridden almost; the once beast of a man was now thin as paper, constantly coughing, particles of saliva and blood followed him everywhere. In contrast, his high school and college days were almost glorious, though all the photos I could find are taken in coal mines and on railroads. His shirts were always dirty and broken, yet he was muscular and strong, and always had this big, stupid smile hanging on his face, as if he was the happiest man on Earth, as if he was one of the Forbes Trillionaires, cracking open champagne at the news of a new worthless million-dollar deal. Without the smile, Tom seemed like a completely different man to the rest of us.

According to the coroner, Tom died of suicide. Nobody is to blame but himself, he added in the autopsy report, as no signs of coercion were found near the scene. Ten years ago, deaths like this might’ve made headlines. Now, no media could even bother to let this kind of ordinary casualties occupy their precious space on the paper, instead rapaciously filling it with endless advertisements and propaganda. Worker conditions improving, they say; suicide rate decreasing, they say; buy a cheap condo next to the Indian Ocean, they say; new luxurious cruise to East Asia, they say.

We all left early the day Tom died, while he stayed behind and laid down on the railway. Nobody stopped him. The people indoors didn’t care: Tom’s cancer rendered him, practically, useless to the company, and nobody wanted to pay a useless man. It would be surprising if they weren’t hoping for Tom to kill himself. The workers didn’t do anything either: he wasn’t the first to go this way, and certainly won’t be the last. Besides, the workers all had their own families to feed and their share of struggle to go through. Everyone, it seems, was preoccupied with their own petty business.

I remember looking into Tom’s small, tired eyes that evening and finding something particular. It was a sort of strange relief, coupled with liberation, with pity. I also remember once looking at the people indoors. Their eyes were giant and empty, their faces pale, and their mouths constantly twisting into a smile. Their hands were always in their pockets, shuffling back and forth, back and forth, yet they spoke nothing of its contents. Instead, they mentioned only “justice” and “divinity”, adding them to the end of every sentence they spoke, almost desperately.

The night Tom died, there was no such thing. Nobody saved Tom; nobody even looked in his direction, for that matter. They kept partying, celebrating the successful completion of their worthless million-dollar deal of clearing the railroad tracks. The rumbling of the approaching train, and the distant noise of singing, were all that filled Tom’s ears before he died.

The bullet train rammed him over without slowing down. His body was destroyed after a hundred wheels passed over it. Some say he was awfully quiet when he died, no screaming, no crying. In contrast, in the bullet train that killed him, people were screaming and dancing, enjoying the time of their lives, as they looked forward to take that luxurious cruise to East Asia. Avoid the heat and enjoy the moment, they say…

-- Richard Su, Jan. 19, 2023