

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Two - A Cross to Bear - Chapter One - Life of Guy

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September 11, 2020



Saturday morning in the coffee shop had become a ritual. Of course it was not carved in stone what time Guy showed up and which establishment, varied. He used to cherish Saturday mornings as a time to lie in bed for as long as possible. Usually Sunday had been for church and with a house full of kids getting ready was mass chaos. When the kids were younger they could be distracted by Saturday morning cartoons with only minimal refereeing. That left him and Beth with time to be lazy. As the years passed the conventional family life gave way to another life.

Having grown up in a big Irish Catholic family, solitude was always at a premium. The kind of solitude that Guy sought out was not to be shut up in a room but to be out among people. He was a confirmed people watcher. Coffee shops under the right circumstances were ideal for being alone with his thoughts and yet have the stimulation of seeing lots of people. He also worked in coffee shops; writing and sometimes meeting clients. As a freelance writer he considered coffee shops as his branch office.

Since coming to Korea twelve years ago, the coffee shop had surely come into its own. Being well versed in the caffeine habit, having been raised in Seattle and the years he had spent at sea, it was important for him to get his fix every morning. At that time it was hard to get coffee before eleven o'clock in the morning. The coffee shops that were around opened later and stayed open till late at

night serving beer and liquor as well as coffee. He had to be satisfied with mix coffee out of vending machines.

The Starbucks style store hit the shores around eight years ago and quickly became ubiquitous. Now they were on every corner and Koreans have taken to sitting in coffee shops like Seattleites to rain. Depending on the time of day housewives taking a break from shopping, serious students with text books and laptops, giggling high school girls in uniform, and families could all be found in the coffee shop. They had all but replaced the tabang or old style tea room as a place to meet and kill time.

People say that being a writer is a lonely profession but Guy embraced it. If anyone asked what he did he usually said he was a freelance writer; that about covered it. He fell into writing as a career almost by accident. From his early twenties he had gone to sea on oceangoing tugs and traveled around the world. With a dearth of free time on his hands he had started writing about the places he had been to and people he had met, mostly color stuff. First published in a company in-house magazine he branched out into other travel, adventure, and even some online news and opinion periodicals. His forte was off the beaten path type stories and folksy opinion pieces. Over the years he had developed a small following and the small income that went with it.

When he finally quit the sea to try and save his marriage, he tried to make a job out of his writing. To his surprise he was more successful at the latter than the former. Single again with no home to go back to, it was a no brainer to take the offer he got to be a staff writer for a news magazine based in Seoul. After moving to Korea and spending three years working for peanuts, the magazine folded and set him free. Now he was freelance and still working for peanuts. He had never really considered his writing art but it was now his life and he spent a lot of time in coffee shops writing.

Although he sometimes missed the sea and other climes and places, living in Seoul seemed to suit him now. The vibrancy and twenty-four hour hum of the big city invigorated him. He had a three room apartment in an older building not far from Korea University Hospital. It was nothing luxurious; it suited

his needs, and was comfortable. He had been there for more than five years. If he ever came into any serious money he would buy a place but for now he was ok.

The neighborhood was a mix of students, families, and older folks. Everything he needed was just around the corner, dry-cleaners, supermarkets, and pubs. He had learned that everything in Korea could be delivered to your door with just a phone call. Once in a long while he had chicken or pizza delivered but since he was self-employed, going out wasn't an inconvenience but a break and a source of stimulation through human contact.

He often sought out opportunities to interact with the locals in the vernacular. Now days his Korean, while still far from fluent, had improved a lot. When he first came to Korea he had spent a semester at Korea University's intensive language program but he was in such a deep hole to begin with it didn't seem to be effective. Although he still tried to study on his own, he improved a lot just by interacting with folks. It was probably not the fastest or easiest way to learn the language but he was used to doing things the hard way.

One of his favorite things to do was to go to a tent bar, sit down, and order soju with a side dish. He almost never failed to strike up a conversation with fellow patrons in broken Korean, broken English, and more broken Korean. One of the facts of life in Korea is that everyone is anxious about speaking English. The social pressure to speak the prestige language is huge and it is perceived by most as a way to a prosperous future. For many it seemed like an insurmountable task.

English education begins in grade school and continues sometimes into old age. Problem is, the focus is on grammar with few chances to ever actually communicate with an English speaker. Even folks with years of English under their belts and high scores on the standardized tests have no confidence and get tongue tied when actually trying to speak to a foreigner. The tent bar is a good place to bridge that gap.

Guy wasn't really a heavy drinker but a lot of Koreans were. In their highly structured and hierarchical society alcohol was the lubricant that allowed them to blow off steam and break down social barriers. Guy found it a good way to meet people and practice the lingo. Many an adventure with ladies and gentlemen had begun at the tent bar. Guy had learned that the way to speak Korean was to be fearless and damn the mistakes. Now days he was confident to communicate in Korean anywhere any time.

That morning he woke up around 9:30 and pulled on a short sleeved polo shirt and a pair of khakis. Although it was mid-summer the monsoon rains hadn't played themselves out and it wasn't blazing hot yet. After a quick cup of warmed up coffee and a dry bagel he donned sneakers, an old ball cap, and headed for the gym. At age forty-three more than a little discipline was required to keep the belly at bay. It was only a three minute jog through the light rain down the alley to the building where his gym was. He warmed up with twenty minutes of Gi Gong exercises and then spent forty minutes on the running machine, finishing up with another thirty minutes on the weights. After a shower and winking at the pretty young girl at the front desk he was off to the coffee shop.

Today he hit one of his favorites. Located outside the front gate of Korea University, it met most of his requirements for a good place to hang out. It had good comfortable chairs, soft jazz playing in the background, and plenty of outlets to keep the batteries topped off. The sweet concoctions such as lattes or mocha held no attraction for Guy. Coffee was drunk black; over ice in the summer and with a splash of milk during the cooler months.

Cup in hand Guy headed for the third floor and parked himself in a leather armchair at a table looking out the window at the street scene below. At noon on a Saturday there were few folks studying or working. Most self-respecting students were most probably still in bed nursing hangovers from last night. Feeling rather virtuous about his early night the previous evening and fast start on the weekend he whipped out his Galaxy tablet device, thumbed to a story he was working on and began to write.

When he had first started writing seriously twelve years ago he scribbled in notebooks, filled legal pads, and later transcribed the product into Word documents. Nowadays he was a full time digital guy compiling notes and stories on a smart phone as well as finished stories on the tablet and a laptop. He liked the flexibility of being able to write anytime anywhere without toting around note books. Having plenty of stuff to work on, the novel and a couple of short stories that he had started, he got right to work; well almost. Facebook and a news app ate up about forty-five minutes. A quick trip to the head and a detour to the smoking room for a Marlboro light and he was ready to go to work.

The writing process for Guy was his own. He enjoyed writing and nothing pumped him up like a good session of getting it down on digital paper. That's not to say he didn't have problems getting started and keeping going even when it was going good. It was all about creating a space in his head. Once he pushed out the intrusions, the words flowed off his fingers like water down a hill. He was well into it when she walked up the stairs and into his life.