

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Two - A Cross to Bear - Chapter Seven - What's Love Got to Do With It

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September 17, 2020



Love is a many splendored thing; especially new love, or so they say. As for Jeong Sook, she was nowhere near ready to call it love. There was no denying that it was something. She just didn't know what. She had just about no experience in the game called love.

In North Korea, love was for the Dear Leader and the Workers Party. As expressed in movies, drama, music, wall posters, and every form of media, love in its highest form was rightly directed towards those, who in their heroic lives and actions, made life in the glorious nation of Choson possible.

Love between a man and a woman was of a quite different and lower order. It was more like a duty that one was expected to perform. Jeong Sook's husband and his family was where her duty lay. To be a virtuous woman, a good wife, an obedient daughter-in-law, and a doting mother was what was expected of her and she did her best to live up to those expectations. Love didn't really figure into the equation.

Her husband was from a good family in terms of party loyalty and vocation. He was a full professor of mathematics at the prestigious Kim Il-sung University. The family came from an impeccable revolutionary background, were long time Pyongyang residents, and were firmly counted among the elite class. Whether she loved him or not, she couldn't recall anyone ever asking her; it was a match made in heaven.

When the match and engagement were proclaimed she was not one of the first to know. First it was proposed to and approved by the party functionaries. Next it was announced to both families at a rare get together at one of the foreign currency hotels in downtown Pyongyang. It was only later that her mother took her aside and explained the facts of life and marriage in the rarified upper atmosphere of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Jeong Sook didn't object knowing that it was her duty and perhaps her fate. The wedding was a grand affair befitting two such families and the honeymoon was three days of sight seeing at a resort on the East Sea, then back to everyday revolutionary fervor. Love was neither mentioned nor expected.

What was expected was that, along with her perfunctory duties in the marriage bed, she belonged to her husband's family and came under the direct training and supervision of her mother-in-law. No point in complaining, it was the common destiny of all Korean brides. The only thing that could get her out from under the heavy thumb of the mother-in-law would be to produce a son. No such luck. Her first child was of the female persuasion and she was told to try again. When her second daughter was born, things went from bad to worse. She tried to be a good mom for her two daughters and she loved them dearly. Although they were daughters and not valued as a son would have been, she was reminded often that they belonged to her husband's family until a suitable marriage was found for them. She realized that her role was as little more than a nanny. To her husband and the rest of his family she was Hee-jin's mom. Of

course it was not such a bad life; it was just that romantic love didn't have much to do with it.

When Jeong Sook's father fell into disfavor with the party, was arrested, and charged with treason, it was the only prudent thing for her husband to divorce her and take the two girls. She knew that it only made sense but that didn't make the agony of losing her girls any less bearable. It was that and her love and concern for her father over his unjust disgrace that finally turned her against everything that was the Kim regime, the party, and the whole way of life in North Korea.

Belief is usually more an active decision than a process of reasoning things out. You have to decide to believe something; later you can come up with the appropriate reasons. The fact that it is all you have ever known doesn't make it any less a decision. You have to decide everyday in many small, almost imperceptible, ways to believe. Once you make the plunge into skepticism the whole thing collapses. Then you don't believe anything at all. When Jeong Sook took the leap, it was final and irreversible. This was surely the genesis of her search for an alternate meaning. She needed something to fill the void, something to believe in, something to make life worth living. More than anything this is what propelled her to flee her homeland, endure the danger and indignity as a refugee in China, and finally ending up in South Korea.

Her encounter and acceptance of Jesus through Rev. Kim was something but deep down inside it left more than a few things still up in the air. Maybe if she had spent more time under Pastor Kim's discipleship, her faith would have matured. As it was, she had met with him only twice since she had arrived in the south. He spent most of his time with his flock and work in China. He had introduced her to several churches in Seoul but for one reason or another she never fit in with any of them. So she was still searching for the meaning of her life.

"And now this," she thought. After three years in Seoul she was still at a loss. And it wasn't for lack of trying. She lived in very modest circumstances in a one room apartment subsidized by the government. For two years she had also received an allowance that kept her from falling into abject poverty. Now she needed to make it on her own. She worked at two part time jobs, one at the noodle shop and the other as a nurse's aid at a large hospital. More than anything she aspired to work in a field that her education as a fine arts major had prepared her for. An art major is pretty much limited to teaching. She had applied to universities, high schools, and private academies but so far, nothing. At some point in any interview process the inevitable issue of her North Korean origins came up. Her status in South Korea was never mentioned as a reason why some one else got the job but once it was known, any initial enthusiasm for her candidacy dried up. But she still had hope.

And she was lonely. As with all Koreans, social networks in the south are built on family relationships and duties. In addition, friends from school; university, high school, middle school, and as far back as elementary school make up a second tier of friendships. Then there are work colleagues. Jeong Sook was lacking in all these categories. She had a couple of friends in the refugee community but most were a bit stand-offish due to her perceived former elite status in the north.

In the hyper-competitive youth and beauty market that was Seoul, she felt that she didn't have much to bring to the table. She hadn't had a date since she was living back on the farm in China and she wasn't looking for one. What she thought she really wanted was just a friend.

"And now this."

Compared to Jeong Sook, Guy was a simple soul. Of course he believed in love. He had been in love many times. He fell in love almost every day when he rode the subway in Seoul. The possibilities were unlimited. Long ago he had gotten some pretty sage advice.

"Don't chase women. Pursue your life goals and women will follow you."

The fact that this piece of wisdom came from a twenty year old college roommate didn't phase Guy in the least. Made sense to him and ever since then he had tried to stick to it. Of course he was no poster boy for marital bliss and tranquility. The failure of his marriage had a big impact on his confidence. He liked women and enjoyed their company. But any sign that a girlfriend was getting too serious usually got him back pedaling. He knew right away this time was different. He was a firm believer in the adage; jump off the cliff and build your wings on the way down! So he jumped.

Jeong Sook also made up her mind. She couldn't say for sure whether this thing was what she was looking for or if it didn't mean anything at all. But the attraction was too strong. It was more than emotional or physical; it was both of those but more, it moved her heart. It quickly became the center of her life. She thought of him, waited for texts from him, and the rest of her life began to, ever so gradually, revolve around him.

And so on the third day, after a marathon of texting back and forth, they met again. This time Guy decided he better buy her some dinner. Jeong Sook had never been to Itaewon so it was a minor excursion for her. Guy wanted to spring for steaks but she informed him that she wasn't a big meat eater. She suggested some noodles but this was a big night for Guy and he didn't want bowls of noodles at six bucks a pop. They settled for raw tuna at a Japanese style restaurant. Tuna was expensive and was a rare treat for Jeong Sook.

Over dinner, Guy regaled her with his extensive knowledge of tuna and tuna fishing. Jeong Sook listened intently and understood some of what she was being told. Guy even wipped out his smart phone and displayed one of his prized photos of he and another guy landing a giant blue fin tuna off the stern of a tug boat out in the Gulf Stream. Jeong Sook just enjoyed the sound of his voice and his animated story telling. They shared two bottles of sake with the premium seafood and were both somewhat tipsy by the time they left.

Jeong Sook suggested coffee but Guy had a different idea. They hiked up the hill to the Nashville Club. It was said to be the oldest club in Itaewon and the only country music joint in the ville. On this Friday night it was over run with GIs, more than a few in boots and cowboy hats, who were drinking, dancing, and sometimes brawling the night away. Off course Jeong Sook had never heard American country music and she was facinated by the two-stepping, boot scooting, and line dancing out on the wooden plank dance floor. After a couple gin-tonics and a shot of tequila, Jeong Sook insisted on joining the line dance. Not the least bit athletic and having never seen a line dance before, she was a fish out of water at first. She watched and tried to imitate the other dancers with such unabashed intenseness that she became the hit of the dance floor. Several folks took it upon themselves to give her personal instructions. She was a fast learner. Guy, no expert on country music, tried to explain to her its cultural significance to Americans. Jeong Sook tried to listen while sipping another tropical cocktail but what she really wanted to do was to try two-stepping with Guy. After another shot of tequila they hit the floor. It wasn't pretty but they both enjoyed it. Of course they enjoyed the slow dances even more since it was the only excuse needed to hold each other tight and steal kisses.

They were intimate with each other in a hotel for the first time that night. It rocked Jeong Sook's world. It sealed the deal for Guy. He was a litte dismayed when she insisted that she couldn't spend the night. They dressed together and Guy walked her downstairs and put her in a cab. Although he couldn't figure out the Cinderella act he didn't give it much thought. On top of the world, Guy retired to a nearby bar to do some serious drinking.