

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Two - A Cross to Bear - Chapter Nine - The Education of Guy

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On a bright sunny day the first week of October, Guy was waiting for Jeong Sook. The summer was over and the early days of autumn in Korea were legendary. The daytime temperatures were in the low eighties and the evenings were dipping into the sixties. The sky was a deep blue with the occasional white cloud floating past. It was the best time of year and Guy was feeling upbeat.

Shin Chone was a university district in western Seoul and is home to four major universities. The streets are busy with students and are lined with coffee shops, youth oriented clothing stores, bars, restaurants, and clubs. Jeong Sook was working the day shift at a nearby university hospital. They had agreed to meet up for dinner in the popular entertainment district when she got off.

Waiting for Jeong Sook was a new thing for Guy. Really he wasn't in the habit of waiting for women. Now days he found himself waiting for her more and more. As a freelancer his time was pretty much his own and so he waited for her to get off. The other thing is that their concepts of time were quite different. For Guy, a five o'clock

appointment meant five. Ten minutes either way was understandable but Jeong Sook was always late thirty minutes and sometimes more. On occasion she called and cancelled at the last minute. Today her shift ended at five but he knew she would show up when she was ready.

He took up a post at a Tom N Toms coffee shop on the main drag. On a Saturday afternoon it was packed with couples on dates, students studying, and ladies doing coffee with friends. By paying attention to the comings and goings of customers and with several quick moves, he was able to advance his position from a stool at the bar to a booth near the windows. He always had a project to work on but didn't always have the concentration. After several tries he closed the tablet computer and let his mind wander. Where was Jeong Sook?

He reviewed the past two months and tried to get a clear eyed idea of where he was at. Meeting this woman had surely turned his life upside-down. He was in deeper than he had expected. The joy of love is so sweet but waiting for Jeong Sook had a lot of less than optimal side effects. He hadn't felt like this since he was in high school. Yet what did he really know about her. She seemed to have no past, at least not one she wanted to talk about. He decided it was time to find out more about her and he resolved to push her a little to talk about herself and this time not to let her off the hook so easy.

At five forty five he got a text that she was on her way. She arrived at six fifteen. She was dressed for the season in jeans, one of her 'man style' stripped dress shirts, and white sneakers. Her hair was pulled back revealing the tiny gold earrings. As had become her recently acquired custom since meeting Guy, she was wearing makeup. Nothing gaudy; in fact it would be best described as understated. Guy liked it.

She greeted him warmly with a hug and sat down across from him.

"Sorry, so late," she started out. "When you get here?"

"Don't mention it. I just got here myself. How was work?"

"Really?" She screwed up her face in mock disbelief, "You never late."

He let it slide. No point in giving too much away. "How about a cup of coffee?"

"I drank a lot of coffee today. Wait, I have to pee."

When she came back he talked her into a piece of cheesecake. It was an easy sell. She did have a sweet tooth.

For the next half hour he watched her delight in the confection and adamantly refused several attempts to get him to have a bite. She ate slowly and smiled as if she was consuming manna from heaven. Guy

enjoyed just watching. Then she began to talk about her day at the hospital.

"They so stupid, lazy," she let him know in all seriousness.

"Who?" He didn't have a clue.

"Doctors, of course. They so bad"

This was a new one for Guy. He had never heard her express such opinions about anyone when she was not on one of her rants about him or foreigners in general. She was stone cold sober and she was always in her cups when she got on her high horse. He couldn't help wondering what was up.

"Doctors, what is wrong with doctors?" He wasn't sure he wanted to go there but there it was.

"Doctors all so bad. They lazy. They stupid. Everyday people gonna die and they mistake a lot. They not God! People cry a lot and doctors laugh a lot. They blame nurses if they mistake."

She went on for a while longer and Guy didn't try to argue with her. Doctors, another touchy subject he made a note to himself.

"Let's eat; how about sushi," he said.

"Let's drink, I like sake," she replied

And so they were off.

Over sushi she got moderately looped and was still cheerful as they retired to a nearby love hotel. The area had no shortage and they had their favorite. On the way they stopped at a convenience store to pick up a couple of bottles of soju and something to munch on. After an hour and of half of love making they paused for refreshment. Guy's plan was to get her happy and a little drunk before he broached the potentially explosive topic of who was she and where was she from. They both downed three shots of the firewater and Guy took the plunge.

"Ya know we been keeping company now for around three months, right?"

"Why, you gettin tired of me?" Jeong Sook slurred.

"No of course not. That's not what I meant. You know I really like you. I like you more than any woman I've met in a long time." He had to be somewhat careful here.

"Yeah, you've had a lot of woman. How many woman you loved?"

Ok, this is not where he wanted to go. He had to stay in control of this. Jeong Sook slammed down another shot and poured herself one more. Not a good sign.

"Come on Jeong Sook, you know I love you. There is no one else."

She banged the next shot and then shot back, "You love me? Sounds good? You don't even know me. How can you love me?"

"That's what I want, I want to know you, all about you but you always avoid telling about yourself. You know, like where are you from, who are you now, and who do you want to be?"

She stopped, looked at him, and said, "Who are you and why did you come to me now?" Then the waterworks started.

She cried bitterly for longer than usual. They seemed to be tears of heart break. Guy was, as usual, at a loss. He took her in his arms and she wept and wept. Once she was wept out she fell asleep and Guy smoked and watched her. He resolved to never ask her again. This was too hard.

A while latter she woke up and ran to the bath room and slammed the door. He heard the unmistakable sounds of retching and vomiting. He waited. When she returned she wrapped herself in a sheet and sat cross legged on the bed.

She looked recovered so he asked, "Are you ok?"

"I am ok. What do you want to know about me?"

Guy was leery and could only respond, "Forget it."

"No, ask me," she insisted.

"Ah well, where were you born and where is your family?"

She swallowed hard and said, "I was born in Pyongyang, North Korea. I lost my family."

"What, North Korea?" Guy was floored. He couldn't take it in right away. Maybe he had heard her wrong.

"Yes, right," she confirmed.

"How did you get here?" His head was spinning.

"I ran away. I left my family behind and I ran away."

Now the questions were coming fast and furious in his head. He bit his tongue one more time and only asked, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you, how could I tell you? It is so complicated and hurting. You are a foreigner. You can't understand. I told you many times. You don't know Korea and Korean people. You no know Korean history and how we people have suffered. You never know North Korea. How can you know why I run away."

Yup, he heard this all before in one form or another. North Korea, Jesus H. Christ! He had to think. He laid back on the bed and closed his eyes. Now, Jeong Sook waited for him. He figured he knew as much as anybody about Korea. His own father had landed at Incheon in September 1950 with the First Marine Division. They had captured the city of Seoul and had marched up north to the Choson Reservoir. When 200,000 screaming red Chinese had crossed over and surrounded them, they turned and fought their way to the sea. His dad had walked every step of the way on that break out and had suffered severe frostbite that caused him to limp for the rest of his life.

There was also the fact that he had been living and working in South Korea for almost twelve years. He had more than a few Korean friends and even more acquaintances. He had written quite a bit about life in Korea from an expats point of view. It had not always been a walk in the park and there was no doubt he had made his share of mistakes. But he always tried to take the big view of things and learn from his mistakes. Although his Korean language skills were limited he continued to learn and take interest in the language. He figured he knew as much about Korea as most expats and more than the average American.

It always chaffed his ass when some folks let him know that he really couldn't understand Korea because he wasn't Korean. The hardest thing for him about his relationship with Jeong Sook was that she insisted he was hopeless just because he was a foreigner. Until now he never tried to argue with her but found it more convenient to deflect it with humor and change the subject. Now with her surprising announcement he began to think she might be right. Maybe he really didn't know Korea at all. This woman had sure thrown him for a loop. But he could learn he decided and Jeong Sook would be his window into the esoteric world of this hermit kingdom.

Jeong Sook watched him and waited. She felt closer to him than she ever had. She felt a tenderness well up in her soul. He looked stricken and vulnerable and she thought she could love this man. She covered him with a blanket, put her hand on his head, and said a prayer for him.

He opened his eyes, looked at her looking at him and said, "Ok then, why don't you teach me about Korea? I'm not a dummy and I do want to learn."

"Why, why do you want to learn about this small miserable country? You American, you go home and be happy."

"Why, because I love you," he replied without hesitation.

Good answer she thought but replied, "I not a teacher. It so complicated and filled with unbearable heartache. We call this kind of heart break and sorrow 'Han' in Korean. This is why we the people of 'Han'. South Korea is Tae Han Min Kook, the great country of the Han people."

She wondered if a foreigner could really understand but her heart was touched by his sincerity. Her heart swelled and although it was probably impossible, she determined to teach him about Korea. It occurred to her that this might be her cross to bear and so she gladly picked it up.

Guy fell asleep.