

## Between Heaven and Earth: Book Two - A Cross to Bear - Chapter Thirteen - Tattoos

Michael Downey  
September 24, 2020



"Yo dog, I'm thinking of gettin a tattoo. You want to get one too?" Kyle was only moderately wasted.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon on an exquisite October day. Guy had met up with his near do well bud at a coffee shop in Myeongil dong. Guy ordered ice coffee and Kyle said he was 'good.' Good for what Guy wondered. They sat outside on the patio under an awning. The sun was hot but in the shade with a little breeze they were comfortable. They watched the people stroll past and shot the shit. Kyle opened a gym bag he had toted in and pulled out a bottle of makoli. Guy saw what appeared to be three more in the recesses of the Nike bag. It was par for the course; Kyle had no shame about drinking anywhere. Guy wanted to ask Kyle what the fuck he thought he was doing but based on past experience he decided to ignore the behavior.

"Yeah, we could get tattooed together," Kyle was sure it was the best idea he had had all week.

"I don't like you that much," Guy let him know.

To Guy, tattoos were for sailors and circus folk. He considered them a lot like graffiti. Sometimes the colors and patterns were interesting on somebody else's wall but who wanted a graffiti artist to tag their own house?

Kyle was on his third bottle when he asked,

"How about that chunky chick, she got any ink. Maybe she's got one of those camp numbers on her arm."

"Don't be a douchebag. Her name is Jeong Sook and she doesn't have any tattoos."

"Who is she anyway? What do you know about her? She might be a spy."

Kyle twisted the top off the fourth and last bottle. The top fell to the deck and rolled under the next table. Guy had to concede that out of the mouths of babes and drunks sometimes truth emerged. He might be right. Naw!

"Let's get out of here, asshole. You givin foreigners a bad name."

Kyle just grinned, "Yeah let's go get another drink!"

That very evening when Guy saw Jeong Sook he asked her directly,

"Who are you?" Without hesitation she replied,

"I'm my father's daughter."

It was not what Guy was expecting and he followed up, "No, I mean who are you as a person?"

"That's really who I am. I'm my daughters' mom, my husband's wife, well really ex-wife I should say."

"Aren't you Jeong Sook, your ownself with your own hopes and dreams?"

"I suppose so but those things are only private and of no consequence in the bigger way of things. This is the Korean way, especially for us women. We belong to our father until we get married and then we belong to our husband and his family. Eventually we belong to our son. This is who 'we' are and who I am."

Now, Guy was a true blue American. He believed in truth, justice, and the American way. In particular, he believed in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights that guaranteed basic rights to individuals, including himself. Hell, God gave him these rights and no king, no government, or political party would ever take them away. He had had a professor in the university who taught that the genius of western civilization was the idea of the primacy of the individual. The concept was enshrined in the founding documents of America and had become his guiding philosophy.

When he explained these things to Jeong Sook she thought about it awhile and said,

"Oh yes, I like that. Maybe that what makes you guys how you are, so full of yourselves. You know everybody want to be like you but we can't."

"Why not? Everybody is the same and we all have the same right to be ourselves. Don't you see?"

"I said I see, but there is a lot more to know. Korean society is concerned about proper order. If everyone does what they should do then everybody happy. Troublemakers make trouble for everybody. This is the old, old wisdom of our ancestors. It should be that way."

Yeah ok, he had to think about that some more.

She continued, "Right is not always right. When everyone does what's right then everyone has they rights."

"Ok, who decides what is right? Why do some people get to decide what is right? I have to decide for myself what is right. This is the primacy of the individual."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, but you don't live alone. You got to live with other people. You want to live alone? That is stupid. Can't be happy living your by self."

Now Guy was stumped. Of course she was right. It was the age old question of where does one guy's rights end and the next guy's rights begin. He couldn't answer that one but he was still sure that the rights and value of each individual trumps all else, but a crack in his wall had appeared.

A couple days later Jeong Sook called Guy and asked him to meet her pastor. Pastor, he had no idea she had a pastor or that she went to church. All news to him, this woman was full of surprises. Sure, why not he told her.

They met at the Gunja station in eastern Seoul and went together to a building about a ten minute walk away. On the way he asked her what was up?

"I didn't know you went to church. This guy is the pastor?"

"I don't," she let him know.

"Then why did you say this guy was your pastor?"

"I no say my pastor, I say a pastor."

Well, he was pretty sure he had heard her right but there was no point in correcting her.

"Ok, who is he and why are we going to meet him?"

"He is a pastor and missionary to China. He saved my life and got me out of China. You wanna know about me you gotta know this story."

"China, what were you doing in China? I thought you are from North Korea."

"How you think I got out of North Korea? You don't know nothing. You better just listen and learn sumpthin"

He conceded that he didn't know much about all this. By then they had arrived in front of a six story building that could have been offices or efficiency apartments. In fact it turned out to be both. Jeong Sook entered the front doors and headed for the single elevator. She seemed to know where she was going and Guy followed. She punched the button for the third floor and he asked,

"You been here before?"

"Sure, a few times. He usually in China, only in Korea twice a year."

When the doors opened on the third floor she went directly down the hall and knocked on an ordinary looking door. It was immediately opened by a middle aged Korean man who greeted them and urged them to come in and have a seat around the obligatory heavy coffee table with less than easy looking chairs. Guy and Jeong Sook sat together on one side and the gentleman took the seat at the head, signaling that he was the principle. In the office there was a desk with an old desktop computer and an executive chair as well as two walls of bookshelves. There were a couple of framed photos and an empty aquarium. There was nothing to indicate the premises had anything to do with a church. Guy got the impression that not much time was spent here.

Jeong Sook and the guy began talking in Korean and Guy knew she was lining him out on her guest. Then she turned to Guy,

"This is Rev. Kim Soo Beak. He is a pastor and a missionary working in China. He saved me and got me to South Korea. Try greeting him in Korean."

Both men stood, bowed, and shook hands. Guy said nice to meet you and gave his full name in his very best Korean. Kim also went through the prescribed ritual including the production of and exchange of name cards. Then the clergyman said,

"Sit, sit; Ms.Kim has talked about you. I spent some time in your country and picked up a little English. Shall we converse in your language?"

Well that will make things a lot easier Guy thought. Actuality it seemed that the reverend had picked up more than the little English he had mentioned.

"Nowadays I work in China with the Korean community there. That's where I met your Jeong Sook."

"He saved me! Without he help I maybe still in China," Jeong Sook added.

"Well, I did my best and with the grace of God she has been able to come here. More than anything else, it was this lady's courage and faith that saved her. Has she told you about her time in China?"

In fact she hadn't. "Not much. I'd like to hear that story."

"Jeong Sook, this might be a good time to tell him about your experience. He does need to know. Let's have some tea and you can take your time telling us." To Guy he said warmly, "It's a moving story. I've heard it several times and it never fails to bring tears to my eyes."

"I'll try," she said in a soft voice.

Jeong Sook insisted on preparing and serving the mixed coffee and green tea. Kim apologized that the only snacks were a box of Choc-co Pies. It took ten minutes to get everything ready and as they sipped their beverages, Jeong Sook began.

"Guy, I already told you I was born in North Korea. It became unbearable for me to continue to live there so I ran. My husband had divorced me, took my kids, and my beloved father had been denounced, arrested, and sent to prison."

For the next two hours Jeong Sook poured out her story. She broke down and cried more than a couple times. She tried to tell the truth without lying and it was both painful and liberating. She told about her father and her escape from the North including the night on the ice. She told about the trafficking and her desperate flight from the farm. She told about meeting Kim and her accepting Jesus. She was most animated when she related the rescue of her friend from the nightclub. When she got to the part about her near death and rebirth in the river, a feeling of grace washed over her and her face glowed with light. It was a visual transformation that both men noticed and marveled at. She ended with her arrival in Seoul. She excused herself and retreated to the bathroom where she sat silently on the floor. Her mind was empty and her heart was overflowing.

Guy was also overwhelmed. He had never imagined that this woman he thought he loved had gone through such things. Of course, during the narrative, he had had a million questions but when he tried to interrupt, Jeong Sook ignored him and pushed forward with her telling. After listening to her incredible account, it seemed that she was no longer the same person. More likely, he was also changed. Instinctively he understood their relationship was also changed for good. Telling the truth tends to do that.

While they waited for the lady to return, Guy stared out the window and Kim watched him. The clergyman did take a couple of calls and finished off the choc-co pies. When Jeong Sook came back she

was all smiles, her makeup was repaired, but her face was still filled with a light.

Guy wanted to ask a few questions.

"What about your mother? Why was your father arrested? Where is he now?"

"That's a different story for another day. I all talked out. I'm hungry. Let's eat. Rev. Kim, can you come for dinner?"

"Sorry, my family is waiting for me to get home. I'm gone so much, when I'm in Korea, I have to make time for them. Rain check me, ok?"

"You mean; Can I get a rain check?" Guy knew what he meant.

"Yeah, a rain check."