

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Two - A Cross to Bear - Chapter Fifteen - Falling Leaves

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Few things are as intimate as a shared umbrella on a rainy afternoon. It was a good one, a big golf umbrella and they were dry and cozy under its canopy. They had coffee at a Starbucks, Guy's first hot cup in six months. With no particular destination in mind they strolled together along a wooded path. The foliage was only just showing signs of changing but the first maple and ginkgo leaves were beginning to litter their path.

Guy recalled and did his best to relate to Jeong Sook his falls spent in Michigan and his sentimental feelings for the season. She looked up at his face as he talked and felt reassured, safe, and almost content. Was this love she wondered?

"I always liked autumn the most. For me it was a time of new beginnings. The start of the new school year meant new teachers, new classmates, and a chance to turn over a new academic leaf. No matter how poor my grades were the previous term, I always held firmly to the illusion that I would do better."

"But you were a good student Guy." She thought he must have been.

"Sure," he lied, "but more important was the football season."

"Did you play football, that like soccer?" It was a common misconception.

"No, we played real football, American football," he clued her in.

"Oh yeah, like rugby; too dangerous." She kind of liked the idea of Guy being a little dangerous.

"Rugby, kind of like that but not exactly." He spent a little time carefully explaining the difference. He lost her early on and gave up.

"Don't you miss your hometown? Why don't you go back. Why do you spend your life so far away?" It was perplexing to her.

Guy got this a lot. Longing for one's hometown was an overarching theme in Korean culture. They had a hard time understanding why someone born in America would choose to live anywhere else for any extended period of time. He often mentioned the FBI and winked. Sometimes folks got it and sometimes not.

When he had tried his little joke on Jeong Sook she just stared at him with incomprehension and said, "Don't be stupid."

"You know I was really into football back then. Where I grew up football was king. In the fall, Friday nights were game nights. We played under the lights and it was a big deal for the school and the whole town. On Saturday mornings we watched the younger guys play JV ball. The afternoon was for college games. Every year the Michigan Ohio State game was the highlight of the season. Sundays were for professional football. It was like a way of life."

"Why you like a game so much?" It seemed a little frivolous to her.

"I suppose it gave me a purpose and a meaning. It was real important to everyone." He had never thought about why before. It was sort of self evident.

Her eyes lit up when she heard the words purpose and meaning. Now she was really paying attention.

"How did you feel when you were playing football?" She felt she was onto something.

"You know, I felt really alive when playing and even when practicing. We practiced everyday after school for two hours. We used words like 'play with reckless abandon' and 'in the zone'." The words and emotions rushed back as he tried to explain it to Jeong Sook.

She couldn't catch the meaning of words like reckless and abandon. So she asked, "What is in a zone?"

"In the zone, sometimes when you are doing something that means a lot to you, you focus on that one thing so much that you lose track of everything else. Maybe the two parts of the brain, left and right, become one. You don't have to think about what you are doing; you just do it. It's almost effortless. Performance is optimized and time disappears. I often played a two hour game and it seemed to be over in ten minutes. You know what I'm talking about?"

She didn't but it sounded intriguing. She figured 'in the zone' was something she needed.

"Then why did you stop football? Don't you miss that zone?"

Yes, I missed it for awhile. My playing days came to an end. Sometimes when I'm really writing well I get into the zone. Other times when I'm engaged in an interesting, important, or meaningful conversation with somebody I get real close."

"Oh yeah, you mean with one of your girlfriends?"

"No, nowadays it's pretty much with you. Sex with you will do it," he tried another joke.

"You got one thing on you mind," she informed him with her superior air.

They walked for a while silently, each lost in thought.

"You not so stupid," she let him know.

Jeong Sook had the evening shift at the hospital and so they took a cab together. After dropping her, Guy headed off on foot to a nearby coffee shop. He was in a rare introspective mood and thought it would be a good opportunity to get some writing done. This love affair was putting him behind as far as earning his daily bread. Ideally he could get in 'the zone' or at least get some work done.

Jeong Sook's shift as a nurses aid stretched from four to midnight. The busiest time lasted through dinner time until the doctors finished their final rounds about eight o'clock. Then she made several trips to the pharmacy in the basement and brought back the opioids so the nurses could put the patients down to sleep. After nine thirty things slowed down and the staff mainly hung out, drank coffee, and gossiped.

On this evening Jeong Sook avoided the coffee klatch and took a seat by herself. She had a few things to think about. The first was this zone thing. She instinctively felt that she wanted to be able to enter this zone. It sure sounded like the place she wanted to be. But how? Of course it wasn't gonna be by playing football or any other game. She wanted to talk to Guy more about it. The other thing was the reckless abandon. She looked up the meaning of both words and discovered that neither one was something good. She'd have to ask Guy about that too.

She knew that Rev. Kim was scheduled to return to China next week and she was determined to talk some of these things over with him before he left. She decided she would take Guy with her and they could discuss a lot of things with the pastor. He had been a big help in the past and she trusted his perspective.

Inevitably her thoughts strayed to her life's dilemma; what did it all mean if anything? What was her life worth? Did it have any value at all? It suddenly occurred to her that as long as her family was still trapped in North Korea she would never find peace. It was an unsettling thought but she couldn't easily shake it. She reasoned with herself that her father was as good as dead and buried in that gulag. But a small voiced answered that no, he was alive and waiting for her. Impossible she knew but the small quiet voice was persistent.

At twelve thirty, one of the night shift nurses shook her arm and asked,

"You are still here? Whatever are you thinking about? Maybe a boyfriend. You better get home."

Startled, Jeong Sook said, "No, no, what would I do with a boyfriend? I'll be going. See you tomorrow."

The time had passed unnoticed. In wonderment Jeong Sook realized that she had been 'in the zone.'

Guy hadn't been so lucky. He was working on a travel piece for an in flight magazine on the seaside town of Sokcho. He had been there several times, once with Jeong Sook. It had all the advantages of the mountains, the sea, and a picturesque fishing village. He was cranking right along when he was rudely interrupted by the belch of a kakao notification on his phone. It was Kyle. He ignored the first three messages but finally,

"What's up? I'm trying to work. Where are you?" It was probably a mistake but Guy's concentration was already broken.

"I'm in Hanam at the in-laws. Let's meet up."

"What are you doing there? Drinking?"

"Eating dinner right now. Soon as we finish I can go out for a walk. Meet me at the 7-11 across from the Tokpung market. We can sit outside." Kyle liked this place because it had a deck with chairs and tables.

"Can't. I'm busy. Working."

"Come on, I got something I want to show you."

"What?"

"You'll see. You're gonna love it"

Guy caved, packed up his stuff, and headed for Hanam City on the far east side of Seoul. This better be good he told himself again and again on the hour long trip. In a way it was better than he had expected.

At nine thirty Guy took a seat on the deck of the 7-11. It wasn't long before Kyle strolled up.

The air temperature was somewhere in the mid-forties. It wasn't raining but the sky was leaking a little. It was a bit chilly for sitting outside. Kyle was dressed in a baggy hoodie, Bermuda shorts, and hiking boots. This was his standard costume and would be until the first snowfall.

"Hey Guy, thanks for coming. I had to get out of that house. Let's get a drink. I think it's your turn to buy."

They went into the convenience store to make their selections. Kyle chose two large bottles of one of the local lagers and a bottle of soju. Guy picked up another bottle of the 'ju' and a large bag of Doritos. He looked around and found a jar of salsa for dipping. It all went on Guy's card.

They made themselves comfortable at one of the tables and both fired up Marlboros. Without further ado, they poured beer into two large paper cups provided by the convenience store and added generous amounts of soju. The street and sidewalk traffic were humming. It was 'market-day' at the traditional market across the street. Every fifth day itinerant vendors set up their wares and the locals flocked to get good deals on produce, seafood, shoes, and all kinds of things. Half way through their second 'soju-bombs' Guy remembered the all important question.

"So, what is it you got to show me? It better be good."

"Oh yeah, I did it. I told you I was gonna get a tattoo. Check this out!"

He leaned in close to Guy and proceeded to pull up his hoodie and a gray t-shirt to reveal his masterpiece of ink. The light wasn't great and all Guy could see was what appeared to be a bloody mess about six inches square on Kyle's left breast.

"What the hell is it?" Guy inquired after a closer examination.

"You don't recognize him?" Kyle was incredulous. "It's Ahn Jung-geun!"

Guy knew the name. Everyone in Korea did. He was the guy that had assassinated the Governor General of Korea, Ito Hirobumi, during the Japanese Colonial period. He was revered as a patriot, freedom fighter, and martyr by most Koreans.

Ok, now Guy could see a face with a mustache. Maybe it was him.

The real question was, "What the fuck, why did you get Ahn Jung-geun's face tattooed on your chest?"

"It's cool man. Soon as it heals up a little I'm going to the sauna and show it off!"

"So, you're a Korean patriot now?" Guy was flabbergasted.

"Yeah, why not. If you had the balls you would have gone with me and gotten one too."

"Has your wife seen it yet?"

" Not yet. I just got it yesterday. She's gonna love it."

"You sure about that?" Kyung-hee was a very practical and level headed lady that didn't put up with much of her hubby's bullshit.

About the time Jeong Sook was heading out of the hospital, a white mini-van arrived at the 7-11 and Guy poured the patriot into the back seat while Kyung-hee cussed him out. On the way back to Anam dong Guy promised himself that when he wrote his novel, this episode would absolutely be a part of it.