

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Two - A Cross to Bear - Chapter Nineteen - Financial Planning

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As Jeong Sook entered a place of increasing light and clarity, Guy was sinking into what seemed to be a morass of conflicting thoughts and emotions. Usually it was his modus operandi to retreat from situations where there was no obvious solution. But this time there seemed to be no place to hide. The conflict he felt went to the core of who he was. Because it went that deep he felt his life was in turmoil. At the same time that Jeong Sook was embarking on a new chapter he was clinging to the comfortable life he had carved out for himself. Surely he loved this woman but what was love and was this worth the jeopardy? He would be happy to make her a part of his life but instead he was being increasingly drawn into the drama of her reality.

Their conversations with the Rev. Kim were a source of irritation also. He had never dwelt much on esoteric topics such as redemption, the meaning of life, or callings. He prided himself in being quite rational and he trusted in known facts that made up the cause and effect relationship. Now he was questioning the very underpinnings of his life. Kim was real good at explaining things so they seemed rational, but were they? Guy couldn't easily dismiss

Kim's concepts. What he was asserting, that meaning in life trumped even facts, made a lot of sense. It was meaning that moved him and not mere facts. This was a major seismic fault and Guy was moving in a direction he wasn't sure he wanted to go.

It was a hell of a lot easier to deal with a known quantity Behind the trendy youth oriented shopping district known as Rodeo Drive was the older covered market area. It abutted up against the red light district and was a place that Guy occasionally liked to bend the elbow. Interspaced among the market stalls were the establishments that catered to the working class locals' alcohol requirements. They wandered through the market until they found a place that looked out on the street and specialized in pigs feet. It was as good a place as any.

Snow had been falling steadily for three hours and it was accumulating rapidly setting a nostalgic mood for the evening. Guy always looked forward to the first snowfall of the season. He loved snow in December decidedly more than he detested it in March. An early appearance in November was sure to improve his continence.

"So how's your old lady?" Guy always figured it was only polite to enquire as to his pal's marital status.

"Oh, about the same; mean as a snake." Kyle was ignoring the greasy plate of 'trotters' they had ordered and was banging down soju about as fast as he could. He may have been behind on his quota for the day.

Guy knew Kyung Hee to be a pretty reasonable woman who could be more than tough when trying to keep her life with a sometimes feckless hubby from descending into chaos.

"What is it now, the tattoo?"

"No, she's pretty much over that now. I was sure she was going to divorce me last week. I went out with Alpha to celebrate his birthday and fucked up big time"

"Alpha? You know he's nothing but trouble. Why do you keep messing around with him?"

"Yeah that's what Kyung Hee keeps telling me. Anyway, he's my oldest friend in Korea. After last week we got to split the blanket."

"So what happened last week?"

"It was his birthday so we went to a room salon to celebrate. We went to a place on the other side of the river and spent about three hours."

Now a room salon was a fixture in modern Korean life where a group of men, and now days women,

could get a private room in an establishment and party together. Any kind of alcohol and the accompanying side dishes could be ordered at exorbitant prices and consumed. They were served by young, and often not so young, ladies who worked for big tips. It was hugely expensive but is a big part of the business, entertainment, and social fabric. The size of the tips varied based on the services performed.

"Three hours, that had to cost an arm and a leg. Who picked up the tab?"

"Well that's the thing. We polished off three bottles of whiskey and were pretty wasted when it was time to settle up. Alpha, the asshole, says let's skip out. He said it was a piece of cake, he'd done it many times. I told him hell no but neither of us had the cash. I may have passed out for a moment but when I looked around, Alpha was gone. I figured he went to the toilet. I waited but the mama-san was getting persistent. Finally she said that's it; pay up or she was gonna call the cops. It was over four hundred thousand won. When the law arrived it went south fast. They put the cuffs on me and roughed me up some. Then they hauled me off to the cop shop."

"Why didn't you just put it on a credit card?" Guy already knew the answer to that one.

"Kyung Hee took all my cards after the tattoo incident."

"And then....?" Guy couldn't help laughing.

"They took me down to the basement of the police station and handcuffed me to a bench. Then they tortured me"

"Tortured, why?"

"Who knows? They just bastards and they said they were sick and tired of foreign English teachers coming to Korea and running wild. One guy took my hand and put it on a hot radiator and stepped on it. Another guy banged on my back and legs with a rubber hose. Then they took my cell phone and started sending messages to all of my contacts telling them I had been arrested for running out on a check. A lot of them went to the parents of my private students."

"How did you get out of there?"

"In the end they called Kyung Hee and told her to bring money and pick me up. They turned the job of torturing me over to her."

"Don't worry, she ain't gonna divorce you. You're her ticket to the land of the big PX."

By this time they were both laughing uproariously. It was one of the things Guy liked about Kyle, his ability to find humor in the most ridiculous situations. The snow was still falling and they continued drinking.

At about forty thousand won into the evening, Guy was under no illusion as to who was gonna pay, they decided to make a move. On their way out they got a little lost and wound up walking through the crib lined narrow alleyways of the red light district. Like others, all over Korea, this one had surely seen more prosperous days. Many of the cribs were shuttered but there were some ladies still sitting in the windows and calling out Oppa (brother!), to potential customers. It was always interesting to walk around and see all the different costumes, from 'schoolgirl', 'princess,' to 'bride', that the ladies wore to stoke the fantasies of the clients.

By midnight the snow had stopped and the guys were both stumbling drunk. For Guy it was time to call it a night but Kyle had one last request.

"Hey dude, how about spotting me a 'man' won (10,000 won)?"

"For what? You already smashed. And I know you still got a stash of makoli at home."

"I need to buy my Lotto ticket. I get one everyday."

"You playing the lottery now? You planning on getting rich?"

"You can't win if you don't play," Kyle told him as if it was one of the irrefutable principles of life.

"Besides I had a dream of a pig two weeks ago. There was a number on the pig's back and I put it together with my birth date and got my sure-thing number. I just got to keep playing it till it hits."

It sounded perfectly reasonable to Guy at that hour so he gave him the tenner.

Across town Jeong Sook was just finishing up her shift at the severance hospital. The early snow had also delighted her. In order to make ends meet she was still holding down two jobs. At the same time she was

pursuing a love affair with Guy that was showing little indication of how it might turn out. More important was her increasing confidence that she had found what she was looking for. Her life could mean something and it was up to her to choose and decide what it meant. She felt for the first time in her life that she didn't have to remain at the mercy of fate. It was up to her. It was an absolutely exhilarating feeling. She decided, even though she didn't really believe in such things, that today's unexpected snowfall was a sign. She would act as if she believed it.

Her small clear voice had reassured her as to what her calling was. As many times as she listened for the voice, she usually couldn't hear it. But then suddenly, without rhyme or reason, there it was again. She would never know peace and happiness until her father was free. She argued with her voice; it was impossible, it was an absurd idea that she should even think about such a thing, it was a burden that was too much for a poor, powerless woman. But the voice persisted, "pick up your cross and follow me." Ah yes, she gave up arguing and had now decided to pick up this burden and see what would happen.

From now there was work to do. She wanted to talk to somebody about it. Most of all she wanted the advice and guidance of Rev. Kim but he was back in China. She had a few friends in the refugee community but no one she trusted enough for this. She only had Guy, so on the way home she called him.

The phone rang and rang and finally he picked up, "Hey baby, where you at? I've been looking for you!"

She knew immediately that he was drunk but pressed on, "Where are you? You drunk again? With who?"

"I'm a little bit drunk. Had a few adult beverages with Kyle; had to counsel him about his love life."

"What you know about that? Not much."

"I know I love you baby. Just crazy bout you."

"You crazy alright!"

"I'm in a taxi, let's meet up. You at work?"

"Do you really love me Guy?"

"Absolutely sweetheart. Come to my house and we can love all night."

"Not sex, I mean do you really, really love me?"

"I really, really, really, really, really love you! I will do anything for you."

"Oh really, anything? Why did you come to me? Why now?"

Once this recurring theme was breached it was pretty sure that Guy wasn't going to get laid. Ah well, it was worth a try.

"Guy if you really love me, I need your help. It's not an easy thing but it is something I gotta do."

"Sure, I'll do anything at all for you. What is it? Just say the word! It's good as done!"

"I believe you. I not tell you now. You too drunk, maybe tomorrow."

"Ah come on, I'm sober as an Archbishop. I'm just happy."

Jeong Sook had to laugh. It was probably why she loved him. He could always make her laugh.

"So how bout it my love? Let's get together and heat up a snowy night." Worth another try he figured.

"No! You got a one way mind. I got to work at the noodle shop tomorrow at ten. I got to sleep now. See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sure, call me." It was snowing again and Guy was standing on the sidewalk in front of his building watching it fall when she hung up.