

## Between Heaven and Earth: Book Two - A Cross to Bear - Chapter Eleven - Of Little Comfort

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Several folks had urged Guy to talk with a few 'comfort women' before it was too late. Of course 'comfort women' referred to the women that had been forced, coerced, or signed up to serve as prostitutes for the Imperial Japanese Army. Guy was not at all comfortable about it but at Jeong Sook's persistence he agreed. Guy was familiar with the basic details of the story.

The Korean media often carried stories about the few remaining women and their weekly demonstrations outside the Japanese embassy in downtown Seoul. There were only about a half a dozen still alive and they were in their late eighties. They lived together in a facility on the outskirts of Seoul and bided their time.

The 'comfort women' was one of the highly emotional issues that existed between the two close neighbors stemming from Japan's efforts at creating a Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere on the backs of her neighbors. It was a horrific story that was at once unbelievable and wholly believable. In what can be only described as an efficient, although devoid of morality in any modern sense, the

Japanese high command decided that it would be best, for the sake of comfort and moral, for the front line troops to be provided with outlets for their natural bodily functions such as sex. Being in the fortunate position of occupying Korea, the Philippines, Indo-china, and large parts of China, all conveniently full of woman who should be eager to do their duty for the Emperor, rounded up tens of thousands of girls, women, and aunties and then shipped them off to comfort stations in order to service dozens of soldiers a day.

On the day they drove out to Sanctuary House, the group home in Geonggi Province where the surviving grannies lived together, it was the last week of October. It was a typical mid autumn day, cool in the evenings but still warm with clear blue skies in the daytime. On the forty minute drive Jeong Sook was overly cheerful and even a little hyper. Guy noticed and wondered what was up.

"Hey girl, what's up with you today?" Guy stepped into the trap.

"Ya!" She fired off a tirade in Korean so fast that there was no chance of Guy picking up any more than a spattering of words like American, mi-kook, and foolish.

Guy wasn't really stunned because he'd seen similar radical mood swings in the past. He probably should have seen it coming but he was enjoying the day and wasn't paying attention. Now he had a couple of options. He could take the high road and try and placate her. With a little luck and tact he might calm her down and it would blow over in a day or two. Or he could go reasonable and point out how ridiculous she was being and she would most likely not speak to him for a week or so.

While he stayed quiet, making up his mind, she rolled on, this time in mixed English and Korean.

"You don't know. You are American. You can't understand." She then switched to another burst of rapid fire Korean.

"Understand what?" Of course he had no clue.

"Nothing, you can't understand Koreans. You can't understand culture. You can't know how Koreans feel."

Now Guy prided himself in being able to understand most things. Outside of string theory and other quantum physics topics he figured he could understand things as well as or even better than most. It made no sense to him that he couldn't understand things just because they were Korean. He had heard this line of reasoning from Jeong Sook before and pretty much rejected it as emotional nonsense.

Jeong Sook remained sullen the rest of the way. When they arrived at the group home they were met by three Korean men in their mid forties. They conversed with Jeong Sook for more than ten minutes. In the course, Guy understood that she had introduced him as an American journalist that was hoping to interview one or more of the grannies. Eventually it seemed that the conversation became more heated.

Abruptly Jeong Sook turned to him and said "Let's go! She then stormed off to where they had parked the car.

Once they were back on the main road Guy tried to find out what had gone down.

"What happened back there? I thought we had an appointment." Jeong Sook didn't reply and instead stared out the window at the passing scenery.

After awhile Guy noticed her shoulders shaking and then a sob. Lost in the emotional fog of language, culture, and circumstances he just kept driving. At the first small village he pulled off the road and looked for a place they could regroup. Down a small dirt road they came upon what looked like, if not for the small parking lot with a dozen cars off to the side, an abandoned temple with sweeping up-turned eaves. It turned out to be a well known country tea house that attracted tourists out for the taste of bygone days on the road. This will do thought Guy and even Jeong Sook perked up when she noticed the quaint building.

"I need the WC," she said slamming the door.

"The what?" he enquired.

"The toilet, silly," she was already up the steps and reaching for the handle of the double doors.

By the time Jeong Sook returned Guy had already leaked the lizard, found a table by the front windows, and had ordered coffee. The decor was Korean country side circa say about 1900. The large room was filled with tables and chairs that seemed to be made of shellacked sawn logs. There were even tables made from cross cut sections of trees at least six feet in diameter. All the chairs were equally rustic. The walls were hung with a mishmash of yellowing black and white ink drawings captioned with Sino Korean calligraphy. On a far wall were old black and white photographs that Guy wanted to get a closer look at. The electrical wiring ran exposed and was anchored to the ceiling and walls with white ceramic insulators. Clearly the building dated to pre Edison times. Kook-ak, a kind of traditional Korean music played softly in the background. It was quite pleasant.

When she finally came out of the ladies room she had another lady literally in tow. Well dressed and in her early thirties she and Jeong Sook were grinning broadly. This woman is full of surprises thought Guy.

"Will you buy us a cup of tea?" Jeong Sook's mood had turned around a hundred and eighty degrees.

"Sure why not?" Guy replied and wondered what had happened in the water closet.

Of course, in Korean style, there was no immediate introduction like there would have been in another situation. The ladies chatted away in Korean and the gentleman bided his time. They ordered pine nut tea and rice cakes. Guy went outside for a smoke. When he got back they were deep into an animated conversation. He could only surmise that they were old friends that had accidentally bumped into each other in this out of the way place.