

## Between Heaven and Earth: Book Two - A Cross to Bear - Chapter Twelve - A Horse of a Different Color

Michael Downey  
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Tea time stretched into makoli time, a traditional milky white rice wine, and then into a kind of hot pot dinner. The two women seemed to be on rather intimate terms as they talked on and on. Guy felt somewhat like a seven year old hanging on his mother while she talked forever on the phone with a friend or neighbor. Early on he gave up trying to decipher the Korean. They were going way too fast and he just gave up. Guy took frequent smoke breaks and wandered around the outside of the red brick tea house. Behind one of the outhouses he found stacks of used and broken roof tiles. A couple of small skinny black and white squirrels worked to stock what was probably their nest for the winter. Guy watched them for awhile. Preparation for the winter is a serious business he ruminated. He was ready to get back to town.

About half way through the makoli course the conversation changed. The wine was served in a battered looking brass pot. They drank it out of matching brass bowls. Jeong Sook poured first for their guest and then for Guy. Of course he then took the pot and poured for her. By the third round everyone had poured for everyone else and had sampled the Korean style pancakes with scallions and seafood. Once the niceties were out of the way the language turned to English and Jeong Sook made the introductions.

"Guy, this is Professor Choi, Choi Mi Yeon. She is a professor of Korean books at a university in Seoul."

The professor was highly intelligent looking as well as gorgeous. She was dressed in a dark brown tweed suit with a blue silk blouse and a blue and white scarf tastefully tied at her neck. Her hair was medium length, jet black with only a hint of gray. Very attractive as he would imagine a female professor should be. Guy made a mental note to be careful with her. Jeong Sook was known to be unreasonably jealous.

"Pleased to meet you Guy. Elder sister has told me that you are a writer. I'd like to read some of your work," she said in flawless if slightly stilted English.

Lubricated with two more pots of makoli they became acquainted and the story came out.

"So, how long have you ladies known each other?" Guy wanted to know. The women both broke out laughing.

"So, what's so funny?" Guy asked a little miffed.

"Sorry, sir, we meet for the first time in the ladies room. I should have introduced myself. My name is Choi Mi Yeon. Your Mrs. Kim was kind enough to help me out with some things I was in need of."

"Yes, she is a professor at Sejong University. She was also come to visit the grannies at the Sanctuary House. She know a lot about what's up there," Jeong Sook chimed in.

Guy's antenna immediately went up. Well, he thought, maybe this trip won't be a bust after all.

"Nice to meet you Miss Choi. What do you teach?"

"My field is Korean Traditional Dance and Korean folk lore but I have researched and written extensively about the Comfort Women. I have known and interviewed the seniors living at that house for my books many times. Today was just a social call. Most of them are in poor health and all are lonely. I come and visit when I can."

"She knows who those guys are who blocked us. Tell him, sister," Jeong Sook said with a directness that was uncharacteristic of her.

"Yeah I can't help wondering who those guys are. I thought we had an appointment but apparently not."

Now he pressed a little bit.

"They are members of an activist group that is often known as, hm...how can I say in English, Sons of the Nation? They are the ones who are taking care of the grannies who live in that house."

"Is that right? How come they wouldn't let us meet with them today?" Guy was a little pissed now.

"They are not only the caretakers but you could say the gatekeepers to these survivors." She spoke in textbook English and it sounded like a prepared statement.

Guy knew there was more that he had to know.

"What do you mean gatekeepers? Why do these old ladies need gatekeepers?"

"They are communists, North Koreans I think," Jeong Sook jumped in.

"Really, are they communists?" Guy wanted to know.

"Maybe not communist and they surely are not from the north. They are leftists and have a lot of sympathetic views toward North Korea. They are civic activists, extreme nationalists, and a driving force in the progressive movement here in the South."

It was a lot to take in and Guy emptied his bowl of rice wine, leaned back and tried to sort it out. The two women chatted in Korean. It was still hard to believe they had just met. He noted that Jeong Sook's mood had changed dramatically for the better and he was glad for that.

After a while he sat up and asked, "Why wouldn't they let us in today?"

Miss Choi thought for a moment and replied, "I really don't know, I can only guess. You are a writer, aren't you? They don't know you and what you might write. They always try to control the Comfort Women issue. They only want their narrative to be heard. They keep those women in that house and control who can talk to them."

"Why do they want to control the narrative?" He pressed.

"In many ways it is a horrible story of human rights abuse, the degrading of Korean women, and an affront to Korean national pride," Choi carefully said. "It's a major issue for the extreme nationalist, progressive movement. They use it as a wedge to drive into the alliance between the United States, South Korea and Japan."

"But the story is no secret. Everybody knows that the Japanese Army kidnapped young girls and forced them to work in their brothels." Guy was sure he was on solid ground. The gross abuse of Korea's daughters pissed even him off.

"Of course, that's why it's such a powerful tool for them. It hits directly at our national pride," she said with a sad smile.

"So it's true right?" He needed to know.

"Continuing to smile she said, "Not exactly. The truth is more complicated than the black and white narrative that they insist on. I've spent the last eight years researching the truth and have come up with some facts that don't fit their telling of the story."

"Is that right?" Guy could tell that this was important. "What facts?"

"Well for example, many of the women that I've interviewed tell different stories depending on who they are talking to. It was a very difficult time for our people. We were a country occupied by a foreign nation. Some people resisted and paid a heavy price. Others collaborated and made their own life easier. Most people tried to survive. People were very poor and to sell a daughter was a way to survive. Many of the women I talked to, including those living in that house, told me stories of being sold by mothers, fathers, and stepfathers to factories and brothel owners. The fact is that the comfort stations and brothels were owned not only by Japanese businessmen but by Koreans. In the end it is rather clear to anyone who examines the historical evidence that it was the Japanese occupation of our country that is at the root of this and other tragedies but we Koreans were also complicit. If we want Japan to take full responsibility then we ourselves have to take responsibility. Now the far left is using it as a political football." She stopped and poured another round of makoli for everyone.

"Kyung Bae!" She toasted and they all drank from their cups.

That's a horse of a different color," Guy mused.

"The modern history of Korea since the time of the Japanese occupation is quite complicated. That's not to say it was not complicated before the Japanese occupation, it just became more difficult to sort out with more international players," the professor continued.

Over a third pot of makoli the ladies returned to what seemed to be an intense discussion in Korean. Guy didn't try to follow but instead tried to wrap his head around this new information. It made sense to him. The thing was that just about everyone in South Korea believed that the Japanese were the bad guys for not coming clean about their imperial past. Along with the territorial dispute concerning the Dokdo islands, it was the issue that was guaranteed to bring out the strongest emotions against Japan. For Guy, it had always been sure that the truth about this story and others was a slippery thing. It all depended on who was telling the story. Didn't the winners write the history.

After dinner Guy went out for another smoke. The sun had set and in the dark he felt a chill. He sat in the car and plugged in his cell phone and thought about Professor Choi. Her story jived more with his instinctive take on human nature than the black and white official narrative. He decided that he believed her but that it would be prudent to do some due diligence concerning her facts. Next he thought about how this piece of the Korean puzzle fit with the rest of what he was learning about Korean history and culture. Without coming to any conclusions he figured it was time to head back inside.

Jeong Sook and her new friend were both noticeably intoxicated. Tomorrow was Sunday and Guy began considering sheltering in place and driving back to Seoul in the morning. When he got back from a trip to the restroom there was a bottle of Scotch Blue, a particularly vial Korean whisky, a bucket of ice, four glasses, and various bottles of mix on the table.

"Dear, today is our lucky day and we gonna celebrate," Jeong Sook explained with a big sloppy smile.

"In my county's language we say In-yeon. It mean a fortunate meeting by chance." The professor's English was deteriorating.

Guy had heard the word before. In-yeon seemed to mean something like the English word fate or destiny. It was one of those Korean words that resisted an exact translation. He did know that it was culturally significant in understanding the Korean soul. For professor Choi to use the word to describe today's meeting said that she placed great meaning in it in the overall scheme of things. Guy wondered.

For most of the evening Guy was the linguistic odd man out. The two women went on and on in their common lingua for what seemed like forever. The younger woman nodded and nodded as she commiserated with whatever Jeong Sook was telling her. Next Jeong Sook listened intently without interruption as the professor elaborated on some unknowable subject. Who knows, they could have been working out some variation of string theory. They steadily drained the bottle and ordered another.

Once well into the second bottle, Professor Choi attempted to include Guy by switching to English but they were both too drunk by that time to carry it off. She was explaining about the four basic epics of traditional Korean dance. It sounded interesting to Guy who had seen more than a couple performances of the popular Fan and Drum dances but had no idea of the subtle meanings of the graceful, rhythmic, and sometimes energetic movements. He tried to help her clear up her English expressions but it was too far into the party and he gave up.

When Jeong Sook ordered a third bottle, Guy, trying to play the voice of reason, protested.

"No worry, you got no more money, I pay!" His girlfriend slurred.

Jesus H. Christ he thought, this isn't going to end well. By this time Guy had had enough to drink. He was already well lubricated and drinking more wasn't going to make him feel better. On the other hand the two ladies looked like they were not stopping anytime soon. It was part of the Korean alcohol culture. It was usually bad form to stop before either all the booze or the night had been consumed. Guy wanted to sleep.

An unsympathetic Jeong Sook announced that if he was tired he could go home. Although tempted, he knew from past experience he would never hear the end of it if he cut out early. Against his better judgment he decided to hang. By ten or so, the three of them were what they used to call three sheets to the wind. Jeong Sook began her usual routine of crying when she was drunk. Guy had seen this before and knew there was no point in trying to figure out what was wrong. The professor was crying too and put her arms around her new friend and tried to comfort her. Guy tried to keep from passing out. After about twenty minutes of sobbing, Jeong Sook stopped and began talking again. Suddenly both women seemed to sober up as Jeong Sook passionately related her tale and the professor listened intently.

"She explaining about her escape from the north and her passage through China. You know this story Guy?" Choi asked in all seriousness.

"Yeah, we talked about it before. I know the basic details anyway. I'm sure I don't have the full story," Guy answered and realized that he was no longer so intoxicated.

"She can't tell you. She never told nobody. She all broke up inside. A very bad time; everybody betrayed her," the professor said with a deep sigh.

"That's why she cries all the time?"

"That's why," Choi nodded.

Jeong Sook had nodded out.

Professor Choi called a substitute driver and was driven home. Guy figured he was sobered up enough to get he and the comatose Jeong Sook back to Seoul and he, at her insistence, dropped her outside her door. What next, he wondered?