

Chapter 8.

Calum and Halla are the only people in the restaurant when a large plate of raw fish arrives along with a selection of tasty spices. There is enough for four people, Calum thought. Then the beer comes, accompanied by a bottle of traditional soju, a popular fermented rice spirit.

Calum notices what she is wearing, a blue jean jacket that has a section of stitches neatly removed on one side, drawing attention to appealing horizontal lines. He admires her attire, genuinely appreciating her artistic sensibility. His eyes trace the contours concealing the roundness of her breasts. "I really like that jacket you are wearing. Is it one of your designs?"

"Yes, it is. I still make a lot of my own clothes, just for myself," she replied, her eyes sparkling with modesty and pride.

"Very artistic. Very tasteful. Not too much. Just right. I thought you were artistic when I first saw you."

"Gamsahamnida, Halla replied.

She places two small glasses on the table. "Now you in Korea, you must learn how to do things here, the right way. Next Korean girl you take out, you can impress with your cultural knowledge."

"Next girl? The next girl I take out will be you. Only you, Miss Halla with a H. Only you," Calum replied. "Remember you are the only girl I know here in this country."

"In Korea, that is," She pauses. "We don't know how the script gets written for us."

"The script? What script?" Calum inquired.

"Please watch carefully. Place one hand on your arm on the inside of your wrist like this. It's a sign of respect. Or, you can have left hand open on your heart, like this." Halla demonstrates the process with the skill of a professional.

Calum watches carefully, appreciating the chance to get an education on local etiquette. Halla hands him a glass full of Soju. "Geon bae!" she said. "This is our way of giving a toast. Now you say. Then we drink."

Calum raises his glass to connect with hers. "Geon bae!" he said.

Halla turns and covers her mouth with her hand, as she drinks all the contents.

"Why do you cover your glass with your hand when you drink?" he asked.

"You are older. It is our Korean custom," she replied, as she fills another glass. It shows respect. I turn away, cover my mouth and drink. Like this."

"Geon bae!" he said. Calum does not usually drink excessively however, Halla is soon filling up his glass again with soju. After a few more glasses, he starts feeling the effect.

“Each time we have a drink, we say, Geon bae. Be careful. Soju is strong drink.”

“Gummy-sa-ha-mnida,” Calum makes a poor attempt at pronouncing *thank you*, to which Halla finds amusing.

He feels certain she could out drink him. “Yes, soju is very strong,” Calum slurred.

“Yes, very popular in South Korea,” she replied.

“Tell me, Miss Halla with a H. Do you think someone else, outside of ourselves is writing the script for our lives?” he said, as he makes several attempts at grasping a piece of sushi. He chases it around the plate with his chop sticks like a hound after an elusive rabbit.

“Perhaps,” Halla replied, leaving the question hanging in the air with a delicate promise of more to come. “Let me help you.”

“No. I am good. It will not get away,” said Calum, as he successfully retrieves a portion of food after a struggle. Elevating it to his mouth is another challenge. His clothes soon become coated with a variety of Korean spices.

“I am so messy.”

“Yes, you are,” Halla smiled.

“Are you enjoying your meal,” Calum asked.

“Yes, I am hungry. I like so much,” said Halla, surprised at the return of her appetite.

“Perhaps, just perhaps?... Do you think we can be the authors of our own life?” he persists with the previous topic. He likes the abstract direction of the conversation and is ready to engage further, however a waitress arrives with more food, breaking the flow of conversation. Usually friendly and sociable by nature, when Calum is inebriated, that characteristic is multiplied ten-fold.

“I like her a lot,” he told the waitress, referring to Halla. “But I only love her a little bit, not a big bit.” The waitress doesn’t understand a word of what is being said. However, she follows the mood, responding with a smile.

Halla continues. “I no like. I no like. Not a little bit. In Korea, we always smile when we tell someone we not like them. Ha. ha.” She thinks her comment is very amusing.

In Australia....if we no like, we...we...kiss them. So now is your opportunity. Say, I not like you, while kissing and smiling.” Calum leans across the table in preparation.

“You crazy. More crazy than me.” They both laugh as Halla feels the effects of the soju. “That so funny. Kiss me, I not like you. Ha Ha. Stop!”

“I not like you either,” Calum smiled.

“I not like you. Kiss me.” Ha, Ha.” Halla beams a smile Calum’s direction, while shaking her head.

Halla forgets her usual concern about how she looks momentarily. Suddenly, she finds herself, instinctively reaching for her vanity mirror, her desire for perfect facial presentation resurfacing. Laughter distracted her for a while but then, reality comes flooding back. Halla sees her reflection in the vanity mirror, intent on rectifying her make-up. A minute flaw needs urgent attention.

Calum is oblivious to any imperfections in her makeup. He loves watching her, amused by Halla's assortment of unusual mannerisms, like the shocked expression she gives her reflection. The feelings of being besotted is overwhelming him. But why so circumspect about the script comment? It seems like she is privy to a secret. He is becoming more mesmerised by her with the increased consumption of alcohol.

"You are so beautiful...so, so, beautiful," he said. "I cannot stop looking at you, Miss Halla with a H," he slurred. "How do I say, I love you in Korean?"

"Salanghaeyo," she replied.

"Oh, thank you, I love you too," Calum grins, as though he has just won a game of checkers.

There is that damn charm again, Halla thought. He can't stop himself. How many other girls has he swept off their feet. I bet I am not the only one he has used that line on.

"Oh! gam-sa-ha-mnida. Calum with a.... What letter was it again." she laughed, while masking her true thoughts. Stop! I don't like to laugh."

"You don't like laughing. Why?" replied Calum, amazed by the comment.

"No, I no like," as she points to lines either side of her eyes. "It make me old."

"Laughing is wonderful. Doesn't matter about making lines. Your eyes are beautiful. The irony," he continues. "Is not the facial effect of smiling and laughing more appealing to one's countenance than the residue left from concern and stress about ageing?" Not that Calum is particularly comfortable with the process. He sensed the pain he is experiencing in his hip would soon signal the end of travelling and his liberation stolen by the passage of time.

"You should learn more about Jacheongbi," Halla deflected. "She came to earth and fell in love with a man...a mortal. She sacrificed her life for love," her delivery, tinged with an element of resentment. "She sacrifice for a man!" she added.

The art of deflection is becoming common place for both of them. "C," said Calum, finishing her previous statement. "C is for Calum and for...Cigarette?" He motions to the exit.

"Yes, outside, we must go. Not here." They both make their way to the exit. Halla comes to a stop half way. "Calum, you go. I be there soon."

Feeling her facial temperature rise, Halla walks urgently toward the bathroom. Self-conscious, she avoids eye contact with the staff, yet she feels their gaze upon her. It is empty, much to her relief. A mirror reflects a horrified, sweaty face. After a check of her smile lines, the thought occurs to her that all the makeup in the world will not be enough to hide her physical reaction. The temperature increase comes in waves recovering faster if she calms down, however a public toilet is not the ideal place for deep breathing exercises. She notices a small stain on the wall tiles

overlooked by the cleaner causing her further concern. Compelled to rectify it, a compulsion for cleanliness, just one of Halla's many burdens.

Calum is sitting outside the restaurant when Halla joins him. "Everything ok, Halla?"

"Yes, I am fine. Well no. Not really. Sometimes I feel I not belong here," she replied, as she sits next to him.

"In Korea?"

"No just here, on earth," her words sailing away with the wind. "On earth, where everything gets old and dis...dis...,"

"...Disintegrates," Calum finishes the word. "Try not to think too much, but I understand what you mean. Perhaps we are both lost, you and me," he said.

"Yes, you and me, lost," said Halla.

"That's why we are together." He put up his hand in a hi-five pose, to which she responds.

Calum lit a cigarette, as Halla puffs away on her vape. They are comfortable with the silence as they contemplate the circumstances of their lives. Her temperature has dropped, however Halla is feeling the effects of drinking excessively.

"Well tell me, you in Thailand before Korea, yes?"

"Only a few days ago actually," said Calum.

"How many girlfriends do you have there? One, two, maybe three...one in Korea, one in Thailand, one in every other country you go to?"

"None! You are the only one, beautiful lady. Just you. I not look that way. I not look this way. Just you."

She suspects it is the alcohol doing the talking for him. "All this flattery...lifting me up. I am flying and then, nothing." Laughing loudly, she imitates flapping her arms like wings and then, crashing to the ground.

He thinks she is hilarious, but the Soju is helping him see everything in a humorous light. "It's the truth. The total truth. I like you a lot. I love you just a little bit. No, I love you a lot, and like you a little bit."

"I no like. I no like you a lot. Kiss me. Smile." Halla laughs.

They could feel themselves falling for each other, a shared humour drawing them closer, ever so gracefully. It is becoming a semi-dream-like state when they are together, a confusing place where there is the potential of losing their individuality. Is this love? The falling feeling, they both wonder.

As they return to their table, Callum comments. "Halla, How much is one plus one?"

"Are you joking! I am a university..." Calum cut her off.

“One plus one equals one,” pointing to her and himself.

“Oh, right. Yes, one plus one equals one. I get it. Calum! No more drinking for you. You drink too fast. I think we should go,” as she motioned toward the exit.

Halla insists on paying. They walk off together into the night, giggling and laughing, supporting each other as they wobble this way and that. “One plus one equals one” she smiled. “I not like.”

“Yes, elementary mathematics. One plus one equals one.”

“Not four?” said Halla.

“No, one, well.... maybe... another one or two.” Calum joked.

Does he know? Is he reading her mind or, is his dream inside hers?

“Maybe three,” as she followed on with the joke.

She has her arm tucked around his, as they walk off into the night. It feels comforting for Calum to have her there beside him, her breast rubbing against his shoulder. Is she conscious she is doing that? he wondered. For Halla, the sensation is sublime to hold a man’s arm, to be out with someone she feels attracted to. It’s been almost fifteen years since she has had this connection, this closeness.

They stop beside a flight of steps which leads down to a lower basement level. A dimly lit karaoke bar attracts Halla’s attention, a place where they would be less conspicuous, she hopes.

“And I am that other entity,” whispers Halla, just loud enough to be semi audible.

What did you say?”

“Coming?” Halla said, as she tugs in the direction of the descending stairs.

Calum is reluctant to go down, unsure where it leads. “What happens down there?” he said.

“Singing. Dancing, Come on. Let’s go!” she said.

Calum holds back, assessing his capacity to make a clear judgment, being more than a little bit drunk. A strange foreign woman is inviting him down a dark flight of steps late at night to who-knows-where. What’s the worst that can happen, lose a few organs perhaps.

“Arrmm,” Calum murmurs.

“Are you alright, Calum? You look a little concerned. I love you. It’s ok, you safe with me.”

“Sure, let’s go. I have my guide with me. We can fight the dragon together. Donate a few organs. I am good with that,” he relented.

They make their way down the steps with Calum hanging on to the handrail with one hand and Halla, the other. Halla thinks his nervousness is amusing. Calum notices she slipped that comment in, *‘I love you’*. Is it a bit early to say that? he thought. Doesn’t a relationship have to evolve more

before one member starts making such intense statements. They had only known each other two days. “Doesn’t matter” he reassures himself.

“What?” said Halla. She continues. “It’s ok, I will make sure you get out alive. I am your guide remember and you, my teacher.” Halla touches him on the nose with her pointing finger.

They find their way to a private room with soft couches, a karaoke tv screen along with enough beer and soju to last a week.

“Geonbae!” Halla said, as they raise glasses.

“I am having so much fun, Calum. Thank you. It’s because of you.”

“Me too. It’s because of you,” he reciprocates.

“No, really. I don’t go out,” said Halla. “All year I study. Stay home with my cat and dog. Geonbae! Mr Calum with a C.” It’s because of you.”

“Gum bear! Miss Halla with a I forget”

They laugh together.

She watches him sitting back relaxed, feeling herself drawn to his self-confidence. It is his inner courage and strength that attracts her. He lives a life without fear, which to her, would be unachievable on her own. He can go anywhere, talk to anyone, be himself without concern for favour or scorn from others. A free spirit. With him beside her, she may be able to break free of the prison walls, fear of the unknown, fear of people and even fear itself. With him, she can see her life being lived how it should be lived. She could feel it, almost touch it. It is so real, so close.

“Ok, let’s dance, my teacher. I know. Unchained Melody.” she said, as she sorts through a selection of songs. “You are my type,” said Halla with an alluring smile. In her mind, she replays the words memorised perfectly from her altered reality; I was acting like another woman, yet I was more myself than ever before.

As Calum watches her sway to the music and singing, it appears to him, she is finding a release from a captivity that perhaps, she has imposed on herself. He glimpses a special moment of her complete free expression. It is then he sees the full vividness of her internal beauty shine. She makes him feel special, a feeling he too has not experienced for a long time. The romance left his marriage long ago. Although the love is still there, it has transformed. Their relationship evolved into a matter of practicality with the responsibility of rearing children and paying bills. The beautiful feelings of longing for each other and the need to be near, left years earlier. Perhaps, they have said all that is needed to say to each other over their time together. As painful as it is to separate, there was no recourse, but to end it. It had gone too far to rekindle those precious feelings that initially brought them together.

Now, there is this new emotion beginning to overcome him. Halla looks so beautiful, so perfect. The music, the alcohol and the lyrics magnify his emotions as the shared feelings flow effortlessly between them. They are building upon the connection of love together, the beautiful feeling of union. Nothing else matters. Time has stopped, in a room at the bottom of a flight of descending stairs, sharing a special moment together, neither of them will forget. Their thought processes are synchronised in perfect harmony with the energy and the eternity of the moment.

“That was beautiful.” Halla said, as tears form in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” said Calum. “Don’t cry.”

“Just feeling very emotional. I miss my mother.”

“Your mother?” said Calum.

“Yes, she gone for eighteen years. I miss every day. I think about all the time.”

“I’m sorry.” Calum reached out and holds her hand. “That must be hard. Me too. My mother is gone as well. I understand.”

“It’s just so hard, so long. Eighteen years. I not forget her every day. But now I feel happy, because of you.”

“Perhaps, it’s time. Time to let go.” he suggested.

“Yes, I know I have to, but I don’t want. She my earth mother,” Halla lamented.

“Earth mother?”

“Yes. My earth mother,” she repeated.

Calum reaches out and holds her hand again. “Our mother is such a powerful influence on our lives. I feel for you Halla. We cared for our mother, my two sisters and I. For five years she was able to live independently in her own home. We decided to help her, because she cared for us when we were small. What goes around, comes around.”

“What’s that mean? What goes around, comes around?”

“I suppose you would call it karma. We all take our turns at being dependent and also independent and we all have responsibility. You have a responsibility to your cat and dog,” he reminded her.

Her eyes filled with gratitude. “Yes, I have.” That word ‘responsibility’ strikes a chord with her. “I have a responsibility to them. she repeated.”

At that moment, Calum doesn't realize that it will be the first and last time he will see her cry. He had recently observed the unique bond between mothers and daughters, and it resonated with him. He knows it is a different kind of love, a silent and profound connection unlike that between a man and a woman or a father and a son. Finally, he thought, she is sharing a part of her authentic self.

“And you still have your father? Is he still with you?”

“Yes. Let’s dance. But first, another?” she said, enticing him with a glass of soju. They drink the contents, then she helps him up from his seat. “Listen Calum! It is playing. Our song. Love is in the Air.”

“This is our song,” said Calum, while struggling to remain vertical.

“Yes, I will never forget. I will never forget you.” She kissed his hand. In turn, he kissed hers.

“Hey, I am booked into a hotel in Busan for three nights, starting tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow! You go, already?” said Halla, feeling the weight of his absence, even before he has left.

“It will be only for a few days. I booked it before coming to Korea. I am coming back to Seoul.”

“Oh, ok. You will love it there,” Halla gave him a half smile trying to hide her disappointment. The thought raced through her mind that she has just found him, and now, he is going.

“Yes, I catch the train tomorrow, but I will be back to Seoul. Hey, why not come with me? I will pay,” Calum pleaded.

“I cannot leave my dog and cat,” she relented.

“What about leaving them with friends or, with your father?”

“They get upset when I not there. I am responsible for them. They helped me through difficult time. You go. Have fun. Enjoy Korea,” she said, as she raised a toast. “You might meet new girlfriends. Not come back. There might be new script to follow.”

“Halla, I am not looking for a girlfriend. Really, I am not looking. What are you talking about, script?”

Halla changed the subject. “I not love you. I not like you. Kiss me. I not like you. I love you a little bit,” she laughed, as she spilled a bottle of soju over the table.

Calum stands up, about to make a presentation to an invisible audience.

“Thank you for coming everyone. We are here welcoming Halla back to the world. It’s been a long time, but she has arrived. Take a bow Halla. You are back. The world has been waiting. Now you have returned. Everybody! Halla is in the house! Give her a clap!”

Calum is clapping and Halla is playing along by bowing, laughing and waving. “Stop! You crazy. You too crazy for me. More crazy than me.” She gave him a ‘hand to the ear and mouth’ gesture. “Call me from Busan.” I wrote my email, just in case. Now you have no excuse.”

“Halla, I won’t forget...I will never forget you... I don’t like you,” he smiled.

“Yes, Love is in the air. I don’t like you either.” said Halla playfully. “I don’t like you ...not even a little bit...maybe...I don’t like you...A little, but I like you a lot.”

Although they are close together in the dimly lit room, it is too soon to kiss. They both know it isn’t the right time, not yet.

The night wears on, a dance of mispronounced words and emotions. With a promise to contact each other, they part ways, their hearts intertwined in a swirl of different emotions, leaving them both with a memory, a shared magical moment of their time together.

However, Halla is yet to learn of Calum's fear-the fear of being alone, while he, soon to discover the secret duality of a parallel universe she is building in her mind.