

## *Dr. Lee*

**F**IRST, I need some background information. So could you please tell me a little a bit about your parents?" Dr. Lee began. Junee hesitated. Sitting alone with him in his office like this, she felt awkward and shy as if this were their first meeting. She already regretted coming. The doctor was a small and wiry man. His face looked so young without his white lab coat that it was reassuring to see some gray patches on his temples and mustache.

"There isn't much to talk about," Junee finally answered. "My parents are long gone from my life."

"Okay," Dr. Lee said after a second. "Well, then, what about those images that keep you awake at night? Would you like to talk about them?"

"Not really," she murmured. "I don't see how talking's going to change anything."

A brief silence ensued.

"Why are you here, then?" the doctor said in the same calm and even voice. "Talking is what I do, you know."

"I want some more of those pills."

"I see. I can certainly help you with that. But, how long do you

intend to take those pills? Forever? The pills won't make your memories go away."

"And talking will?" she barely heard her own voice, but the doctor did.

He regarded her for a while before answering, "You're absolutely right. Talking won't make memories go away either. Nothing will."

"Why is that?" she was surprised to hear herself jumping in.

"Because memories are the very fabric of who we are. Let's take your shirt as an example. That's a cotton shirt you're wearing, right? If you cut the cotton out of that shirt, would you have any shirt left? I mean, who would you be if you had no memory?"

"I don't mean all memories. I just want to get rid of the bad ones."

"That would be nice, wouldn't it? Except that the good and the bad memories are not two separate things. They are both part of you. If you say such and such are bad memories and try to kill them, you end up killing yourself. It's like a loaf of bread saying that the flour in him is good, but the yeast is bad. Number one, it's impossible to separate out the yeast from the bread. Number two, even if you can, if you kill the yeast, you kill the whole loaf of bread."

Junee was listening closely.

"Besides, the distinction between the good and the bad isn't all that clear-cut," he continued. "There often is profound good in what's painful if you look deeply enough. And what appears to be good on the surface can often be an obstacle. Or it can quickly turn into bad, if we let it, if we abuse it.

"I don't work like a surgeon. I'm not trying to cut your bad memories out. That's not what I'm after. My job is to help people to heal themselves. By finding meaning in their life events. By making sense out of senseless things, so that they can embrace the whole of themselves. You can't find meaning in something when you're busy running away from it. You make sense out of something only if you face it, go under the surface and dig deep."

Junee probed his eyes for the first time. They were kind eyes, gentle eyes. But she still wasn't sure what she was feeling. She wanted to talk, yet she didn't.

She turned her face away from him and started going over the titles of his books, neatly lined up alongside the wall.

“Miss Park,” Dr. Lee broke the silence, leaning forward and looking directly into her eyes. “I haven’t spent that much time with you, and I don’t know you that well. But there’s something about you that I admire.

“You’re kind of quiet, aren’t you? And of course right now, you’re feeling pretty down and low, but still...there’s this fire in you. I can sense a real fighting spirit in there somewhere.”

Junee dropped her head. She examined the skin on her hands. She fiddled around with her fingers.

“And another thing,” he went on. “Those friends of yours. I can tell that they really care about you. Do you know what that tells me? It tells me that you’re doing something right in your life, where it really counts.

“That young American friend of yours, Sparky. He told me that everyone in Keechun calls you Princess June, that people just love you over there. I can kind of see how you earned that nickname. It’s not just your looks, I don’t think. There’s something about the way you carry yourself that sets you apart from everyone—a sense of pride, a quiet dignity perhaps.”

He paused for a while. Junee remained as she was.

“One thing I know for sure,” the doctor spoke again. “You’re here because you wanted to be here. An entire army battalion couldn’t have dragged you here against your will. Am I right? So, why don’t we just get on with it, Miss Park? Isn’t that more your style?”

After a moment, Junee raised her head and tried to say something. But then, she went back to playing with her hands again. Several seconds ticked by.

“It’s tough to get that first sentence out, isn’t it?” Dr. Lee said, almost to himself. “Let me try this.... Since you’re such a smart lady.”

Junee looked up at him.

“You know you’re very intelligent, don’t you?” he said. “I hope you do. I heard you speaking English, you know. It just blew me away when I first heard you. You have almost no accent!”

He straightened up on his chair and leaned back.

“Heck, look at me. All in all, I must have spent three or four years in America. And I still speak Ko-english. My accent is so thick, I still have to write things down to communicate.... I hear that you picked up all your English right off the streets, too. Now, that’s some brains, you know. Learning a foreign language from the streets, just like that,” he snapped his fingers.

“Anyway, what I was going to say was,” he resumed, getting serious and leaning forward again, “you wondered earlier how the talking was going to help. Let me try to explain that a little bit. Do you know how cows digest their food, in two passes? How they regurgitate?”

That got Junee’s attention. She nodded.

“Well, talking kind of works on the same principle. You see, the life experiences to our mind are like the food to our body. For our body to benefit from the food, the food first has to be digested. In similar ways, our mind feeds and grows on our experiences. But only if we can digest them properly. Unfortunately, life can be very cruel, at least to some of us. It throws such hard stuff at us sometimes, that there’s no way our system can digest it. We’re then forced to swallow it whole. It’s especially hard when these things happen to us when we’re small and weak. It’s kind of like force-feeding a baby with bricks, you know. Try to imagine that. Having a brick sitting in your stomach.”

He paused for a second before going on.

“So, then, what do you do? You’ve got to get rid of these bricks, somehow. Otherwise, they’ll kill you, just as surely as the bricks in your stomach will kill your body. The only way to get rid of these things is to re-digest them. Bring them back up, you know, one small chunk at a time. That’s what talking does—brings up the experiences that make you sick so that you can chew on them and digest them again.”

The doctor studied Junee’s face.

“I know that you have at least one big brick sitting in your heart,” he started again.

His voice was softer and tender.

“Giving up your baby, especially after you already bonded with

her. That's tough. Probably one of the most painful things in life. But that's not all, is it? I have a feeling that you have more.

"I think you know, at some level, that you cannot run away from these things anymore. It's time that you face those ghosts from your past. It's a scary thing to do, I know. But you don't have to do it alone. That's why I'm here. We'll do it together. The burden does get lighter when you let it out and share it with someone."

June's head was still down, but she could feel the doctor's gaze on her face. It didn't make her feel uncomfortable, though. At long last, she looked up, feeling stronger.

"I will promise you two things," Dr. Lee met her eyes. "I promise that I'll never cram anything down your throat, even if it's medicine. This is your journey and you get to be the captain this time. You get to choose what you want to talk about and when you want to talk about it. You get to do it at your own pace. Sometimes, you might not feel ready to talk. You might feel like just crying or screaming instead. That's perfectly okay, too.

"And I'll never leave you stranded in the middle, holding the bag alone. That's my second promise. It'll take a long time. But no matter how long it takes, I will be here, for as long as you want me. Once we get going, it's all the way to the finish line."

The doctor closed his mouth and waited. This time, June kept her eye contact with him.

"Well, do you think you're ready to talk?" Dr. Lee asked her.

"Yes," she said.

"All right, then. It seems to me that your father's a good place to begin, since you grew up without a mother."

"How...how did you know that?"

"You told me," Dr. Lee said. "At the hospital. When you were first brought in?"

"I did?"

"Yes, you did. You just can't remember. That's all. Which isn't surprising, really. You were going through a tough time there for a while. But don't be alarmed. You said very little, even back then. That

was just about all I could get out of you—that you had no mother.”

She relaxed, but remained silent.

“I’ll tell you what,” the doctor finally said. “Why don’t we make it easy? How about telling me what your father did for a living, as a starter?”

She breathed deeply and began.

“My father was a pimp. A gangster...I think he pretty much did it all. Money laundering, extortion, I think that’s what they call it.... Burglary, smuggling, God knows what else....”

“But I didn’t know too much about his business side. He didn’t involve me in that, because I was a girl. My job was to keep the house. You know, cooking, cleaning, washing and ironing, heating the house, stuff like that. That’s all I did, ever since we came up to Seoul after the war. Since I was seven.”

“Seven? You did that stuff when you were seven years old? All by yourself?”

“Yes. I had to. That was the only reason he let me stay in his house and eat his food. Because I at least learned how to do that half-way decent. That’s what he told me. Otherwise, I was a complete waste.... Girls were useless. Totally worthless.”

“He said that to you?”

“Yes. Almost every day.... I had to be real careful with everything, too. I couldn’t make any mistakes,” she gulped and let out a long sigh.

“Why? Did he beat you?”

“Did he beat me?” she repeated in a faint voice, raising her eyebrows. “Did he beat me? Oh, yes. Oh, yes...many, many, many times.... At least once or twice a month.... With a....”

She grimaced, dropped her head and let out another long sigh.

“It’s painful to think back, isn’t it?” he offered in a quiet voice.

She nodded and remained quiet, gazing down at the floor.

“But...you did go to school, didn’t you?” the doctor asked.

“Hell, no,” she shook her head. “That was out of the question. I couldn’t even bring it up.... I never saw the inside of any real classroom.”

“Hmm.... So, you had no escape at all,” he mumbled.

Junee didn't react. She was in her own world now, deep in thought.

“...But, in a way, I didn't mind it,” she resumed. “The housework, you know. Because it kept me away from him...from the whole scene. I was glad that I wasn't involved in my father's business. Every time my brother tried to tell me about his days, I stopped him. I didn't want to hear it. I really didn't want to know. I didn't even want to think about him.”

“So you had a brother. Older or younger?”

“Five years older than me.”

“What's his name?”

“Hosuk.”

“Any other siblings?”

“No. He was the only one.... Things were very different for my brother. Because he was a boy. He knew everything. He went wherever my father went.... He had to. He hated my father as much as I did.... He got beaten practically every day.... My father was really worse with my brother...except that he never spanked him. With my brother, he always used a belt.... With me....”

Junee stopped. The doctor let the silence stretch on this time. She was still looking down on the same spot on the floor, but the floor wasn't what she was seeing.

“...But it was the other kids who got the worst deal. My father had a lot of kids working for him. All of them about my age. Eight, nine, ten....

“My father was so cruel to those orphan boys.... Their job was to steal and snatch purses and stuff, and everyone had a quota. My father would beat them if they didn't meet the quota. He wouldn't even let them eat the dinner. As it was, the dinner was nothing but plain rice and *kimchee*. That was it. I wasn't supposed to give them anything else. My father rationed the rice, too.

“But I couldn't stand to watch them. They were so skinny, you could count their ribs. So I began to cheat a little.... The very first time, I made these tiny balls of ground beef and buried them in the

middle of their rice bowls.... I'll never forget it... watching their eyes light up. One by one, going around the whole room.

“From then on, it became a kind of special game between us. We never talked. We couldn't. That wasn't allowed. But we learned to talk with our eyes.... I could tell. They lived for dinnertime from that point on.”

Junee lightened up a bit as she continued reminiscing. “I made tiny food balls with anything I could get my hands on. Minced chicken, fish, even walnut meat. If I had nothing else, I put in hard-boiled eggs.... But I had to cool it once in a while, because my father would start inspecting the rice bowls.... When I couldn't add any real treats, I made little ribbons out of spinach stems and put them in there....

“The American snacks. That's what I remember. Anything American was like a gift from heaven. They were all so rich and filling.... My brother used to bring them home, as a special gift for me.... One time, I had this huge hunk of cheese. I got weeks out of that one.... The chocolate bars were the hard ones for me, because I wanted to eat them myself. But if I did that, the whole bar would be a goner. So I had to stop myself. The cheese wasn't a problem, because I didn't like it. It smelled kind of funky to me. Now I don't smell it, but back then I did. But the chocolate bars! Just the sight of them made my mouth water.”

She was getting livelier. “That was why I loved the M&M bags the best. Those, I could eat some and still have a whole bag left. And they were all in different colors. I liked the color green. So I ate them myself. I only gave out the green ones on special occasions, like after someone had a run-in with my father....”

She paused. She gradually became somber again.

“...There was this one boy. I even remember his name. Dongnam. He never learned the rules of our game. At dinnertime, he would poke around his rice bowl with his finger, looking for the treat. For everyone to see! You weren't supposed to do that.... You weren't supposed to chew, either. You were supposed to swallow the whole thing. But he...he would sit there with his eyes closed, roll-

ing the thing around in his mouth. Savoring the taste of it, you know....

“What I didn’t know was that he was safekeeping bits and pieces of my treats, too, like souvenirs. And one day, he got caught with this bag full of evidence. Everything I ever gave out to the boys was in there.”

She stopped.

“So what happened?” the doctor finally asked after waiting for several seconds.

“...I caught hell for it, of course.... My father didn’t beat the boys. He just made them watch me. And Dongnam...he kept barging in between me and my father, throwing himself over me, crying and begging and carrying on. That only made things worse for me....

“That was one of the worst nights of my childhood. I still have marks from that night.... It took me a long time to heal.... My brother wouldn’t get me any medicine, like he did other times. He was mad at me because I gave away his special gifts. And because I didn’t let him in on our secret.”

She shook her head, “That poor boy.... Everyone was so mad at him. He felt so bad.... I couldn’t stay mad at him, though. Every time he saw me limping around, he would start crying all over again.... It was my own damn fault, really. I knew he was trouble waiting to happen. I shouldn’t have continued to give him treats, but I just didn’t have the heart to leave him out. It seemed too cruel....

“I wanted to tell him that. That I wasn’t mad at him.... It was an easy enough thing to do. All I had to do was to slip him a green M&M.... I almost did it a couple of times, but...I was too afraid.... Then, in a month or so, my father moved us out into a new house, me and my brother. And I never saw the boys again.”

She fell silent and remained still for a long time.

“...It’s funny how the mind works,” she finally said, in a dreamy and hushed voice. “Dongnam caused me so much grief. But he’s the one I think about the most.... Even now, I wonder if he made it out, if he survived. I want him to be alive and well somewhere so bad.... But in my head, I know that his chances weren’t good.... He was

too...too sweet.... Too much water in him. And that was no good. Especially for a boy. That wasn't a good thing at all, when you had to live with someone like my father.... I just wish I had had the guts to let him know. To this day, that's what I regret."

The tears suddenly sprang to her eyes.

"Isn't that stupid?" she said, trying to blink away the tears.

But it was no use. She couldn't talk anymore. Dr. Lee spent the rest of the session reassuring her. There was nothing stupid about caring. On the contrary, it was something she should be proud of. And don't try to fight the tears. Let them come. Let them flow. The tears were good. That was how you healed yourself.

"You mentioned once that you came to Seoul when you were seven, after the war," Dr. Lee said a couple of sessions later. "So where were you born, then?"

"I was born in Kangwondo. In a tiny fishing village, right by the Eastern Sea. I don't remember the name of the town. I asked my brother, but he wouldn't tell me."

"Kangwondo. That's gorgeous country out there," the doctor interjected. "I used to hike up in those mountains when I was in college."

"Yes, it's a beautiful place...." Junee stopped.

Even now, she vividly remembered everything about that village, about those few happy years.

"You were born in 1946. So, you were about four when the war broke out?" Dr. Lee brought her out of her reverie.

"Oh...yes, I was about four."

"What do you remember about the war?"

"The war itself? Not much.... I don't think there was any real battle over our town, because it was such a little nothing place.... I remember watching the Reds marching into the village. And the executions. That I remember.... It was horrible.... The communists shot six innocent people in the town square."

"You were there? You actually saw the killing?"

"I was there. Everyone was there. But I didn't actually see it. My grandma didn't let me. She buried my head in her skirt, and brought me home. She wouldn't let me out of her house until they cleared everything away."

"So, you at least had a grandma."

"No. She wasn't my real grandma. She was just a neighbor, but she was the one who raised me.... She was real good to me...."

Junee looked out the windows for a couple of minutes. Thinking about Grandma was always a tricky proposition, but she did manage to steer her thoughts back to the war days.

"...You know what was the worst part about those executions?" she picked up where she left off. "Finding out that it was my father's doing. I didn't know about that until many years later. My brother told me."

"You mean, your father snitched to the communists?"

Junee nodded. "He got those people killed, just because he had some gripes against them.... And that was why we had to leave the town so fast, right in the middle of the night. You know, when the communists began to lose the war and fled the town. My father lucked out. He'd somehow found out about it before anyone else did.... He was scared stiff that night. I do remember that...."

"Everything happened so fast that night, I never even had a chance to say good-bye to my grandma.... I never saw her again.... She's probably gone by now."

"You loved her, didn't you?" Dr. Lee said.

"Yes," Junee whispered and looked out the windows again.

The doctor patiently waited.

"Anyway." She eventually turned her head back to face the doctor. "Where was I? Oh.... My brother said that one more day, it would have been too late. The villagers would have hanged us, all three of us. That's what he said, but I'm not sure about that. I don't think the villagers would have killed me. My father, yes, for sure. Maybe even my brother.... No one liked my brother, because he was always with my father. No one wanted to play with him. I was his only playmate.... But they all liked me, the villagers. They were all real nice to me.... I have a lot of good memories of those days...."

“My brother said that my father didn’t want to bring me along. He wanted to leave me behind. But my brother refused to go without me. He woke me up and carried me out himself.... He always said that I owed my life to him because of that. But frankly, I wish he’d let me stay behind. Even now, I cannot help thinking that my life would have been better, if my brother hadn’t brought me along.”

“So, that was in 1953?” the doctor asked. “When you left your hometown and moved to Seoul?”

“No, no. That happened in 1951. I was five years old at the time.... During the war, we wandered around all over the country. For two years. We didn’t settle in Seoul until after the war was completely over. In 1953.”

“Tell me about those two years. The war years.”

“Oh, the war years...those were real hard years.... We were always going from one place to another, and we had to walk all the way.... We must have climbed at least a dozen mountains. And I could never keep up with them, my father and my brother.... My feet got so swollen and bloody.... My father got mad that I slowed them down. He kept hitting me and.... He didn’t want me to follow them anymore.... But where could I go? What could I do? I had no one else. So, I kept following.... He would throw stones at me.... It was my brother who saved me. I do owe him for that one....

“He kept pleading with my father. I remember him begging over and over. ‘Give her to me, then. If you don’t want her, let me have her. I’ll take care of her food. I’ll make sure that she doesn’t slow us down. I’ll teach her how to cook and clean. She’ll be worth the trouble, then.’

“So, my father let me follow them.... But then, he wouldn’t give me any food. My brother fed me and he carried me on his back when I couldn’t walk.... Even so, my father still tried to sell me off to some guy once. When my brother found out about it, he took this grenade out of his pocket. He threatened to take the pin out of that thing right then and there. So my father had to give the money back to the guy and let me stay on.”



“How about your mother? Do you think you’re ready to talk about her?” the doctor finally broached the subject one day.

Junee nodded.

“What happened to her? Do you know?”

“She ran away when I was about one,” she said. “Grandma told me that... Grandma said that my mother was a nice lady, an educated one. It was the Japanese who ruined my mother’s life. My mother became an orphan during the Occupation. Grandma said that the Japanese probably had something to do with her parents’ deaths, too. Anyway, the Japanese were about to ship her out overseas. As a sex slave, you know. And my father bought her. Paid cash to some Japanese official. She was about seventeen years old at the time.”

Junee paused for a few seconds.

“Grandma said that my mother suffered an awful lot at my father’s hands. He was a real pig, she said. So with the Japanese gone after the Liberation, I guess she decided to split. She had no reason to stay with my father anymore.”

“How do you feel about that?” the doctor asked. “About her running away and abandoning you?”

“She didn’t have any choice. The life with my father must have been pure hell... No, I’m not angry with her, if that’s what you’re asking... My brother, though. He blamed her for everything. He used to get mad at me, if I brought her up.”

She closed her mouth and looked straight ahead, right through the doctor’s eyes.

“I sometimes wish I had at least one picture of her,” she said after a while, still looking straight ahead. “I have no mental image of her. I don’t have one single memory of her... I do think about her a lot... I sometimes think, maybe if I try to remember hard enough, I’ll be able to see or hear something. I think, maybe she’ll come to me in my dream or something, but... Well, anyway, I’m glad that she got away... I hope her life turned out better afterward... I...I just wish that she had taken me with her, is all.”