

OUR HAPPY TIME

A NOVEL



*In the face of death,
can love save you?*

GONG JI-YOUNG



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TIME

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translated by Sora Kim-Russell

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Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

– Jesus, a condemned criminal facing execution at the age of 33

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Harlem is there by way of a divine indictment against New York City and the people who live downtown and make their money downtown. The brothels of Harlem, and all its prostitution, and its dope rings, and all the rest are the mirror of the polite divorces and the manifold cultured adulteries of Park Avenue: they are God's commentary on the whole of our society.

– Thomas Merton

BLUE NOTE 1

I am going to tell you a story. It is a story of murder. It is a story of a family that was only capable of destruction, where screaming and yelling and whippings and chaos and curses were their daily bread. And it is a story of a miserable being who used to believe he couldn't possibly be miserable—this is my story. The day it all began, two women and a teenager died. I was convinced that one of those women had no right to live, that she deserved to die. I thought that for her to have so much money all to herself was like dressing vermin in fine silk. I thought that if I, in this unfair and unjust world, could use that money for something good instead, I would be doing the right thing.

And there was another woman. She was a woman who had never had anything of her own in her whole life. A woman who had everything taken away from her by others—that woman was dying. If only I'd had three million won, I could have saved her. But at the time, I had no way of getting that much money. With each day that passed, she was closer to death, and though I did not know if there really was a heaven or how long it had been since I last looked to it, I assumed heaven would understand me, and that this was justice. Justice.

PART 1

The fine flurries of snow that started in the afternoon were turning to rain. A hazy bluish light flooded the streets, and the damp sky hung low, blurring the line between it and the earth. The clock ticked past five. I put on my coat and left my apartment. In the parking lot, the cars were as silent as graves, and the yellow lights flickering on one by one in the windows across the street began to glimmer like unreachable stars. The trees that lined the road, having long since dropped their leaves, looked like a barbed wire fence dividing the poor people's apartments across the street from the wealthy apartments on this side. I paused before getting into my car and glanced up. The apartment buildings stood with their backs to the sky, their ponderous bodies blocking the clouds from view. Standing there in the fading light of dusk, the buildings resembled a straight, unmarred fortress wall. A thin winter rain fell on the frozen street. I got in my car. As soon as I turned on the headlights, shards of rain like finely shaved ice appeared in the cylindrical light. The dark evening was broken only by the cheerful, colorful rays spilling from the streetlights and store signs—for all I knew, the rain fell only inside that light. In the darkness, after all, we had no idea what was really falling upon us.

Dr. Noh had called to tell me that Aunt Monica had collapsed and was back in the hospital, that the prognosis didn't look good this time, and that I'd better prepare myself. That probably meant I had to get ready to let go of yet another person. I pictured Yunsu's face as the engine turned over: black horn-rimmed glasses, pale faded-looking skin, lips still red with youth, shallow dimple that appeared in only one cheek when he smiled shyly. I didn't want to remember him. I had spent many sleepless nights trying to put him out of my mind. Nights when I could not fall asleep without hard liquor, blue dawns when I awoke to a strangling phantom.

I used to bury my face in my pillow and wait for tears, but all that would come out of me was a strange moan. There were some days when I thought, *Fine, better to remember, remember it all, remember every last bit of it*, but I would wind up drunk and passed out on the sofa.

After Yunsu was gone, I woke up every morning knowing that I could never return to my old ways. Everything had been turned upside down again; like it was in the beginning. But after getting to know him, I became sure of two things: that I could never again try to take my own life, and that this was both his last gift and the final sentence that he gave to me.

Just like the winter rain that was only visible in the glow of the headlights, there were many things in this world that were invisible in the dark. I learned this after meeting him: just because something was invisible didn't mean it did not exist. After meeting him, I pushed through my own darkness and figured out what that darkness was that breathed inside of me like death. There were things I would never have noticed if not for him, and I would have never realized that what I thought was darkness was actually a dazzling brightness. A light so bright that my eyes were blinded by it. I would have continued thinking I knew everything. Because I realized through Yunsu that if we can love truly, then it is in that instant that we are already sharing the glory of God.

He's gone now, but I still thank God for giving me the chance to meet him.

I drove down the dark street in the rain. Seven years ago, there had been almost no traffic on this road where even the neon signs had held their breath, but now the lanes were packed with cars pouring in from all directions. There was no hurry. Everyone was going somewhere. No matter the destination, they all had to get somewhere. But did any of them really know where they were going? The same question I'd asked myself all those years ago returned to me like an ancient memory. Up ahead, a stop light lit up as red as the sun over the cars racing through the murky, fog-like rain. The cars all stopped at once. I stopped, too.

Poor little legless bird who lost its mother,
where will you go
when rough winds blow?

Dear wind, do you know?

Dear rain, do you know?

What will carry them from these woods?.

– Bang Eui-kyung, “Beautiful Things”

BLUE NOTE 2

My hometown... You asked me about my hometown. But did I ever really have a home? I said that if by hometown you meant where I was born, then the answer would be Yangpyeong in Gyeonggi Province outside of Seoul, and I waited for your next question. But you didn't ask me anything else. *It was a poor village*, I said. *There was a reservoir just past a small grassy knoll and our house was always cold.* I stopped there. *It's okay*, you said, *you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to.* But it's not that I didn't want to—I couldn't. When I dig up those memories, it feels like a black clot of blood fills my mouth.

My little brother Eunsu and I used to play in the sun at the edge of the reservoir. One day, Eunsu was spanked by the woman next door. He had gone over there to beg for some rice, but she said he spilled it. So while she and her husband were out working, I took a long wooden stick from an A-frame carrier and used it to beat their kids until their noses bled. After that, none of the other kids would play with us. So it was always just the two of us. Sometimes, if a kind-hearted person gave us a lump of cold leftover rice, we would sneak into a neighbor's barn so as not to wake up our father who was passed out from drinking, and we would take turns taking bites of the frozen ball of rice. The reservoir was always sunny, and when luck was with us, we even got instant ramen from the fishermen who came there from Seoul. On even luckier days, we would go to a store about five miles away and bring back cigarettes for them in exchange for a few coins.

It took me a long time to realize that we were waiting for our mother, who had run away from home. It was only after a very, very long time that I realized that, even though all I remembered of her was her swollen face and the bruises that covered her body from our father's beatings, I was waiting for her to come home, bruises and all, and kill our father who would start beating us again the moment he woke from his drunken slumber in that unheated room. I was waiting for her to rescue us. My very first memory in life is of

wanting to kill. But since my mother was out there somewhere, in some faraway place, that feeling of waiting—even when I didn't know what I was waiting for—never went away entirely. I think that was when I was around seven years old.

PART 2

Aunt Monica and I were the black sheep in our family. Or should I say heretics? Or maybe bastards is more accurate? There was a nearly forty-year age difference between us, but we were as identical as twins. When I was a child, my mother used to tell me, *You act just like your aunt*. I knew she didn't mean it in a good way. No matter how young you are, you can always tell from the way someone says a person's name whether they like or hate that person. Why did she hate my aunt, whom she used to be friends with? Did I hate my mother because she hated the aunt that I took after, or had I decided to take after my aunt on purpose because my mother hated her? I was stubborn and enjoyed making other people uncomfortable. I would cuss in the peaceful faces of those who sickened me, and cackle with laughter and pity as the looks on their faces turned to shock. But what I felt was not victory, like occupying forces singing as they enter a savage land. It was more like an old, secret wound ready to spill blood at the slightest touch, the kind of hurt that would bleed at a moment's notice even when there was no pain. In other words, it was closer to desperation, a parody sung by the surviving soldiers of a failed mutiny. But Aunt Monica and I were also different in many ways. She prayed far more for our family than I did, and she never used them for material gain.

As for me, if I'm going to be really honest, I was a mess. I lived for myself, dragged other people into my life in the name of love or friendship, not for their sake but for my own, existed only for myself and even wanted to die for myself. I was a hedonist. Oblivious to the fact that I had lost myself and become a slave to the senses, I lashed out at the fortress of my strong family. I stayed out all night drinking and singing and dancing. I didn't know that this trivial lifestyle of mine was systematically destroying me, and even if I had known, I wouldn't have stopped. I wanted to destroy myself. I was only satisfied if the entire galaxy revolved around me. I got drunk and kicked at closed doors, not knowing who I was or what I wanted. I had never said the words out loud, but if someone had held a stethoscope to my heart back then, they probably would have heard: *Why can't the sun revolve around me? Why*

aren't you there for me when I'm lonely? Why do good things keep happening to the people I hate? Why does the world keep angering me and refusing me even the tiniest sliver of happiness?

The only thing more evil than feeling nothing is not knowing that you feel nothing.

– Charles Fred Alford, *What Evil Means To Us*

BLUE NOTE 3

After I started going to school, my little brother Eunsu followed me there every morning. Since he wasn't allowed inside, he used to squat at the corner of the schoolyard wall to wait for me until school was over. Eunsu was different from me. When the other kids hit him, he never grabbed a stick and hit them back. If a stronger kid picked on me, I would fight him to the bitter end, sinking my teeth into his forearm if I had to, but not Eunsu. His fate, like our mother's, was to submit to the lash of destiny and do nothing but cry. School would end and I would rush out to find Eunsu trembling and shivering against the wall, his lips blue from the cold. Our daily meal was the cornbread that was rationed out to the students at school. I used to save my piece and not take a single bite even while the other kids were eating theirs and my mouth was watering for a taste. On some days, I would find Eunsu sitting there with a bloody nose; on other days, I would find him crying with his pepper hanging out because his clothes had been stolen by the other kids.

For a long time after, I used to wonder whether I had really loved my little brother. I don't know. All I do know is that I wanted him to be happy. I think maybe those times we spent together, walking home and sharing the cornbread that I had managed not to eat, might have been the happiest times of both of our lives.

One day, it rained. It was spring, but the weather was cold, and the sky that started off clear in the morning grew dark, and suddenly the rain was like poles of water coming down. I didn't hear a word the teacher said and just stared out the window. There was nowhere outside of the school where Eunsu could stay dry. An image of him in the rain passed before my eyes: like a young pigeon left behind in an empty nest, he was crying so hard that his eyes were swelling up. As soon as the first period ended, I ran out the gate.

Standing there in the rain, Eunsu was so surprised to see me come out earlier than expected that he smiled from ear to ear. The rain beat down mercilessly on his face, but he was beside himself with happiness. I lost my temper. Since I had no umbrella either, I was no better off than he was, and my clothes were getting as drenched as his.

“Go home,” I told him.

“Don’t want to.”

“Go home!”

“No.”

It hurt to have to send him back to our house where our drunk father would grab the first thing he saw when he awoke, whether a stick or a broom handle, and beat my little brother with it. But the rain was coming down hard, so I grabbed Eunsu by the collar and dragged him toward home. I left him in the alleyway that led to our house and turned to leave, but he followed me out. I turned around, grabbed him by the collar again, and dragged him back. I turned and ran, but he kept following me. I ran back to him again and started punching him. And like a fool from the planet of submission who doesn’t know the meaning of the word disobedience, Eunsu took the blows while clinging to the hem of my shirt. I wailed away at him like a crazy person. Blood spurted from his nose and soaked into my clothes along with the rain.

“Listen to me,” I said. “If you don’t go home right now, I’ll run away, too. I will leave you and run away. Now go home and don’t come out again!”

Eunsu stopped crying at once. He let go of my shirt. My running away would have been worse than a death sentence to him. He gave me a resentful look and turned to go. That was the last time we looked each other in the eyes. And it would be the last clear image of me that Eunsu ever saw.

PART 3

I'll start with the early winter of 1996. I was lying in a hospital bed. I had been found after trying to kill myself by swallowing a lethal dose of sleeping pills with whiskey—an *attempted suicide patient*, they called me. When I opened my eyes, rain was falling outside the window. A few stray leaves were dropping off of the sycamores. The sky was so overcast that I couldn't tell what time it was.

I thought about how my uncle—my mother's brother who was a psychiatrist—had told me he wished I would cry. He looked old for his age, and if it weren't for the situation, I would have teased him by saying, *You've lost more hair, haven't you? You look like a grandfather. Now that I've survived, can I get a smoke?* Then I would have laughed at the shock on his face. But instead, I had refused to answer his questions, and because he was such a goody-goody, he added, *How could you do this when your mother is still recovering from her operation?* I retorted, *Are you really that worried about my mom? Do you really like her that much?* But he just smiled and said, *I wish you would cry.* It was a sad smile, though, filled with compassion for me. I hated that.

There was a knock at my hospital room door. I didn't respond. When my mother, whose cancer had been removed over a month ago, had tried to visit me recently, I screamed at her and smashed my IV bottle. None of the other family members had come to see me since then. It was clear from their faces that they considered me an even bigger headache than the centimeter-long tumor that had grown inside my mother's breast. This life that my mother wanted so badly to live was boring to me. Neither of us had ever considered whether she—this person I called mom—had a life worth living. But I shouted at her that since she didn't want to die, I would die in her place. I would never have made such an awful scene if she had not come into the hospital room where I had been brought back to life and told me she didn't know why she gave birth to me—the same thing she had been telling me my whole life. But what made me even angrier was the realization that I take after her. I thought the knock on the door was my youngest sister-in-law Seo Yeongja, the pushover who only knew how to say yes to everyone, bringing me a bowl of

abalone porridge, and I closed my eyes.

The door opened and someone stepped into the room. It wasn't my sister-in-law after all. If it were, she would have called out in that nasal voice of hers, *Miss, are you sleeping?* She used to be an actress, but now she acted like she owed some kind of debt to the Mun family, as if her life's goal was to do all our dirty work for us. Whenever she came to my room, she silently emptied the trashcan and rattled the vase on the windowsill as she refilled it with fresh flowers. But to my surprise, I didn't hear her this time. I knew as soon as the door opened that it was Aunt Monica. I could tell by her scent. Where did that scent come from? Back when I was a kid, whenever she came to the house, I would press my face against her habit and sniff.

What is it? Do I smell like disinfectant?

No, not disinfectant. You smell like church, Aunt Monica. Like candles and things.

Aunt Monica told me that she had graduated from nursing school and worked at a university hospital before suddenly deciding to join a convent.

I cracked my eyes open, as if I were just waking up. Aunt Monica was sitting in the chair beside my bed and quietly watching me. The last time I had seen her was right before I left to study abroad in France, back when I was a pop singer who wore a miniskirt and sang and shook my ass on stage like—as my mother put it—I knew no shame. She had come to see me briefly in my dressing room backstage, so that meant almost ten years had passed. Her age was already showing back then: the hair that peeked out from beneath her black veil had turned gray, and though her shoulders were still square, her back was stooped. Even allowing for the fact that it's hard to tell how old nuns are, her age showed. For a moment, I almost thought about the sad fate of human beings who must live, grow old and die. Aunt Monica's eyes were fixed on me, and I could see that they were filled with a strange fatigue. Her small wrinkled eyes seemed to hold both a slight annoyance and a certain warm maternal love—something my mother had never showed me. There was something else in her eyes, as well, that had always been there for as long as I knew her. It was the kind of look a new mother gives to small living things—a combination of boundless compassion mixed with the curiosity of a

mischievous child looking at a newborn puppy.

Since she was being quiet, I smiled and said, "I've gotten old, haven't I?"

"Not old enough to die," she said.

"I wasn't trying to kill myself," I told her. "I wasn't trying to die. I just had trouble sleeping. Drinking alcohol didn't help, so I took a few sleeping pills... I guess I was too drunk to count the pills. I just took whatever was there, and the next thing I knew, all this happened. Mom came to see me and told me that if I want to die, I should just die and not worry her, and now I feel like I'm some kind of juvenile delinquent who tried to commit suicide. But you know how Mom is. Once she makes up her mind about something, you can't argue with her. I'm sick of it! She's always treated me like I'm defective. I'm over thirty..."

I had intended not to say anything, but the words spilled out of me.

Seeing Aunt Monica after all that time made me want to act like a child and throw a tantrum. She seemed to guess what I was feeling, because she tucked my blanket around me like she would for a baby. I felt the secret joy that only grown-ups who are being pampered like a baby can enjoy. Aunt Monica's small rough hand caught my own, and I felt the warmth that radiated from her body. It had been a long time since I'd felt another person's warmth.

"I mean it," I said. "I don't have the energy to die. You know I'm not that kind of person, you know I don't have the will or the courage to die. So don't try to tell me that if I have the will to die then I also have the will to live, or that I need go to church. And don't pray for me either. I'm sure I'll just give God a headache, too."

Aunt Monica started to say something and then stopped. My mother had probably told her everything. I bet she had told her, *Yujeong said yes to the engagement but now she doesn't want to go through with it. Her brother says this man went to the same school as him and graduated at the top of his class from the Judicial Research and Training Institute, so we know he's a good person with a good academic background. He's a decent man. His family isn't much to speak of, but she's over thirty. Where does she think she's going to find another man like that? Go talk to her. She listens to you. I*

can't stand that girl anymore. I can't believe I gave birth to her. Her father spoiled her because she's the only girl. That's what's wrong with her. Her brothers all went to the best universities, but she could only get into that lousy school. No one in our family has ever had bad grades, so I don't understand how she could turn out that way...

“I didn't do it because of him,” I said. “I never wanted to marry him. He probably didn't really want to marry me either. He'll find some other girl, someone else from a good family with money. Younger, better prospective brides will be lined up for him. He told me the matchmakers have been banging down his door.”

Aunt Monica said nothing. I heard the wind rush past outside and the window rattle. The wind was building. The trees outside were dropping their leaves. If only people were like trees and could fall into a long death-like sleep once a year and reawaken. It would be nice to wake up, put out new pale green leaves and pink blossoms, and start over.

“You know what? His ex-girlfriend who lived with him for three years came to see me. She said she'd had two abortions. Her story was so predictable. I bet she gave him spending money, bought his books, cooked for him. On the day of the bar exam, she probably took him out for barbecued ribs and toasted to his success. And then, that son of a bitch, after all that, he had a change of heart and went after me, the little sister of the chief prosecutor. Probably factored in my share of the inheritance as well. I'm sure he likes our family because it's full of doctors, lawyers, PhDs... all those stuck-up professionals. Aunt Monica, do you know what I hate the most? Clichés. If only he had dumped her in a less clichéd way, or wanted to marry me for reasons that weren't so clichéd, I would have closed my eyes and looked the other way. I mean it. I couldn't stand what a big cliché he was. That's it! You have to believe me. It's the first time I've told anyone this. Not my mom, not my brothers, no one in this family. No one knows about it. They all think I'm being picky, and I prefer it like that. That way, I don't have to deal with them as much.”

At the time, I had no idea why I was telling my aunt things I hadn't told anyone else. Nor did I understand why I hadn't just explained to my family

why I wasn't going to marry him. His ex-girlfriend's voice had trembled faintly over the phone: *Is this Miss Mun Yujeong? I'd like to talk to you.* When we were sitting face to face, I was surprised to see how rough her hands looked wrapped around the coffee cup. Her face was pretty, but her face and hands were completely different, like they were serving two different masters. Though her inviting eyes and the contours of her oval face were soft, she was deathly pale. *He's everything to me.* The moment she opened her mouth and said those words, my heart dropped. How on earth could one person say that about another, especially a woman about a man, and how could you say those words so resolutely to someone you were meeting for the first time? It's possible I felt a little jealous of her, just as I felt jealous of everyone who had faith and conviction, a sense that what they were doing was right. I don't mean that I was jealous of her for having a man. I mean that I had never had someone in my life for whom it was worth risking everything, even if it did end in a childish, immature, even laughable way. She looked sad but she didn't cry, and that seemed to be because she still held onto some foolish hope that kept her from facing reality. I thought it might kill her to realize that she was a fool for hoping and was therefore worse off than if she had despaired instead. She had a tragic and dangerous glow about her. But as I finished telling Aunt Monica about her, I started to wonder why I had kept it a secret from my family. My ex-fiancé was not good-looking. He was not that tall, and his square jaw and dark complexion showed that his childhood had not been an easy one. There was nothing sentimental about him. But I wasn't expecting him to give me butterflies. I was old enough to know that when you've made up your mind to get married rather than keep playing the field, then that's how it is. The first time we had met, introduced by my older brother Yusik, I asked him if he had dated a lot of women. He looked down and smiled shyly. I felt a flash of pleasure at the thought of being the first to conquer virgin soil where no others had trod. I could see why men sought out virgins. But I also knew that if I gave in and married this eligible fool who spent all of his time with his nose buried in books, my family would give me a gilded passport into the kingdom they had constructed and never again bring up my past. And when I thought about it, hedonism, self-indulgence, and debauchery—in other words, booze, sex, and other vices—were becoming clichés to me, too.