

Translated by Shanna Tan

HWANG BO-REUM



WELCOME TO THE HYUNAM-DONG BOOKSHOP

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What Makes a Good Bookshop?

A man was loitering outside the bookshop. Stooping slightly, he shaded his eyes and peered through the window. He'd mistaken the opening time and come too early. As she walked towards the bookshop, Yeongju recognised the man from behind. He was a regular customer who would drop by two or three evenings a week, always in a business suit.

'Hello.'

Startled, the man turned his head sharply. At the sight of Yeongju, he quickly lowered his hands and straightened up, grinning sheepishly.

'I usually come in the evenings. First time I'm here at this time,' he said.

Yeongju smiled at him.

'Well, not sure about other things, but I'm definitely envious that you start work at lunchtime,' he quipped.

She laughed. 'I get that a lot.'

At the beeps of the passcode being punched on the keypad, the man looked away and turned back only at the click of the door. His face relaxed upon glimpsing the interior through the crack.

Pushing the door wide open, she turned to him.

‘It’s going to smell a little – of the night air and books. If you don’t mind, you’re welcome inside.’

The man stepped back, waving his palms. ‘No, no. I’m good. I’d hate to bother you, especially outside business hours. I’ll come by again. Oh my, isn’t it hot today?’

She smiled at his considerate gesture and didn’t insist further. ‘Only June and it’s already scorching,’ she said, the sun’s rays prickling her arm.

Yeongju stood by the door and watched his retreating figure before turning into the bookshop. The moment she stepped inside, she relaxed, as if her body and senses basked in the comfort of returning to her workplace. In the past, she used to live by mantras like *passion* and *willpower*, as if by imprinting the words on her mind, they would somehow breathe meaning into her life. Then one day she realised it felt like she was driving herself into a corner, and she resolved never to let those words dictate her life again. Instead, she learnt to listen to her body, her feelings, and be in happy places. She would ask herself these questions: does this place make me feel positive? Can I be truly whole and uncompromisingly myself? Do I love and treasure myself here? For Yeongju, the bookshop checked all the boxes.

It was indeed a sweltering day, but before she could turn on the air-con, she needed to expel the stale air of yesterday and let fresh air in. *When will I escape from the past, or is that a futile task?* An unbreakable habit, the negativity reared its ugly head to drag her down, but she quickly pushed back with happier thoughts.

Warm humid air rushed in as she opened the windows one by one. Fanning herself with a hand, she surveyed the bookshop. Questions swirled in her mind. If this were her first visit, would she have faith in the staff’s recommendations? How does a bookshop earn trust? What makes a good bookshop?

She imagined walking in for the first time. *I’d probably go starry-eyed at the wall over there*, she thought. The floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed with novels. No, wait. She caught herself in time. Not everyone, even if they’re a book lover, enjoys fiction. It was something she learnt only after starting

Hyunam-dong Bookshop. Those who didn't like the genre would probably give the wall a wide berth, she mused.

The wall of novels in the bookshop was her way of coming full circle to fulfil her childhood dream. In elementary school, little Yeongju pestered her dad to line all four walls in her room with storybooks. Each time, her dad would admonish her, saying that it wouldn't do for her to be so greedy – even when it came to books. She knew he wasn't angry and was just trying to break her habit of throwing tantrums to get what she wanted. But still, she would burst into tears at his stern demeanour and later, tired from crying, she would curl up and fall asleep in his embrace.

Shifting her weight away from the bookcase she'd been leaning against, Yeongju walked to the windows and closed them one by one, starting as usual from the rightmost. With the last window firmly shut, she switched on the air-con and put on her favourite album – Keane's *Hopes and Fears*. The album was released back in 2004, but she had only discovered the British band last year. It was love at first listen. Since then, she put it on almost every day. The languid and dreamy voice filled the air as a new day at Hyunam-dong Bookshop began.





It's Okay to Stop Crying

Next to the counter, Yeongju sat down at her desk and checked her inbox for new online orders. The next thing to do was to run through the to-do list she'd prepared the night before. It was a habit from high school that carried well over to her adult life: to write down the tasks she needed to do the following day, starting with the most important one. Years later, she still maintained the habit, albeit with a different purpose. Her younger self had wanted to rule her day with an iron fist; now, Yeongju soothed herself with the lists. Running through the tasks she needed to work on gave her confidence that it would be another day well spent.

For the first few months after the bookshop's opening, she'd completely forgotten about lists and long-time habits. Each day passed by in a blur of struggles, as if time had slammed to a halt. Before she started the bookshop, it'd been even worse, as if something was siphoning her soul away. Or maybe it was more accurate to say she was not herself at all.

There was only one thing on her mind.

I must open a bookshop.

Clinging to the thought, she forcibly drove everything else out of her mind. Luckily, she was the type to hold herself together if she had something to

focus on. It was the anchor she needed. She plunged headlong into the process. She settled on a location, found a suitable property; busied herself with the fittings and furnishings and bought in the stock. In between everything, she even got herself certified as a barista.

This was how Hyunam-dong Bookshop, nestled in the residential neighbourhood of the same name, came to be.

In the beginning, she left the front door open and did nothing else. People walking by strolled in, drawn by the seemingly gentle atmosphere. But in fact, the bookshop was like a wounded beast, wheezing feebly. The footfall soon trickled to a drop. It was the sight of Yeongju sitting on a chair, her face so ashen you'd wonder if she still had a drop of blood in her: stepping into the bookshop was like an intrusion of her private space. She welcomed everyone with a smile, but none of them returned it.

Mincheol's mother, a good-looking lady with a flashy sense of fashion, was among the rare few who felt the sincerity in her smile.

'Who would come into a shop like this? Bookselling is also a business. Here, look at you slumped in that chair! Do you think money will fall from the sky?'

Twice a week, Mincheol's mother attended drawing and Chinese classes at the neighbourhood community centre. After her classes, she made it a point to stop by the bookshop to check on Yeongju.

'Feeling alright today?' Mincheol's mother asked, a hint of worry in her voice.

'Always fine.' Yeongju smiled weakly.

'Aigoo. Everyone in the neighbourhood was so happy to have our own bookshop. But they see this lady nailed to her chair looking like she has a screw loose, as if she belongs in the hospital instead! Who would dare come in?' Mincheol's mother exclaimed as she fished out a sparkly wallet from her equally flashy bag.

'Just one loose screw? Hey, that's not too bad,' Yeongju exclaimed.

Mincheol's mother snorted with laughter. 'One iced Americano.'

‘I’m trying to be less perfect, more human. Guess that backfired,’ Yeongju deadpanned.

‘Hrmmph. Did someone tell you I love a good sense of humour?’

Yeongju pressed her lips into a thin line and wiggled her eyebrows as if saying, ‘Please draw your own conclusions,’ to which the older lady returned an amused scowl. Leaning against the bar table, she watched Yeongju prepare her coffee.

‘I’ve been through something similar too,’ she said quietly, half to herself. ‘My body shut down and I was completely drained. After giving birth to Mincheol, there was a period when I lived like a patient. Well, I was one. My body was in pain. But what I couldn’t understand was why my mind was hurting too. Come to think of it, it was probably depression.’

‘Your coffee is ready.’

Yeongju was about to put a lid on the cup when Mincheol’s mother waved her hand away. She grabbed a straw and settled down at a table while Yeongju sat across from her.

‘The worst thing was having to act like I was fine when I wasn’t. I cried every night, feeling so sorry for myself for not being able to speak of my pain. I wonder if things would have turned out different, if I could have been like you, sitting there and letting go of everything else. The tears wouldn’t stop, but you know, when we feel like crying, we should let it all out. Forcing them back only makes the wounds heal slower.’

At Yeongju’s silence, Mincheol’s mother paused and, in one go, drained the iced coffee.

‘I envy you,’ she added, ‘to have the space to do that.’

For the first few months, Yeongju, too, had cried her heart out. She let the tears flow, but if customers walked in on her crying, she would dab her eyes dry and greet them as if nothing had happened. Nobody said anything about her tear-stained face. Nobody asked why she cried; they simply assumed there was a reason. Yeongju knew very well why she was crying. For a long time – perhaps her whole life – it would cast a shadow over her, making her cry.

Nothing had changed. The reason, stuck in the past, remained as it was. But one day, Yeongju realised that the tears had stopped. That moment – knowing that it was okay to stop crying – felt as if a heavy rock was lifted from her heart. The days of listlessly sitting in her chair dwindled as each morning felt a little more hopeful than the last. She didn't have enough energy yet to do more for the bookshop, but she started reading voraciously again.

It was as if she was back to the days of reading from morning to night, giggling as she piled on more books to the stack, scrunching up her face in concentration as she leafed through the pages. She was back to being little Yeongju, who turned a deaf ear to her mother's nagging as she read through mealtimes; back to basking in the joy of reading even as her eyes protested. *If I can experience that happiness once more, perhaps I'll be able to start afresh*, she thought.

Up till middle school, Yeongju had been an avid reader. Her parents, both perpetually busy, left her alone reading in a corner at home. Once she devoured all the books in her collection, she turned to the library. She loved books. Novels were her favourite, bringing her on expeditions across lands and seas in the comfort of her home. When she had to pull herself back to reality – cutting a sweet dream short – her heart sank. But she needn't feel sad for long. She only had to open the book to dive right into the adventures again.

Reading in the empty bookshop brought back memories of her childhood and she smiled. It occurred to her, as she rubbed her dry eyes with her palms, that she was past the age for a reading marathon. She blinked several times before returning to the page. As if trying her best to mend a broken friendship from her childhood, she immersed herself into the books, day and night, never leaving their side. It didn't take long for their treasured relationship to rekindle. The books welcomed her back with open arms without judging the person she'd become, and accepted her for who she was. Like a well-nourished person who ate three good meals a day, she grew

stronger. One day, lifting her head from the pages, she found herself looking at the bookshop with clearer eyes and a sharper mind.

I need to do better than this.

Yeongju sought out book recommendations and worked hard to fill the half-empty shelves. For each book she read, she penned down her thoughts on memo paper which she wedged between the pages. The ones she hadn't read, she would put together the opinions of literary critics, book reviewers and readers she found online. When customers asked for an unfamiliar title, she made sure to look it up. All this she didn't do for the profits; her priority was to create a bookshop that looked and felt like one. Gradually, her efforts paid off. Residents nearby stopped throwing doubtful looks at the bookshop; the astute ones even noticed the changes. Each time they walked in, the bookshop seemed a little warmer, a little more inviting, casting a magnetic charm on passers-by. The biggest change was Yeongju. The bookshop lady who had flustered customers with her tear-stained face was no more.

The bookshop began seeing visitors from further neighbourhoods. Mincheol's mother was delighted to see unfamiliar faces browsing the shelves.

'Did they mention how they got to know of the bookshop?'

'Through our Instagram.'

'The bookshop's on *Instagram*?'

'Yes. You know the handwritten notes in between the books' pages? I post the photos online too.'

'Uh. And people travel all the way here because of that?'

'Well, not only that. I'm quite active on Instagram. I usually post a warm greeting during the morning rush hour. Or a book I'm reading. Sometimes, I share small grumbles in life. Oh, and another greeting during the evening commute.'

'What's in the brains of the young ones is beyond me. Why travel so far because of this? Well, anyway, great. I thought you were just sitting around like a mannequin, but it looks like you're doing something.'

There wasn't much to do when she couldn't be bothered, but once she started to care, the work was never-ending. From the time she punched in the passcode till she locked up for the day, her hands and feet never had an idle moment. When her limbs almost tied themselves into a knot as she bounced between the bookshop and the coffee orders piling up, she decided it was time to get some help. She put up hiring notices in the neighbourhood for a barista. Minjun walked in the very next day. The same day, after she had a sip of his coffee, she took down the notices. He started work the following day, around the first anniversary of the bookshop.

Since then, another year had passed. Minjun was set to arrive in five minutes. As usual, over a cup of his coffee, she would immerse herself in a novel until one o'clock, when the bookshop was ready to welcome its customers.





What's the Coffee of the Day?

On his way to the bookshop, Minjun cast an envious glance at a man walking past him with a handheld fan. Calling the day hot was an understatement when his scalp tingled in the unrelenting heat. It hadn't been this insufferable last year, or had it? Thinking of the weather reminded him that it was this time a year ago when he'd come across the hiring notice.

BARISTA WANTED.

8 hours a day, 5 days a week.

Remuneration to be discussed in person.

Anyone who makes good coffee is welcome to apply.

Back then, Minjun was desperate for a job. He didn't care what it was. Making coffee was fine. So was moving bulky items, cleaning toilets, flipping burgers, delivering parcels, or scanning barcodes. To him, they were all the same. As long as it paid. So, he turned up at the bookshop.

It was about three in the afternoon when he pushed open the door. As expected, the bookshop was empty, save for a lady who appeared to be the owner. She was sitting at one of the square tables in the café section of the shop, busy scribbling on a notepad the size of her palms. At the sound of the door, she looked up and gave him a little nod of greeting. Her warm smile seemed to say: feel free to browse, I won't bother you.

When she returned to her work, Minjun thought he would take things slow and have a look around. The place was spacious – big, in fact – for an independent bookshop, and the couple of chairs nestled among the bookshelves seemed to welcome customers to take their time to browse. Fully stocked shelves reaching all the way to the ceiling took up one third of the wall to the right while display racks aligned to the height of the shop windows flanked both sides of the entrance. It wasn't quite clear, at first glance, how the books were organised. He randomly pulled a book out from the nearest shelf. A piece of paper peeked out from the top. Opening the book, he took out the note and read it.

Every one of us is like an island; alone and lonely. It's not a bad thing. Solitude sets us free, just as loneliness brings depth to our lives. In the novels I like, the characters are like isolated islands. In the novels I love, the characters used to be like isolated islands, until their fates gradually intertwined; the kind of stories where you whisper, 'You were here?' and a voice answers, 'Yes, always.' You think to yourself, I was a little lonely, but because of you, I'm less alone. It's a wonderful feeling and the book in your hands gives me a taste of that joy.

Minjun slid the note back and flipped to the title. *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*. He tried to imagine a prickly hedgehog ambling elegantly. A hedgehog? Solitude? Loneliness? Depth? He couldn't quite link them together. *Solitude sets us free, just as loneliness brings depth to our lives*. He had never given much thought – good or bad – to solitude or loneliness, and hence never tried to avoid either. In that sense, he was free. But did it add depth to his life? He wasn't sure.

It looked like the owner was working on a similar note right now. Did she handwrite these all by herself? He had always thought a bookshop simply stocks and sells books, but it seemed like there was more to it.

Ending his tour with a quick glance at the coffee machine, he approached the lady.

‘Excuse me.’

Yeongju stood up. ‘May I help you?’

‘I saw the hiring notice. For a barista.’

‘Ah! Yes! Please have a seat.’

Yeongju grinned at him, as though he was the person she’d been waiting for for the longest time. She walked over to her desk next to the counter and returned with two sheets of paper, which she placed on the table before taking the seat opposite.

‘Do you live nearby?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you know how to make coffee?’

‘Yes. I’ve worked part-time at several cafés.’

‘Are you able to handle that coffee machine over there?’

He glanced in the direction she was pointing. ‘I guess so.’

‘Alright, would you make me some coffee?’

‘Now?’

‘Two cups. We’ll chat over coffee.’

A while later, he returned with freshly made coffee. He kept his gaze fixed upon Yeongju as she took a sip from hers. Even with the sudden request, he wasn’t at all nervous; he had no reason to be when serving up decent coffee was easy for him. But he tensed up when Yeongju took her time to savour the dark liquid, slowly tipping the cup back for a second sip before looking up.

‘Why aren’t you drinking? Drink up, it’s good.’

‘Okay.’

They chatted for the next twenty minutes, or rather, Yeongju did most of the talking while he listened. Praising his coffee, Yeongju asked if he was

available immediately. Yes, he replied. As a barista, you'd focus on the coffee, she said, adding that her only request was for him to take over all the coffee-related tasks so that she could free up some bandwidth. When she followed with a question on whether he could also handle the selection and procurement of coffee beans, he wondered why such a nondescript task would warrant a separate mention, but out loud, he simply replied, 'Yes.'

'There's a roaster I work with. The boss is a good person.'

'Got it.'

'You and I, we'll keep to our own roles. But if either of us gets too busy, the other person can chip in.'

'Got it.'

'To make it clear, it's not only me who can ask for help. If you're swamped, I'll help too.'

'Got it.'

Yeongju pushed the documents to him. It was his contract. She handed him a pen to sign once he was agreeable to the terms and started to walk him through each clause.

'You'll be working five days a week; rest days are Sundays and Mondays. Work hours are from half past noon to eight thirty in the evening. Are you okay with this?'

'Got it.'

'The bookshop is open six days a week, so I only take a break on Sundays.'

'I see, got it.'

'In the event you have to work overtime, though I don't really see it happening, you'll be paid for the extra hours.'

'Got it.'

'Your hourly rate is twelve thousand won.'

'Twelve thousand?'

'You're working five days a week and putting in the hours equivalent to a full-time job. To be paid adequately, that's what you should get.'

Minjun couldn't help but look around the bookshop. Since the moment he had stepped in, there had been no customers. He wondered if the boss