

When We Cross the Bridge

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1.

I didn't expect to meet Aya there.

I had ordered an iced Americano from an Asian employee wearing a green apron with a vivid logo, and as I turned around, someone opened the glass door of the Fort Lee Starbucks and our eyes met. At that moment, sunlight poured into the café, locking everything in the shade of the backlight. I'm not one to observe the people around me, so if Aya had passed by blankly, I might not have recognized her. It's more accurate to say that Aya's startled look grabbed me rather than that I found her.

"Didn't you say you lived in Queens?"

Moments later, Aya, who was sitting at my table with a cold brew topped with whipped cream, nodded and pointed a finger somewhere behind her head, saying she was on her way back from spending a night at a friend's house in Fort Lee.

"I was going to go to school after having a cup of coffee," she said.

A little white cream smeared on Aya's lips as she moved.

"How are you going to get there from here?"

"There's a Spanish bus. I just have to cross the bridge to get to the subway station."

"You have the same destination as me."

Aya asked, "Are you going into Manhattan too?"

I shook my head.

"No, I'm going to the bridge."

Aya looked at me for a moment with an expression asking what that meant, and I felt the need to explain.

"The George Washington Bridge."

A response that sounded like "Ehhh?" came out of Aya's mouth. Was it because I didn't want her to be embarrassed that I said impulsively, "Want to go together?"

2

Think about probability. For example, the chance of meeting someone you know at a café in Fort Lee. The probability that it would be Aya. The probability that I would be here at this time and the probability that Aya would come in at the exact time I was ordering, not

before or after I left. The probability of making eye contact and recognizing each other. The odds of me saying, “Let’s go to the bridge,” and the odds of Aya accepting. The probability that Aya and I were born in Tokyo and Seoul, respectively. The probability of meeting in New York 30 years later. The probability that a bridge would be built or collapse. The probability of an event occurring. Any number of cases of any kind. Which is to say we broke through the near-infinite number of probabilities and arrived at an event, and now we were drinking coffee together, facing each other....

Aya was a person worthy of being called a friend in this city where there was no one worthy of being called a friend. We were doing the same thing, teaching foreign languages at university (of course she was teaching Japanese and I was teaching Korean), we were temporary foreign workers (that meant part-time non-resident aliens), and we hid our artistic self-consciousness somewhere and went about our daily lives like normal people. We had something in common as camouflaged artists of a sort (not perfect but desperate camouflage—I am a novelist, Aya a visual artist).

Of course, this is what I am saying now, as I reconstruct my relationship with Aya. At the time, we were dealing with the difficulties of beginner foreign language classes, the strange students, the never-ending semester, the problem of joining the non-regular instructors’ union, and our favorite flavors at the new gelato shop near the department building. We were just talking about different things. I don’t remember all the details of her story, but as always, Aya expressed her opinion in a clear English that seemed to be made up of pieces all the same width and height like bricks. It was different from my English, which was broken and crooked somehow.

When she finally ended the conversation with her habitual “We’ll see,” I said right away, “Yes, we’ll see the bridge.”

Then Aya, who had laughed earlier instead of answering, asked, “You really mean it about the bridge?”

“Of course.”

“Why are you going?”

“To cross it on foot.”

“Not passing beside it, but walking across?”

“That’s right. Want to go together?”

“Why are you doing that?”

“If you go with me, I’ll tell you. Curious?”

Aya gave a smile like she’d given up and then turned her head to look out the window.

“The sun will set soon.”

3

After experiencing the siege of Boston during the American Revolutionary War, George Washington, commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, turned his gaze downward and began to focus on defending New York and the Hudson Valley. This was because the British Army was trying to take control of the Hudson River based on its strong naval power. In the

summer of 1776, George Washington instructed General Hugh Mercer to muster all available troops and build a new fort west of the Hudson: Fort Lee, the very place where Aya and I sat. First named Fort Constitution and later named Fort Lee after General Charles Lee, who helped defend New York, it was a twin fort facing Fort Washington across the river on the northern part of the island of Manhattan. George Washington tried to overwhelm the Royal Navy by firing cannons from both forts across the river, a strategy that at first seemed quite plausible. It was even more so because obstacles were made by deliberately sinking ships in the river.

However, like many things in this world, the war did not go the way Washington intended. When penetration of the Hudson River became difficult, the British Army moved more than 30,000 troops, landed on Long Island, the most eastern part of New York, and began to advance slowly westward. Eventually, in November of that year, even Fort Washington in Manhattan fell to the British, and Washington evacuated to Fort Lee across the river with his remaining troops. His company built a hut in the camp on the hill and carved stones to make a fire pit.

Sometimes when I fall asleep or wake up in my \$1,250-per-month studio in Fort Lee, overlooking Manhattan across the river, I imagine the smoke and smell of food rising from George Washington's troops as they prepared to retreat south. When I think of how the word "future" might have felt for young people who fell asleep and woke up in the same place 200 years ago, my worries about my bleak future seem trivial and light. At least I'm not in a position to pack up my gear and retreat to southern New Jersey in the middle of the night, fearing for my life.

When I said this, Aya nodded. I added, "Of course, there are things as frightening to me as the British Army pushing down from the north. My thesis deadline."

"When did you say it was due?"

"This Friday."

"There's one week left."

"Five workdays."

"How are you feeling?"

"Not that different from the Continental Army."

"But don't run away. What if George Washington had fought back here?"

"He would have been killed, probably."

Aya smiled at my words, gathered her things, and stood up, saying, "Who knows?"

I stood up and, imitating her, said softly, "I know," but Aya didn't seem to hear.

4

As I left the Starbucks and looked across the street for the entrance to the bridge, I pictured George Washington looking down at the bridge with a bewildered expression from his camp at Fort Lee Hill, where the batteries were set up. Even George Washington could not have predicted that 150 years later a massive iron bridge named after him would be built on the sites of Fort Lee and Fort Washington (and that the two points would be precisely connected). Or that a man and a woman who were born in Seoul and Tokyo, respectively, at

the end of the 20th century were about to cross that bridge on their two legs.

It wasn't until I climbed the stairs that I got the feeling that something was wrong. As I opened the iron door and found the passage leading up onto the bridge, I looked back at Aya and saw an absurd expression on her face. "Are you serious?" Aya asked. "It's not too late. You can quit right now." She said, "You can quit any time," and the word "quit" in that short sentence touched me.

"No," I answered. I mumbled over and over again as I climbed the stairs. "Never. Never." I asked Aya as if I had remembered it belatedly, "Have you ever crossed a bridge on foot?"

"No way. There are buses and cars, so why would I?" Aya answered as if shouting from the bottom up.

"I have."

"Here?"

"No, in Korea."

A few minutes later we were up on the bridge. Through the iron gate, I could see the beginning of the upper level of the George Washington Bridge. Even though it was October, sweat was dripping down my hoodie with the school logo on it. Colorful cars entered the bridge one after another while the wind blew in from the north and cooled the heat.

"Is it normal for Koreans? Walking across bridges?"

"Not really."

"Then why are you doing this? You said you would tell me."

"It's because of my thesis."

"Thesis?" Aya frowned slightly.

5

I was writing a thesis about Seongsu Bridge. To be precise, it was a thesis on how the collapse of Seongsu Bridge in 1994 changed the urban character of Seoul. I also wondered why I had come to study literature abroad and had chosen a topic closer to urban engineering for my graduation thesis, but if I had to give an excuse, it was because of my academic advisor. At the consultation for my thesis proposal, I had come up with: 1) Kafka's themes (Kafka's ambiguity and the labyrinth motif in "The Castle") and 2) Asian immigrant writers (a comparison of the Asian identity of the characters found in the works of Ha Jin and Yiyun Li) one after another. But I thought I still needed a number 3, so I decided to match the assortment and inserted 3) the story of Seongsu Bridge, and of all these, my advisor said the last topic was the best. "But I'm a literature major," I had blurted out. But she said, touching the seven piercings on her ears, "Well, it's not even a doctoral dissertation anyway, is it?"

My Finnish thesis advisor, who had majored in urban engineering, greeted me warmly when I visited. He said that he was well aware of the Seongsu Bridge collapse and that it was a topic that many people were interested in in urban engineering, and that if someone from Korea wrote about it, they would be able to create a new perspective. But two weeks later, when I went with the draft that developed my proposal, he tilted his head and said, "This is a novel, not a thesis."

In some ways, his point was correct. Because I was also writing a novel. The story was about how the main character—who had lost his first love, who was attending Muhak Girls' High School, in the Seongsu Bridge collapse—goes back in time to October 20, 1994, the day before the accident, and saves her. At that time, I was writing a novel of over 800 pages, not knowing how backward it was. It was because my experience, which had become the background of the story, was too intense.

Back then, I had been a middle school student commuting from the area north of the river to Gangnam in the south, and in fact, I barely survived that morning. It was because I chose the subway that crosses Dongho Bridge, not the bus that passes over Seongsu Bridge. For some reason, there were a lot of people on the subway, so I regretted not having taken the bus; Seongsu Bridge, which I always saw outside the window when I passed over the bridge, looked fine as I crossed the Han River. To get to school, I had to get off at the Express Bus Terminal Station and take another bus. Whether because I had waited for a long time for the bus to come or because I'd had a stomachache, I was late that day for a reason I don't remember well, and immediately after arriving at school, I was called to the teachers' office. As soon as my homeroom teacher saw me, he told me to bend over and he hit me on the butt five times with the cut-off hockey stick he always carried. Had I really been so very late? When I stood up with a firm grip on my aching buttocks, the homeroom teacher said, as if spitting out chewing gum, "I thought you were dead, you jerk."

As it turned out later, the school had investigated the students commuting from the northern side in each class right after the accident occurred that morning. The students who had not reached school by then were classified separately, and the school office was checking whether they were alive. Back in the classroom, everyone was staring at the CRT TV hanging from the ceiling. On the TV screen, a fragment of a bridge floated like a raft on the Han River. The children looked at me as if they were seeing a ghost. Someone shouted, "Hey, isn't this kid dead?"

6

It isn't easy to turn experiences into a novel. It's close to impossible to turn an experience into a thesis. In the first place, novels and theses aren't in the same realm, but even if they are of the same dimension (writing), experience is a completely different dimension (reality). No matter how much a triangle or square compare and contrast their similarities and differences with each other, they can never understand a cube. In order to talk about the collapse of the Seongsu Bridge, I had to replace my subjective experiences and senses with objective facts and historical data. Words and phrases such as "the Korean War," "modernization," "hurry-hurry mentality," "north and south of the river," "moon villages," "the Joseon Dynasty," "feng shui," "Wangsimni" and "Muhakdaesa," "the Miracle on the Han River," "Park Chung-hee," "truss structure," "public apology," "cross-assignment ban," and "aftermath" were needed. However, at night, things that couldn't be transferred to my thesis used to float on my inner river like debris—no, like the top of a collapsed bridge, and unable to sleep, I would think about how to make a novel out of these remaining pieces. Of course, the

thesis did not work as a thesis, and the novel did not work as a novel. It felt like being forced to run a three-legged race with the wrong partner. Besides, the bridge I had to cross had already been cut off in front of me....

So maybe it was fortunate that the novel was completed before the thesis. I sent the 817-page draft to my editor and friend, who had often looked at my novels unofficially for several years, and received a reply within a week saying that it was a lot of work. At the end of the email he said, "But you know, a novel is not a thesis. Who will read this?"

7

I couldn't tell that whole story to Aya. It was in part because of the difficulty of translating what I wanted to say into English, but that wasn't the only reason. I barely talked about the story of Seongsu Bridge, the fact that my thesis dealt with the subject, and the extent to which I wanted to write a novel related to it. Of course, I didn't mention that the entire draft of the novel I had printed out a few days before was in the bag I was carrying on my back. The noise of passing cars was so loud that we had to raise our voices little by little.

"How is that bridge now?"

"Still there."

"Still there? You said it collapsed."

"They built it again. In the same place. It was improved. It was originally four lanes, but it became eight lanes."

"No way."

Aya shook her head in disbelief. "Total nonsense." Aya called the new Seongsu Bridge that. Then she talked about Ground Zero and Freedom Tower. She spoke of the two large square reflecting pools that forever drip water down from all sides, replacing the two collapsed World Trade Center towers. She also talked about the large stone slabs engraved with the names of those who died on September 11, and the white flowers that someone puts down on each person's birthday where their name is carved. In the meantime, several trailers passed by and the bridge swayed up and down. Was it always like this? I felt the adrenaline pumping inside of my body with every jolt of the great bridge. Aya's tone was quite high.

"What were you doing that day?"

When Aya asked, the scene played clearly in my mind without much effort. On the night of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, I was on duty in the army. I watched planes crash into the World Trade Center on the television that was on all night in the duty room, one and then another. The scene was so unreal that it didn't hit home. It felt like a scene from an over-obvious disaster movie. The officer on duty, who was eating ramyun behind me, put down his chopsticks with a thud and said, "Fuck, isn't this going to start a war?" That was when I returned to reality and started to worry about my vacation that was scheduled for the next day.

In the end, the vacation was canceled and the war began. No one yet knew that the war would drag on in Afghanistan for the next 20 years.

"I was in the army."

I suddenly thought about the officer who had been on duty then and wondered where he was now and what he was doing. Looking back, what he had said seemed like something that only a person who would survive, or who would at least not die, could say. A person who existed outside the image, not inside the window. Someone who could rebuild bridges and lay down flowers. A person who would be commemorated but wouldn't be in a funeral portrait.

"Things like that are like bookmarks," Aya said.

8

The bookmark for Aya was March 2011. At the time, she had already left Japan and was majoring in visual arts in Chicago. Like me, she had to watch the tragedy happening in her home country on television in real time.

"I was eating pasta in the school cafeteria. Someone turned on CNN news, and all of a sudden, NHK subtitles started appearing at the bottom. Why were we getting the Japanese news? My heart started beating first and then the 'Breaking News' sign appeared. 'M8.4 QUAKE HITS JAPAN.' White waves were constantly rising from the gloomy colored sea. Yes, a tsunami. My fork wrapped with pasta shook so much that I instantly wondered if that earthquake was affecting Chicago, 10,000 kilometers away. Of course it can't do that, can it? When I looked down, I realized that my legs were shaking without my noticing, enough to shake the table.

"During the few minutes of the breaking news, the anchor was on the phone with a correspondent living in Japan. The whole time I was watching, I wondered who was filming. I was so anxious. 'Who the hell is taking pictures of the tsunami rushing in?' It was before drones were used like now. 'Is someone floating over the sea in a helicopter? If so, are they safe?' The correspondent said that he had been living in Japan for eight years and had experienced several earthquakes during that time, but that this was the first earthquake as big as this. Compared to his calm voice, the anchor sounded excited. The anchor was asking over and over again, as if he didn't understand what the correspondent was saying, 'So do you live there? Or are you traveling?'

"My friend, the one whose house I slept at yesterday. That friend came to America later than me, but he says he has no intention of going back. He's never been able to say why, exactly, but I think I know. People in the US sometimes ask me, 'Are you and your family okay? How did the earthquake change your life?' Well, is there anyone who can answer that correctly? Even with my friend who lives in Fort Lee Hill, I've never had a deep conversation about the earthquake. Even though that friend is from Sendai.

"Only once did a friend talk to me about the earthquake. There's an elementary school at the highest point in my friend's village, and the gym there is the official earthquake shelter. Immediately after the earthquake, an alarm went off throughout the village, and when most of the residents were gathered at the gym, an elderly woman in her 70s came in crying. The old woman explained that she lived with her son who was in his 40s and that he wouldn't come up. Do you know the term *hikikomori*? A reclusive loner. Her son was a hikikomori who hadn't been outside the house once in 20 years. She had told him that a tsunami would come

soon, that he would die if he stayed at home, but he wouldn't listen. He said he didn't care if he died. He told his mother to go alone. No matter how much she tried to convince him, she couldn't get through to him, and as she couldn't stay and die with him, in the end, she had come up to the shelter by herself. Some of the villagers offered to go down and get her son, but it was too late. Because the tsunami was already starting to be visible lower down the hill.

"Everyone was looking out with a heavy and solemn heart. They must have watched helplessly as calm waves turned into angry monsters and engulfed the quiet village. Walls crumbling, roads destroyed, cars floating, houses collapsing. Some tsunamis were so powerful that they even tore houses apart. When everything finally passed by and the silence returned like a lie, people left the gym. The elementary school playground on top of the hill was piled up with all kinds of rubble and trash pushed up by the tsunami, as if the ruins had been moved. There was even a house among them. And someone came into the gym and started looking for the old woman. *'Obaasan! Obaasan!'*

"When she went out with the other people onto the playground, they found that her house had been swept away and carried there by the tsunami. A few people climbed onto the slanted house and opened the door, and there the son was. Covered in a blanket, holding a PlayStation in his arms, soaked in water."

9

By the time we reached the end of the bridge on the Manhattan side, the sun had almost set. Aya and I turned for a moment in front of the few remaining yards of bridge and looked back toward New Jersey, which we had left. The tall trees that lined the Hudson to the north were yellower and redder than the sunset. The steel structure of the George Washington Bridge and the steel cables which held up the orange and purple sky looked like ink lines from a traditional East Asian painting overlaid on watercolor. As I was wondering if Aya and I had ever had such a long conversation before, Aya asked, "Will your thesis problem be solved if you walk across a bridge?" I looked at Aya and she immediately held out her hands and said, "No offense, I'm just wondering." I knew it wasn't meant to be a criticism.

I remembered the day I walked across the newly built Seongsu Bridge before coming to the United States. Maybe it was because I vaguely thought that I wanted to write a novel even then. I don't know if it was the expectation that I would be able to get some kind of inspiration if I went to the scene. But the only thing I got from the bridge I actually walked on was that it was noisy, smoky, and had a green "phone of life" installed in the middle. What had I wanted today? Was it also inspiration? For a novel? Or for a thesis? Why hadn't I done the "what I originally intended to do on the bridge," which I had prepared after thinking about it last night?

"There's one surefire solution."

"What?" Aya asked, looking intrigued.

"To jump from here."

Aya grimaced as she went "*ehhhh*" again.

“Not funny,” she said.

In Franz Kafka’s short story “The Judgment,” which begins with the sentence, “It was a Sunday morning at the most beautiful time in spring,” there is a son who is in conflict with his father over a trivial matter about informing a friend in Petersburg of his engagement. After an argument, what the father says to his son is surprising: “I sentence you now to death by drowning!” Then the son immediately dashes out of the house, frantically runs to the river, and jumps over the railing of the bridge. The son’s last words are, “Dear parents, I have always loved you nonetheless.”

This novel, which reads as an autobiographical story intertwined with Kafka’s personal history, was actually written because Kafka didn’t throw himself off the bridge like the main character. Is that what a novel is? To show a scene where you throw yourself off, but to not actually throw yourself off? Self-murder, not suicide? To stay only “on the bridge,” not on this side or that side? Then jump off in the wrong place and end up disappearing into the black water?

With that thought in mind, I looked down over the railing for a while. The river was flowing on, like a river does, and my face wasn’t reflected in the dark blue waves.

10

At the entrance to the 175th Street subway station, which connects to the end of the bridge, Aya hesitated.

“I guess I should go back.”

“Where?”

“Fort Lee.”

Instead of asking why, I asked, “Will you be okay?”

“Yeah.”

Aya waved her hand, took a few steps, and then she turned around and, keeping her distance, said, “About my name. What does it mean?”

It took me a while to understand what that meant. Aya continued, “A friend from Korea told me the other day. That my name means ‘ouch’ in Korean. Is that right?”

This time I hesitated. It wasn’t completely wrong, but I thought that I wouldn’t want to be close with a friend who said that, even if it was a joke.

“Well, in Korean your name is the beginning of the vowels.” After thinking for a while, I gave an answer very much like a Korean instructor. “*A-ya, eo-yeo, o-yo, u-yu, eu-i*. There are 10 vowels in Korean, and the list starts in the same way as the two syllables of your name. It’s a name that all Koreans recite at least once during their lives. No one is going to take that to mean ‘ouch.’”

Then Aya smiled faintly and said, “*Arigato*.”

Aya asked a passer-by about something and walked away. Across the street, I saw a white Spanish bus resembling an ambulance waiting for passengers, and after a while, Aya, who had grown small with the distance between us, got onto the bus. The moment she reached out her hand to grab the door, she looked like the Hangeul letter for the vowel “*a*.”

Think about probability. For example, meeting someone you know at a café in Fort Lee and walking across the George Washington Bridge. The probability of returning to Fort Lee again. The probability that a name starts with a vowel or an interjection meaning “pain.” The probability of one bridge collapsing. The probability of someone throwing themselves off a bridge. The probability of a house, uprooted by waves in a tsunami-stricken village, reaching the playground of a shelter on top of a hill. The probability of a reunion of a separated mother and son. The probability of one novel being written. The number of possibilities by which the novel could be left uncompleted and abandoned or forgotten forever even by the person who wrote it....

Construction of Seongsu Bridge began in April 1977 and was completed on October 16, 1979. President Park Chung-hee attended the opening ceremony and cut the tape with Seoul Mayor Chong Sang-chon. Ten days later, the president was assassinated, and the bridge collapsed 15 years later in the same month. Contrary to the design, one of the bridge decks connected to the truss structure, poorly constructed, fell into the river. Thirty-two people died and 17 were injured, many of them passengers on Bus No. 16, which crashed upside down, and among them students from Muhak Girls’ Middle School and High School in Wangsimni. Afterwards, the city of Seoul built a new eight-lane bridge and the Office of Education prohibited cross-assignment between north and south to avoid students commuting across the Han River bridges.

Construction of the George Washington Bridge began in September 1927 and it opened on October 24, 1931. After the bridge was completed, suicides occurred one after another. The first intentional suicide occurred on November 3, less than a week after the bridge was opened, and in 2012, 61 people attempted suicide, of whom only 18 succeeded. Close to 100 people each year were repeatedly stopped from attempting suicide, so a temporary fence was installed in 2017 to prevent so-called “jumpers.” Then, in place of the temporary fence, a permanent barrier 11 feet high was built. If Georg, the protagonist of Kafka’s short story, lived in Fort Lee today, he would no longer be able to jump off the bridge. But if he had been born before that time, he might have had to retreat with George Washington’s troops to southern New Jersey to escape the British forces.

On November 20, 1776, British forces occupying all of New York crossed the Hudson River north of Fort Lee. When news of the crossing by thousands of enemy troops spread, George Washington ordered the entire army to abandon Fort Lee and retreat immediately. At this time, in the Continental Army camp at Fort Lee, was Thomas Paine, who was well-known for his pamphlet *Common Sense*, which argued for the legitimacy of American independence. After crossing over from England to the New World with the help of Benjamin Franklin, he became an “American” more enthusiastic than anyone else.

“These are the times that try men’s souls.”

... But when would it not be?

As the Spanish bus disappeared toward New Jersey, I was alone again.

My bag contained the 817-page draft of the novel I had printed out the other day, and I had originally intended to throw it off the bridge into the river. I couldn't for several reasons; first because I'd met Aya, second because I had asked Aya to go with me, and third because we had actually crossed the bridge together. But I couldn't deny that all of this was a cowardly excuse. From the beginning, I hadn't intended to throw the novel away. My subconscious had known that, so I was just looking for an excuse. Even if I had read Kafka's "The Judgment" and run to Seongsu Bridge, I would have used the "phone of life" instead of jumping into the Han River.

I had to go home, but my steps did not come easily. In reality, I was the one who had to take the Spanish bus. While checking useless posts on my cell phone in front of the subway entrance that headed underground, I saw an email notification from my advisor. He said that the title of my thesis "The Collapse and Aftermath of the Seongsu Bridge" was too direct, and he suggested that it be based on an expression he had found in the thesis. The expression he found was "Cracks Everywhere." Cracks. Narrow gaps, cracks appearing from fissures, cracking sounds. "Cracks Everywhere." It didn't sound like a bad title. Even though it was almost dinnertime, it seemed that my advisor was still in his office.

I changed my mind about going back home and decided to take the subway downtown to school. I had to finish my thesis and I thought it would be nice to meet with my advisor if possible. "I'd like to eat pasta for dinner," I muttered to myself as I descended the grey-white stairs. I decided not to think about novels for the time being. As I went on down, a smell of old cannon shells came from somewhere.