

STONE

ANGELS

A NOVEL

HELENA RHO



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) The author includes two epigraphs at the start of the novel, one from Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, and one from William Shakespeare's *Sonnet 116*. After reading the novel, why do you think she chose these excerpts, in particular? How do they reflect the novel's major themes? How many variations of love do you see in the novel?
- 2) In the prologue, Gongju has a dream about her sister, Sunyuh, while she's pregnant with Angelina. After reading the novel, what do you think the dream signified?
- 3) Discuss the ways in which motherhood is depicted in the novel. How did each mother (particularly Grandmama, Gongju, and Angelina) influence the way her daughter behaved and later raise her own children, for better or worse?
- 4) When Angelina first arrives in Seoul, she feels distant from her culture. She insists she is Angelina Lee, not Yi Sunyuh. Discuss the events that contributed to Angelina's feelings of cultural confusion, and her motivations for taking language classes at Konkuk University. Compare and contrast these experiences and motivations with those of her fellow classmate, Keisuke.
- 5) The novel sheds light on the little-known history of girls and young women who were victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery during WWII. Before reading the Author's Note, were you aware of this aspect of history?
- 6) In chapter six, Angelina says: "History will repeat itself if we don't change the pattern of hiding secrets . . . The truth is sometimes unbearable, but eventually, it releases you." Una disagrees: "I think the truth is sometimes so painful one cannot live with it." Where do you fall in this debate?
- 7) Discuss the motif of water in the novel, and the symbolic role it played in Gongju, Sunyuh, and Angelina's lives.
- 8) What was the moment you realized Angelina's connection to Lars wouldn't last? Why was the affair a necessary stepping stone for her relationship with Keisuke?
- 9) Angelina was raised to believe it was the epitome of good manners to hide her feelings, to be stoic. Do you believe it's better to spare others the weight of one's feelings, or speak them honestly?
- 10) Of the three women who narrated the novel, who was your favorite? How did Angelina, Gongju, and Sunyuh mirror one another in the novel, personality and experience-wise? Did you chalk these similarities up to genetics? The way the women were raised? Discuss.



## DEAR READER,

To be perfectly honest, I never intended to write a novel. And I was completely unaware in the summer of 2006 that the origins of *Stone Angels* were taking root when I returned to Seoul, for the first time, since I'd left as a six-year-old child. Now, an MFA candidate in Nonfiction at the University of Pittsburgh, I'd abandoned the practice of pediatrics and was relearning my mother tongue, reconnecting with my Korean family, and writing about my journey back to the culture of my ancestors. *American Seoul*, my memoir, was published two years ago.

In 2006, the confluence of my first hearing about the victims of sexual slavery by Japan during the Asia-Pacific War (1931-1945) along with my deep sorrow over my mother's first suicide attempt and my acute alienation from feeling neither Korean nor American in Seoul drove me to seek refuge in books. On my desk, in my tiny dorm room at Konkuk University, were two of my favorite novels: *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Persuasion* by Jane Austen. Morrison's novel of a girl brutalized by her father and shunned by her community may seem diametrically opposed to Austen's Regency era novel about second chances at love. But these two female authors gave me the courage to write *Stone Angels*.

My novel illuminates a little-known corner of World War II history, but it also contains the stories of women and the intricate relationships between mothers and daughters, sisters and wives. For a long time, I believed I was a doctor too mired in facts to ever write fiction. But I needed fiction to tell the truth about "comfort women" (a misnomer that stuck and used as shorthand for the hundreds of thousands of victims of sexual slavery by Japan. Most were teenagers at the time they were trafficked, and some of them were as young as nine years old.) Only through fiction could I imagine the life of a single victim, her family, her friends, and her community. And at the heart of my novel is a love story—a nod to Jane Austen's *Persuasion*.

I'd never written a love story. In desperation, I turned to Austen. But Angelina Lee, my central character (loosely based on Anne Elliot from *Persuasion*), was acting in unexpected ways—even to me and I'm the author, for god's sake! Angelina wouldn't choose the man I envisioned she'd end up with, the Captain Wentworth from *Persuasion*. Hence, my "Aha!" moment—my novel would feature multiple characters from all six Austen novels. I like to describe my novel as a version of "*Pachinko* meets *Persuasion*" in its themes of migration and identity; a slice of painful history; a precious second chance at love; women trying to navigate the beauty and brutality of their lives. Please join me on an epic journey across oceans and continents as Angelina searches for love and family.

In gratitude,

Helena Rho





# MY MOTHER'S WATCH

One of my favorite chapters in *Stone Angels* is the one I like to call “Gongju at Angelina’s Wedding.” This chapter, told from the character Gongju’s point of view, was almost fun to write because Gongju has a darkly comic way of looking at life. And when her gallows humor is juxtaposed with two terrible conversations with two of her daughters, both comedy and tragedy are heightened. But another reason I love this chapter is because, on Angelina’s wedding day, Gongju gives her an antique watch, the “something old” of the cliché in American culture that every bride should receive. Before my own wedding, my mother gave me an invaluable gift. Angelina’s watch is modeled after it in the novel. My mother bought the watch in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1975. We were on a grand European tour enroute to America, having escaped Uganda, East Africa, and Idi Amin’s military dictatorship. My parents, born in Korea during the Japanese Occupation, admired Swiss engineering and wanted to buy for themselves items that would become family heirlooms. Years later, when my father needed money, he sold his custom Rolex for more than he paid for it. But my mother’s plain, gold-plated cocktail watch that the Rolex company mass produced by the thousands in the 1970s, had depreciated over time and only appraised for about \$200 in 2012 when I was going through an ugly divorce with an uglier ex-husband who insisted the watch was joint property, assuming that a Rolex must be worth thousands. Still, it is a treasure to me because my mother, like Angelina’s grandmother in the novel, wanted her cherished possession to be inherited in a matrilineal line. My mother passed away in 2018. In our last conversation together, she said she hoped that, someday, a great-granddaughter of hers would proudly wear the watch and remember the legacy of the gift. In the meantime, I’m keeping it safe until that day, hoping this priceless reminder of my mother will continue to survive through many more generations of women, each aware of the stories of the mothers and daughters who lived before them.





# LIAM'S BIRTHDAY TOFU WITH SPINACH

(ADAPTED FROM DOK SUNI: RECIPES FROM MY MOTHER'S KOREAN KITCHEN BY JENNY KWAK WITH LIZ FRIED)

I, like my character Gongju, love to cook tofu and this less-than-30-minute recipe is one of my favorite ways to make it. Starting from when he was five or six years old, my son, Liam, consistently asked for this dish on his birthday. Now, at age twenty-four, he still requests this. While I prefer it less fiery, Liam's tolerance for spice has increased, so he wants two teaspoons of gochugaru or Korean red pepper flakes instead of a half teaspoon when he was a child.

## INGREDIENTS:

Yield: 3-4 servings

- 1 tablespoon olive oil or neutral oil
- 1 (14-ounce) block of firm or extra-firm tofu
- ½ clamshell package of baby spinach, about 3 ounces
- 5 tablespoons of soy sauce
- 3 tablespoons of water
- ½ teaspoon of honey or 1 teaspoon of brown sugar
- 2 large garlic cloves crushed, about 2-3 teaspoons
- 3 scallions—minced white parts but thinly sliced green ends—  
about 2 tablespoons
- 1 tablespoon of roasted sesame seeds, crushed in a mortar and pestle
- 1 tablespoon of sesame oil
- 1-2 teaspoons of gochugaru (Korean red pepper flakes), depending on spice tolerance



## STEP 1

Tofu brands vary in their labeling so use whichever tofu is structured but soft and has a little jiggle. If using Pulmuone firm tofu from H-Mart, place tofu block between two plates and then place a weight on top for about 8-10 minutes to gently press out water. If using Nasoya firm tofu or Target's Good & Gather extra-firm tofu, no squeezing needed. Cut tofu into approximately 1 inch by ½ inch by ½ inch pieces—bite size.

## STEP 2

In a small bowl, whisk together soy sauce, water, honey, garlic, red pepper flakes, crushed sesame seeds, and sesame oil into a marinade. Stir in scallions to the mixture at the end.

## TIP

This recipe is forgiving, so tailor it to your taste and play with it. Add more water or use less soy sauce, up the garlic or decrease the scallions. Even add a splash of rice vinegar like I sometimes do.

## STEP 3

Heat the olive oil over medium-high heat in a 12-inch nonstick frying pan and place tofu in a single layer—overlapping pieces will not get any color—cook to a golden brown, about 4-5 minutes. Do not over-sauté. Flip tofu pieces over and cook for another 2-3 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low and pour marinade over the tofu and stir for about 1-2 minutes, coating each piece. Add spinach and fold in. Remove from heat when the spinach is wilted. Add more water if the sauce has become thick or sludgy. Serve tofu and spinach over a bowl of warm white rice, allowing the sauce to seep into the rice.



# THE K-DRAMAS THAT INFLUENCED *STONE ANGELS*

OUR BLUES

FATED TO LOVE YOU

GUARDIAN: THE LONELY AND GREAT GOD

DESCENDANTS OF THE SUN

WHAT'S WRONG WITH SECRETARY KIM

ENCOUNTER

FORECASTING LOVE AND WEATHER

MY LIBERATION NOTES



# HONOR AND SHAME ON A WEDNESDAY IN SEOUL

It is noon, Wednesday, November 15, 2023, in Seoul, and for the first time in my life, I am glad I can't understand Korean. Since leaving Seoul at the age of six, living in Uganda, East Africa, and the United States, I've tried to regain my mother tongue. I've spent so much of my life regretting the physical and cultural distance from the country of my mother, lamenting my inability to communicate like a native speaker. But now, in front of the Somerset Palace Hotel, participating in the weekly Wednesday Demonstration for the Halmoni, *The Grandmothers*, the surviving victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery during the Asian Pacific War (1931-1945), I am relieved I can't understand the vitriolic voices on the other side of the makeshift stage.

Police officers in fluorescent green jackets are everywhere. But only a yellow plastic screen with a butterfly motif blocks the history deniers assembled on the other side, aggressively proclaiming that these girls—euphemistically referred to as “comfort women”—willingly prostituted themselves for the Imperial Japanese Army when Korea was under Japanese Colonial rule. The truth is these girls were lured, coerced, and abducted into sexual slavery by the hundreds of thousands. Who willingly signs up to “service” fifty to seventy men a day? A former soldier described a comfort station as a bleak “assembly line,” one he found revolting. And this is from a soldier's perspective. Not the girls and young women who were verbally and physically abused and raped on a daily basis.

I am in Seoul to fact check my novel, to ensure I've gotten the historical details right. Just two days prior, in a series of meetings with activists and scholars at a research institute, I struggled to understand the Korean flying around me. The vocabulary was difficult to follow—terms like *official apology* and *reparations for the victims of Japanese military sexual slavery* and *erasure by history* and *International Court of Justice*. An activist who was also an interpreter had to turn away from the collective conversation multiple times to explain the intricacies of what was being discussed. I felt ashamed, and my sorrow manifested as a migraine that refused to dissipate for days.



At this Wednesday Demonstration, I watch Lee Yong-Soo Halmoni shiver as a cold breeze ruffles the decorative collar of her black coat. She seems to shrink, fold into herself, as if that action will protect her from the chill and the venom of the history deniers. I wonder how often she was forced to shrink into herself as a girl, referred to as a *public toilet* by Japanese soldiers, who'd line up outside of comfort stations because they assumed that sex, even with unwilling victims, was as necessary as using a latrine. Even now, decades later, the Japanese government won't take legal responsibility for the violations of human rights it committed against her and offer reparations. Despite this, Lee Yong-Soo refuses to give up, continues to prod the South Korean government to petition the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to finally resolve this matter.

As the last speaker of the Demonstration, Halmoni takes the microphone and stands tall on the stage. Her presence is commanding, like when she confronted the Korean First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2015. A seriously flawed agreement had been reached between the Park Geun-hye government and Japan. In exchange for about eight million dollars, in donations, not reparations, Japan would not be held accountable for war crimes against the victims, and the "comfort women" issue would be "finally and irreversibly" resolved. Also, the South Korean government would agree not to bring Japan's war crimes to the United Nations or the International Court of Justice. This agreement was engineered by the US, which wanted to dispose of a political headache. The Halmoni opposed it. They hadn't been consulted in any stage of the negotiations, only informed the night before the press conference that it was "a done deal." The Halmoni refused to accept the agreement—they didn't want the money. They wanted Japan to admit to its war crimes and offer a sincere government apology. The 2015 agreement was effectively nullified by the Moon Jae-in government in 2018.

Now, Lee Yong-soo won't let the history denialists drown her out, even though they call her degrading names, even though they scream that she should be *ashamed* of herself, attacking her honor when they are the ones who should feel shame. Instead, Halmoni asks for justice, for the Japanese government to be held accountable for its "crimes against humanity," as the Special Rapporteur said in her Report to the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1996. The revisionists shout on megaphones, accuse Lee Yong-Soo of lying, of fabricating her story, an eerie echo of what many Japanese politicians have been saying ever since Kim Hak-soon publicly came forward as a victim in 1991.

In 1993, Yohei Kono, then Chief Cabinet Secretary—the equivalent of the White House Press Secretary—stated that the "comfort women system" included "the involvement of the military authorities of the day." His acknowledgment was rendered tepid by his caveat that these crimes were mainly committed by private agents. But the Japanese government wasn't just "involved"—it actively orchestrated and



institutionalized the entire system. To date, however, his words are the closest version of official atonement. But Japan has backpedaled on his “quasi apology” ever since. In 2012, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe went so far as to publicly assert that his honor and that of his grandchildren has been tainted by the survivors, but instead of admitting to Imperial Japan’s war crimes as a way to regain said honor, his response was to discredit the women by insisting there’s no evidence the victims were forcibly taken and used as sex slaves (numerous victims’ testimonies exist and approximately 2,000 official documents remain about the “comfort women” system).

Mindy Kotler, Director of Asia Policy Point, has astutely pointed out why the international community should be paying more attention: Japan’s military sexual slavery before and during WWII set “the modern precedent for all the issues of sexual slavery, sexual violence against women, [and] human trafficking” that persists today—what happened in Bosnia, Rwanda, Nicaragua, and continues in the Ukraine, in Israel, in Gaza. With its continual denial, Japan is undermining international law, and making it more difficult to prosecute criminals who use rape as a weapon of war.

Instead of more platitudes or personal apologies from its prime ministers, Japan needs to issue an official government apology. Because those very men have discredited their own words by making pilgrimages to the Yasukuni Shrine, where fourteen “Class A” war criminals from the Tokyo Trials of WWII have been elevated to “god” status (Shinzo Abe’s grandfather was imprisoned as a war criminal but never tried because the US decided it wanted to work with a war criminal over a “communist” post WWII). In 1995, Japan politically maneuvered behind its citizens by establishing the Asian Women’s Fund as “atonement money” to the victims. It explicitly stated that the Fund was derived from private donations because it wanted to avoid legal governmental responsibility, but most of the money was secretly funneled from the Japanese government. In its ten-year duration, the Fund offered victims “charity,” not reparations. An important distinction.

Most history textbooks in Japan don’t mention “comfort women,” and a Japanese college student I met told me she’d never learned about them in school. Once all the victims have passed away, who will the Japan government apologize to? Some politicians are even counting on this: members of the Japanese Democratic Liberal Party (equivalent to a “right-wing” party in the US) advocate a “biological solution to the Comfort Women problem,” meaning that once these women die, the “problem” will go away. But then, how will Japan restore its honor lost during that dark period of Imperialism?

When Lee Yong-soo was a young girl in Daegu, she entertained her younger twin brothers by hoisting and jostling them on her back. Instead of doing her family’s laundry by the riverbank, she sometimes ate



persimmons in an orchard with her friends and sang songs to the music of a boy's harmonica. Whenever she goes to a noraebang, singing room, she performs at least five songs. A particular favorite is "A Woman's Life" by the artist, Lee Mi-ja.

Halmoni is almost 95 years old now and her chance of getting justice in her lifetime is blowing away like the blustery wind swaying the trees in front of the Somerset Palace Hotel, the former site of the Japanese Embassy. There's a theory that the Embassy hasn't returned to this site because of the "Statue of Peace," which was erected here in 2011. A seated young girl in hanbok, her hair shorn short and in bare feet, with a bird on her shoulder, is a memorial to honor those victims who have passed and those who remain—a bronze angel, as resolute as stone.

Why is a statue of a girl controversial? It shouldn't be. Yet the Japanese Government has opposed the girl statue in several cities in South Korea, the US, the Netherlands, China, Germany, Canada, and Australia, even supporting a lawsuit brought against the City of Glendale, California, insisting its presence "disrupts" US foreign policy. It is a farfetched claim, and the US Supreme Court has declined to hear their argument. Japan seems insulted that a girl dares to rebuke its denial of history.

*"I wish time would wait for me, but I know it won't."* Lee Yong-Soo is the last Korean survivor who is not affected by dementia or disease. She is articulate and eloquent, and I am struck by how fragile she appears and yet how dignified she is. I restrain my tears as I tell her how much I admire her. Unfortunately, that is the extent of my Korean, given my emotional state. Halmoni is gracious and kind, agreeing to take a picture with me, already smiling for the coming photograph. I want to tell her how sorry I am that the United States knew about the atrocity of "comfort women" and stayed silent and now won't help her bring this issue to the ICJ—a last resort to attain justice. Because the US, the country of my citizenship and where I've lived for decades, has chosen to place Japan as an ally above what is right and what Halmoni deserves.

As I shake her hand and tilt my head for our photo, I also want to tell her how remorseful I am that she's had to witness the passing of her contemporaries, her fellow survivors, her friends. I wish I could commend her for her work in women's rights and tell her that her ongoing efforts are not in vain. That someday the Government of Japan will issue an official apology. That the international community will acknowledge her personhood and restore her dignity. Gil Won-ok, another Halmoni, said that if she were to be born again, she would still choose to be a girl. I wonder if Lee Yong-soo would choose the same. But next time, she could live a life without horror. Next time, she could live a life as the precious daughter of an independent nation, marry into a good family, and have beautiful children. Would never have to utter the words, *"It is too unjust."*