

Between Heaven and Earth Book: One - The Cost of Freedom - Chapter Nine - Just a Taste

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The three days that she spent in the local lock up were almost like a vacation in a spa for Jeong Sook. After the twenty minute ride cuffed in the back of the patrol car they arrived at a modern appearing building in a part of the market town she had never seen before. She was to later find out it was the municipal building that housed the city hall, courts, police station, and jail for the surrounding counties. At the rear of the building she was gently extracted from the rear of the car and taken by elevator to the sixth floor that held the police offices and the jail. It was only the second time in her life that Jeong Sook had ever been on an elevator and she couldn't help but marvel. At the booking desk her handcuffs were removed and she was given a chair.

"So, this is the People's Republic of China and we need to know where you are from." The senior officer started out using Mandarin Chinese but switched to a passable Korean once it was apparent that Jeong Sook didn't understand much of the

official language.

"I'm from North Korea and I've lost my way," she replied hesitantly.

She had no idea how much she should tell them and was sure she was in serious trouble.

"Let's have your name to start with," the middle-aged officer asked her not unkindly.

"My name is Kim Jeong Sook of the Andong Kims," she said, holding her head up.

The junior officer was taking everything down on an official looking form. He conferred with his senior twice and it seemed to Jeong Sook he was asking what an Andong was.

"And how old are you?" was next.

Jeong Sook had been lying about this crucial piece of information but quickly decide to come clean.

"My Korean age is thirty eight or maybe thirty six by your reckoning."

The boss told his clerk to write down thirty six.

"When did you enter China and where?"

The questions were getting more difficult. Jeong Sook tried to think fast but after almost three days without food, sleep, and aching from her injuries she couldn't figure out what she ought to give up.

"I crossed over this past winter but I'm not sure exactly when. We crossed a river and were taken by truck somewhere that I don't know."

The two policemen talked for a while and decided that the rest of the story could be obtained later.

"Are you hungry? Do you need to see a doctor?"

Yes and yes she answered.

The senior officer asked her to sit on a bench near the door and the clerk cuffed her ankle to a ring on the floor.

"Please wait a bit. I've summoned a female officer that will come to see to your needs." He turned and left without another word.

Jeon Sook sat and waited. Without realizing it she must have dozed off. She was awoken by the kind hand of a young woman in a police uniform. The clerk unlocked the ankle cuff and the police woman indicated

that Jeong Sook should follow her. Behind the counter and down the hall where there were several doors, the woman stopped, unlocked one, and told Jeong Sook to have a seat. It was what might be called a lunchroom with a dozen tables with chairs. On one wall were cabinets and a counter with a microwave oven.

"You must be starved. Try and eat something." The officer produced several small loaves of bread and a carton of milk.

Jeong Sook tried to keep her dignity but she was ravenous. The police woman sat across from her and watched her consume the bread and milk.

"That's all for now but the morning meal will be served in three hours. Don't worry. You'll get enough to eat while you are with us. Next we need to get you a shower."

Behind another of the doors was a shower room with benches and three shower heads. The officer asked her to undress and stood by with soap, shampoo, and a towel. As she undressed she couldn't help but wince at the pain and stiffness. The police woman winced herself.

"What happened to you? You look like you've had a real hard time. We need to get you taken care off. There is a nurse on the way to see to you and the doctor will come tomorrow. Now wash as well as you can and I'll give you some clean clothes."

The water was cold at first but after a while it ran warmer and warmer. Standing under the warm water her body began to loosen up. A feeling of relative wellbeing came over her and she was able to push aside fear and to begin to heal.

The nurse arrived an hour later as Jeong Sook now dressed was sitting in a holding cell under the watchful eye of the woman officer. She spoke almost no Korean but with the help of the officer the medic was able to examine Jeong Sook and treat most of her array of cuts, scrapes, and bruises. She was mostly concerned with the real possibility of infection and gave specific instructions for keeping open wounds clean and dressed. The doctor would decide if he thought the shoulder should be x-rayed. It was more care and concern than Jeong Sook had received since she had left Pyongyang. She couldn't help but feel a deep gratitude to the two women whose care she was in. When she tried to thank them they let her know that it was their job and nothing more. She had no reason to expect anything but more cruelty at the hands of the police. She felt relieved. She knew that she had to get out of China but she wasn't ready to make a new plan. She desperately needed time to heal and sleep

She spent the rest of that night and the next day in a large cell with eight sets of bunk beds. Her roommates were a mother and three small children, the oldest was seven and the other two were twin toddlers. After an evening meal of corn porridge and some vegetables, Jeong Sook curled up on a lower bunk and fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, Jeong Sook woke up, stretched, surveyed her surroundings, and her condition. She was warm, well rested, and if she didn't move around too much her various aches and pains were easy to ignore. For the first time in nine months she felt safe and at ease. As soon as the thoughts of the past three days and the past nine months intruded, she pushed them out deciding they could wait. Although breakfast, served off a cart rolled into the cell, was the same monotonous fare, it was warm and filling. She shared it with the small family who were her neighbors and enjoyed interacting with the kids.

After the meal she was summoned to a meeting with Chief Inspector Liu. He asked the same questions and this time pressed her on the source of the \$180 dollars they had found when they searched her. She told them she had brought it from North Korea when she crossed over. At the end of the hour long interview Liu asked about her condition and if she had seen the doctor.

She had and the doctor returned shortly after lunch. He seemed to be pleased with her progress. He manipulated her shoulder and enquired about the level of pain. Again he gave detailed instructions to the nurse about changing dressings and keeping everything clean.

Except for a shower and the evening meal, she spent the rest of the day sleeping. Her third day began much the same as the previous day. This time, at the end of another interview with the Chief Inspector, she was asked to sign a three page document. Of course it was all in Chinese which she couldn't read. When she enquired what it was she was assured it was only what she had told them already. Lured into a kind of complacency by her relatively comfortable circumstances she signed it.

When she was returned to her cell she immediately regretted it. Her anxious worry quickly returned and now she was no longer able to ignore it. Now well rested and on the mend she couldn't help but think about her future. She knew there was a pretty good chance that the police would return her across the river. Hadn't she been told this many times. She wondered if the consequences of being returned would be better or worse than her troubles in this foreign land.

After dinner she was once again taken out and escorted to the visiting room. To her astonishment she

found the egg lady sitting at a table waiting for her.

"Oh, Big Sister, how did you find me?"

She rushed to the older woman and threw her arms around her.

"Stop! No touching. Sit in this chair and only talking," the uniformed policeman said.

He was sitting at another table and it was clear he was there to monitor the visit and make sure the rules were observed.

"You have ten minutes," he told them in Mandarin Chinese.

"I heard right away that you had been arrested and were being held here. This is the first time that you have been allowed a visit." She gave Jeong Sook a reserved smile and said nodding towards the officer, "let's be real careful, only speak Korean and don't touch me. I have some important things to tell you. How are you? Didn't I tell you not to run away?"

"Thank you for coming. I don't know what to do. I need your help. I had no choice but to get away from there but now I'm in worse trouble. You will help me, won't you?"

"That's why I'm here. Now you need to listen to me very carefully. You've been very lucky. You were picked up over the three day Harvest Moon Festival. Although it's not an official holiday in the People's Republic, most folks around here including government officials take time off. You were grabbed by the local police and at any other time they would be obliged to turn you over to the border police. They would have immediately deported you. The locals instead held on to you. They can still turn you over to the federals but they also have other options.

"What other options?"

"They can basically do whatever they want with you. They could send you back right now. They could turn you over to the prosecutor and have you charged with something or other," the egg lady clued her in.

"Charged with what?" In her naivety she was incredulous.

"Charged with what? You are an illegal here. They could charge you for any number of things including robbery. The Jangs say you stole from them."

"Are you serious? I was practically a slave in that house. Can they really charge me with robbing them?"

"Well it doesn't look like the cops want to believe them. That 180 bucks is going to save you. If the locals buy their story they will have to give the money back to the Jang family. That many dollars is not an insufficient sum in these parts. Liu is going to keep it if he can."

"How can he? Is he a thief?"

"Well here's the deal. He has assured me that he has the power to turn you loose. If you pay a fine and promise to go back across the border and never return again, he will release you."

"How much is the fine?"

"You have to ask? Of course it is 180 dollars. Don't look shocked. It's the cost of freedom."

For Jeong Sook, what was truly shocking was not the blatant corruption but it was the same phrase that the two girls had been told after they were raped on their journey to the river. Will this nightmare ever end she thought to herself.

"Anyway there's really no choice. It is the only thing you can do at this point. If you agree you can be out of here tonight. What do you say?" Clearly the older woman was using her most persuasive voice.

"Of course there is no choice, there never is. I'll go along with it."

"That's a good girl."