

## Between Heaven and Earth - Book One - The Cost of Freedom; Chapter One - The Crossing

Michael Downey  
August 16, 2020



### Book One - The Cost of Freedom Chapter One - The Crossing

Far to the north, Kim Jeong Sook lay in a stand of cattails with two other women waiting for the broker. A hundred meters upstream they could just make out a bridge that spanned the river. It was an international crossing linking North Korea with the northeast provinces of the People's Republic of China. Unbeknownst to the three refugees, during daylight hours a great deal of commerce, both legal and illegal, passed over its spans. Now it was dark except for the dim lights of the guard huts at either end. Their route tonight would not take them across the bridge

It was mid-January and bitter cold. The river was frozen solid and would be ideal for the crossing or so they were told. The moon that had shone brightly only an hour ago was now obscured by a thick cloud cover. The darkness was a prerequisite for the night's business. They waited and shivered, as much as from fear as from the sub zero

temperatures.

Jeong Sook was thirty-eight years old by Korean reckoning and was the oldest of the three. The others seemed to be in their late teens. They had only met three hours ago at the trapper's hut where they had waited for the darkest part of the night.

They had each paid a middle man all the hard currency that they could beg, borrow, or steal. In Jeong Sook's case she had forked over \$1500 in the precious and rare American greenback. It had come from a previously secret stash her father had somehow accumulated. The last time she saw him before he disappeared into the camps he had urged her to go to his older brother who had something for her. The original amount had been a small fortune, more than \$3000 in hundred dollar bills. She was sure that it would be enough.

On her journey she had encountered an unending line of people with their hands out. Being from a privileged family that had resided in Pyongyang, she had no inkling of the black market economy that dominated life in the districts outside of the capital. In the two weeks it had taken her to get from the city to the river bank where she now huddled, she had learned that all things needed to maintain life and to get where you wanted to go were readily available for a price. Prices, as she had discovered, were not fixed but fluctuate day to day and even hour by hour. As in any market economy, supply and demand was a key principle. More important was 'what the traffic might bear' and how desperately something is it needed.

The movers and shakers in the black market were the women. The men were all occupied in assigned jobs where they practiced the age old socialist principle of 'they pretend to pay us and we pretend to work'. On the other hand the women were agricultural workers and housewives. Since the latest famine a decade ago the burden of the survival of their family members had fallen on them. They had unaccountable for time and used it to scrape together the odd sweet potato and traded it to a neighbor for an extra cup of barley. Out of the desperate need to survive, some became lucky and good at it. As surpluses began to accumulate bribes in the form of favors and goods started to expand the economy. For the bold, cross border deals, where there was hard cold cash, took the economy to a new level. Of course some were caught and sent off to the camps or just shot.

On her journey north Jeong Sook dealt exclusively with tough looking and talking women. Although she was dressed in the poorest of country style winter garments, her refined face, hands, and language gave her away as a daughter of the city dwelling elite. In all transactions she was judged to be able and deserving to pay top dollar. Every step of the way she was gouged and became increasingly worried that her diminishing resources would see her through to the end.

There was a sort of underground railway of guides, safe houses, and thieves that may or may not get her

to her desired destination. There was no guide book or trusted friend to help her once she left Pyongyang. At each step of the way she was pressed to hand over funds for a safe place to rest, some rough food, and transportation to the next stop.

Now after fourteen days Jeong Sook was cold, hungry, unwashed, and scared. Their common plight had thrown the three women together and they hung on to each other for comfort and a little warmth. They had been led to this spot by an old woman and had been told not to move or talk if they wanted to see the sunrise. The guy that would take them across the border was their only hope for salvation.

Jeong Sook had given the last of her dollars to the middle aged woman who had deposited them at the trapper's cabin the previous evening. There had been an argument over the final payment.

"Sorry ma'am that is all that is left." Jeong Sook sincerely informed the guide.

"Sorry ain't gonna get it. You agreed to pay the full amount. I've got a lot of others who need to be paid. I'll just leave you here for the wolves."

"What can I do. Please help me. I'll do anything," she pleaded.

"Charity wasn't a part of this deal. Open your coat and bag. Let me see what you are hiding." The woman roughly searched Jeong Sook going as far as inserting a finger into her vagina and then her anus.

By this time Jeong Sook was crying and shaking but could only submit to the coarse outrage.

"You smell bad. If that's all you got then I'll tell the broker. If he agrees I'll be back after dark." She spit on the dirt floor and slammed the plank door as she left.

The two younger girls were cowered together in a corner crying. Although Jeong Sook didn't know it, they had both been raped at a previous stop. They were told it was a part of the cost of their freedom. Jeong Sook could see the terror in their eyes.

"So sorry older sister," cried Hyo Jin.

"We can't go back," Myung Oke said through her tears.

"She'll be back," Jeong Sook said as she embraced them both.

Both Hyo Jin and Myung Oke were quite obviously from poor rural areas. They both spoke with might be called a cornpone accent. Their hands and faces also betrayed them as being from the deep countryside.

In the next two hours Jeong Sook held the girls and listened to their stories. Myung Oke was from a far western province that was known as the origin for the coal that had once driven the nation's industry; that is before they had run out of food. In fact Myung Oke's grandfather had labored in the coal mines all his life until he died in a cave-in. He had been captured in the south during the 1950-53 war of liberation and taken north to do hard labor. He and his family had been coal miners ever since. Myung Oke had begun life in the mines at age fifteen and it would have been a life sentence if her mother hadn't gathered enough money in her black marketing and sent her only daughter to find a new life across the border.

Hyo Jin's case was not much different. Her family was also part of the politically unreliable class. When the great hunger came her family had nothing and only the daily struggle of her mother to find food kept them alive. When Hyo Jin was twelve, her mother died of overwork, exhaustion, and some lung disease. There was no medicine and no money to buy it even if there was any available. Two years later Hyo Jin's father had remarried. Her new mother made alcohol with black market grains and hand carried water to sell and was able to put together the fortune needed to get Hyo Jin out.

The broker did return and led the three refugees to the spot where they would meet the guide who would take them the last three hundred yards to freedom. As they waited in silence Jeong Sook heard the chattering of teeth and wondered whose they were.

The guide, smuggler, human trafficker, or broker arrived suddenly out of the blue. He was tall for a Korean, was dressed in padded winter clothing, and wore a fur cap with a faded red star. On his feet was a pair of muddy snow-packs.

He immediately grabbed Hyo Jin by the hair and hissed, "shut up cunt and get ready to move. The rest of you pick up your trash and be ready."

He squatted down, scratched his head and looked at the luminous dial on his watch. When he figured the time was right he stood up.

"When I go you follow me in single file. Keep up because I won't wait or go back for you. Keep your mouths shut. Let's go!" He instructed his cargo.

He stepped into the darkness and the three women struggled to their feet and started after him. It was absolutely dark and disorienting. The six yards to the river lead across a small rock strewn beach and each rock became a stumbling block for one or other of the women. The broker was squatting on the ice when they reached him. He motioned them down and again grabbed Jeong Sook by the hair and pulled her down. They waited and the broker squinted towards the bridge. Jeong Sook followed his gaze and caught a brief flare of what might have been a cigarette lighter from the near side.

Instantly they were up and moving out onto the ice. Now the footing was more treacherous than the rocky beach. The constant moving, thawing, and freezing of the ice pack had pushed ice chunks big and small up, creating a slippery and uneven surface. The sure footed guide seemed to know all the places to put a foot and glide forward. The women slipped, tripped, and fell again and again.

Jeong Sook's heart was buoyed with her first sight of the river and the far bank. It was her goal, her dream, and her heart's desire; freedom. It was in sight, only about 300 yards away.

Once on the ice, those 300 yards were a lifetime and as good as a world away. The struggle to keep the broker in site and negotiate the ice quickly became a losing game. Each time she fell she struggled to her feet and looked behind her for the two younger women. They were falling behind. Once she went back to drag Hyo Jin to her feet. Once the broker came back to kick Myung Oke and then Jeong Sook for good measure.

As she struggled to continue forward Jeong Sook reached her limit. On her knees and trying to rise she began to hallucinate. Voices came to her from strangers she knew were not there. The howling of beasts she heard may have been wolves or demons. She was at her end. She finally decided that she had only two choices. Stand up and go on or lay down and die. She made her choice and stood up. Just standing up one more time seemed to take a superhuman effort. Once she had made up her mind, her world changed and she rose from her knees to her frozen feet. It was the defining moment of her life. From then she always referred to it as 'That moment'. She had reached down deep inside and found the grit to go on and live no matter what.

Within thirty yards the faint outline of the opposite bank began to take shape. She was going to make it. Then the shots rang out. The figure of the broker in front of her immediately dropped to the ground and Jeong Sook followed suite. The shriek and moan from behind her sent Jeong Sook scrambling on hands and knees back to the crumbled forms, one on top of the other. In a panic she rolled Myung Oke off the other girl and onto her back. The blood was everywhere. Jeong Sook felt Myung Oke's face, head, and body looking for the wound. Horrified, she found the back of the girl's head gone. Hyo Jin was up and running for the river bank. The broker kicked Jeong Sook in the ribs and yanked her to her feet by the hair.

"She's dead! Run!" He gave her another kick in the ass to send her on her way.

The broker was already on the beach holding Hyo Jin by her collar when Jeong Sook arrived and he grabbed her by the same convenient handle. He pushed, kicked, dragged, and pulled the women up a narrow cut in the six foot high bank. He propelled them into a nearby gully and grasped both by the throat.

"Shut your mouth, not a sound or I'll kill you both" he said in his hoarse whisper. And they obeyed.

As they all caught their breath and began to calm down, he slowly relaxed his grip on the women. Time stood still as they waited but did finally begin to pass again. The broker first listened and then stuck his head out of the gully to look around. Then he crawled out to make sure there was no one nearby.

"Come out here and stay down," he ordered them.

All three were covered with blood and the broker gave the women a cursory examination and learned they were not hit.

It was not until the three were inside a shack almost identical to the one on the other side that Jeong Sook began to believe that she had made it.

"Is this China?" She enquired. The answer was a hard slap and, "shut up bitch. You almost blew it and ended up out there on the ice like that other one!"