

Between Heaven and Earth: Book One - The Cost of Freedom - Chapter Seven - Out of the Frying Pan

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The Harvest Moon Festival fell on the last week of September that year. It was three days of feasting and no work for the Jang family; that is for everyone except Jeong Sook. She still had her chores and in addition had to slave in the kitchen preparing meals, snacks, and washing the dishes. It occurred to her that it was a kind of payback. In Pyongyang at her father's house and her husband's, her only holiday burden was to supervise the hired help. On the first of the three days, the family piled into the truck and headed for the family tombs. Jeong Sook was pleasantly surprised when she was told by Grandma to stay home and prepare the holiday meal. They would be back before dark. At the water hole she met Han Sol who was looking more raggedy than usual.

"Oh Jeong Sook ah, it's been a while. How are you? As for me I'm about to die. We all went into the paddies to harvest the rice this past week. My back is killing me but I still have to carry the water even though it's a holiday. Look what I brought."

She produced a half dozen half-moon rice cakes that were one of the traditional holiday foods. She

unwrapped the handkerchief and spread them on the grass.

"Please help yourself."

"You are so thoughtful older sister, you choose first."

The rice cakes reminded Jeong Sook of the carefree joyous holidays she had known in North Korea and a wave of nostalgia engulfed her. For the first time in a while she felt homesick. How wonderful it would be to be with her parents, relatives, and daughters again. She felt the overwhelming loss of her two daughters. She began to weep, even as she pushed the rice cake into her mouth. Once she had determined to flee North Korea she had walled off her feelings but now the dam had burst.

"What is it Jeong Sook? Why do you weep? It can't be so bad as that. What can I do for you?"

Han Sol put her arms around the crying woman and tried to comfort her. Before long the older woman was weeping also. For a long time they wordlessly held each other and cried and cried. Finally Jeong Sook's tears began to abate. Enough is enough she thought to herself. No good can come from indulging in self pity.

"Ok older sister, let's stop. It's a beautiful day and we have these holiday treats to cheer ourselves up with."

With wet faces they tried to smile as they stuffed rice cakes into their mouths. Their shared tears and sorrow created a wordless connection between them. They felt closer than sisters. It was a moment in time. They sat together silently for a while and watched the stream flow past them.

"Older sister, look at the leaves floating past. See how they twirl and dance for us. They are only in front of us for a short while and then they are swept downstream. How sad and beautiful. I feel like the streams of life are sweeping me away downstream, just like these leaves." The crying jag subsided and was replaced by a deep sadness in Jeong Sook's soul.

"So sad, so sad," repeated Han Sol. "What will become of us? I don't want to be here for next year's festival."

"Me either. We'll get away together. Would you like that?"

"Oh yes. Will you take me away?" Although she was several years older, she was clearly softer and more fragile than Jeong Sook.

"Will you go with me? We have to have a plan. I'm already gathering money and when I have enough I'll get away."

"But I have no money. What can I do?" Han Sol was easily discouraged.

They spent the next two hours conspiring together. There were a lot of 'what ifs and how can we'. Jeong Sook took on the role of the optimist and the 'can do' person encouraging her friend even though she didn't feel so optimistic. She really felt much better to have a partner to share her conspiracy with. Jeong Sook told her about the egg lady and all that she had learned from her. She also revealed her fundraising scheme through stealing and selling eggs from the Jang farm. Although Jeong Sook realized that talking about such incriminating activities to anyone was risky, the appeal of having a co conspirator overrode her misgivings. Swearing themselves to secrecy, they agreed to meet again in three days to firm up their plans.

On the way back Jeong Sook came down off her high and began to worry. She may have revealed too much and the day when she could realistically hope to escape was still more than a year off. The way things were now they could blow up without a moment's notice.

And blow up they did. That evening when the family arrived back at the farm Jeong Sook was feeling a lot better as she served dinner. Grandma said she was exhausted and retired to her room right after dinner. The man of the house was already half drunk and settled down at the table to finish the job. Hyunsang drank with him for a while but excused himself to go out and look around. Jeong Sook quickly finished cleaning up the dinner and also went out to check the hen house to see what she could safely transfer to her hiding place.

Standing in the yard she looked up at the golden full harvest moon. She couldn't help but feel a kind of enchantment at the beauty of the moon. This moon shines for us all without distinction between the master and the servant. As she stared up her heart was again filled with hope and she smiled.

Hyungsang silently came up behind her and put his arms around her.

"How does the great moon make you feel? It makes me feel like a poke with a lusty woman," the boy informed her. "The way the old man is pounding it down tonight it won't be long before he passes out. Then we'll have our chance. Go to your room and wait."

"Don't be so impatient. We still better be careful. Grandma may still be awake."

An hour later Jeong Sook was in her room with her bed clothes spread on the floor and hardening her mind for the night's performance. The room was filled with the soft light of the moon streaming through the small window. The rest of the house was now silent. Then the door slid open and Hyungsang entered. As was his custom, he slung off his coat, pulled off his pants, and flung himself on Jeong Sook. He was ready and without preamble began his assault. Jeong Sook concentrated on keeping the noise to a minimum. He wasn't able to care.

Ten minutes into the onslaught everything went south. Laying on her back Jeong Sook watched as the door was violently thrown open. Her husband's red face seemed to fill the doorway and he entered with a roar.

"What is this! You son of a bitch. What do you think you are doing? I'll kill you both."

In shock, both Hyunsang and Jeong Sook were slow to react. The older man delivered a kick to his son's ribs that rolled him off the woman. He continued kicking, landing several to the head and face of his son. The cuckold attempted to stomp on Jeong Sook's head and belly but got tripped up in the bedclothes and fell to the floor. Given this reprieve Hungsang gained his feet and made it out the door. The old man was up in a flash and went after his progeny.

As fast as possible Jeong Sook arranged her night clothes and stuck her head out the door. Hyungsang, naked with his clothes under his arm, was at the outside door trying to get his feet into his boots. The old man had armed himself with a good sized branch from the woodpile by the stove and caught the boy before he could get the door completely open. Shouting curses that were incomprehensible to Jeong Sook, he delivered blows with the club to Hyungsang's head and shoulders. If he had not been so intoxicated the old man might have seriously injured the kid but the boy was able to make it out the door, leaving behind his foot gear. Dad probably would have pursued him but it was then that Grandma made her entrance.

"What is the meaning of this, I was fast asleep?" she demanded.

"I caught them. The boy was in the woman's room and they were rutting like the boar and his sow," the old man reported incredulously to his mother.

Jeong Sook took the opportunity to close her room door and did her best to barricade it with two twenty kilo bags of newly harvested rice. The voices in the main room became louder and louder and then the two Jangs began to bang on her door and demanded she open it. Jeong Sook was trapped and she was sure that her very life depended on keeping the door closed. Eventually she was able to hold off the two seeking vengeance. She listened to the voices and after awhile she heard the outside door open and slam close. The old lady banged on the door one more time.

"We'll take care of you in the morning you ungrateful bitch," she shouted through the door.

Still in shock and shaking with fear Jeong Sook tried to assess her situation. It was bad. She had gambled and lost. There was no telling what Hyungsang's father or the old lady would do. They may kill her. They may sell her or turn her over to the police to be returned to North Korea. She had to get away. She tried the door but it was locked from the outside. They hadn't locked her in since she had arrived nine months ago. Next she tried the window. It was so small that she could barely get her head through it. Temporarily safe, she was trapped and could think of no way out. Later in the night she heard the outside door open and close. It was her husband returning. He had probably been looking for Hyunsang to kill him or bring him home. He was alone, so the boy was either dead or had gotten away. She was stuck here to face an uncertain fate.

It was after dawn when she finally feel asleep. A couple hours later the banging on the door began again.

"Open the door bitch and come out. We need to talk." It was Grandma.

"I won't. He will kill me," Jeong Sook sobbed.

"I won't kill you, although I should. You are worth money alive and worth nothing to us dead. Come out and we will settle this dirty matter." Her husband tried to sound convincing but Jeong Sook didn't go out.