

Between Heaven and Earth Book: One - The Cost of Freedom - Chapter Eight - In to the Fire

Michael Downey
August 25, 2020



For several hours the two Jangs shouted through the door at Jeong Sook; sometimes threatening her and at other times reassuring her that they would do her no harm but only wanted to resolve the unpleasant matter. Although trapped, she was momentarily safe and she refused to budge. Before noon she heard the outside door slam, the truck start up, and roar away.

For a time there was silence and Jeong Sook thought the old lady had gone off with her son. Then the sounds of food being prepared and eaten dashed her hopes. Grandma was still guarding the gate. After a while she was sure that she heard the door to grandma's room open and close. It was nap time. Jeong Sook tried the door again but it was locked. The only other way out was the small window. Impossible she told herself but this was her only way so she tried again.

The window was high up on the wall but was easy to reach if she dragged and stacked up the five bags of rice that were stored and waiting to be taken to

the market. They were twenty kilo bags and she had to use all of her strength to drag them under the window. By the time she had them stacked, she was sweating through her clothes and out of breath.

She took a few minutes to catch her breath and listen for any sound coming from her jailer. What she heard was grandma's snoring and she pressed forward. Standing on the stacked bags she was able to examine the window. It had no glass but was covered by a shutter that opened upward on two hinges. The wood surrounding the screws was weak from dry rot and with a little effort she was able to work the screws back and forth and up and down until they were loose enough to pull out. Without warning the shutter was free and fell down striking both her head and opening a gash in her right hand. When the shutter hit the ground outside the window it made a noise loud enough to wake the dead but instead raised a clatter and commotion among the chickens that were free ranging in the yard. Jeong Sook froze at the noise and waited to see if it was enough to rouse the old lady. Instead she heard the reassuring snores. Now to somehow get through the small space.

The window may have been twelve inches square. She estimated that with the shutter gone her head would surely fit through but her shoulders and hips were gonna be a challenge. The first attempt ended in failure when she got stuck with her head and one arm outside the window. It took a lot of squirming and scraping to get free. The frustration brought her to tears of despair. She had to try again. She had already gathered the things she had decided she had to take, including the roll of dollars, and stuffed them into the bag she used. She stood on the rice bags and pushed her travel bag out and watched it land on the ground. Next she stripped off all of her clothes, tied them in a bundle and threw them out the window. Finally she tossed the extra pair of ragged sneakers she had kept as spares out into the yard. Now she was all in.

Naked, she had a couple extra millimeters of clearance but she had no protection from the rough window casing and her bare skin paid the price. With her head and one arm out the window she wiggled and

squirmed to get the other arm out. In the process her right side was scraped and bloodied. That was the easy part. The hips were next. Hanging with her upper body out the window and her lower body still inside she was at her most vulnerable. As she pulled with her arms, elbows, and pushed with her feet she slowly worked her hips into the opening. She thought that with a little grease it would be easier. It was when she was in this mid-way predicament that she first heard and then saw the truck returning.

The adrenaline unleashed a sudden burst of energy and with no more concern for her skin, Jeong Sook popped her butt through the window, fell forward and down, and landed on her right shoulder and upper back on the pounded earth floor of the courtyard. She was up in a flash, gathered her scattered stuff, and scampered around the corner of the house and out of site of the fast approaching truck. Barefoot and naked, she ran through the opening in the back hedge. Six yards further was the drainage ditch that ran between the house and the fields. Once in the ditch Jeong Sook stooped to pull on the sneakers, headed toward the stream, and never looked back.

The drainage ditch emptied into the stream a dozen yards downstream from where she filled the water bottles. Under the bridge another twenty yards upstream where the road crossed the waterway, she stopped again to pull on her clothes. Her back, shins, knees and side were all scraped up and bleeding. Her shoulder and back felt like they might be broken but the adrenaline was still flowing and she had no time to bind her wounds or feel sorry for herself. Her gut told her she had to keep moving. With the return of the truck her escape would be quickly discovered and the alarm raised. She had to get as far as possible away from the neighborhood.

Jeong Sook had been to town at least six times and the way was straight down the dirt road until it ran into a paved road. The two-lane asphalt road ran straight into the market town. She knew the way but before she had always been in the truck. She was at a loss as to how long it might take on foot. In addition the road was well traveled during daylight hours and surely the Jangs, other neighbors, and even the Chinese police would be on the lookout for her. She decided that she would have to hole up until dark before trying to get into town.

It was dark and much cooler under the bridge than under the early autumn sun and Jeong Sook figured it would be the best place to lay low till dusk. It was past noon and in late September she would have seven or more hours to hide. The bridge was made of brick and spanned the stream creating a vault of sorts about eight feet high. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom she searched for a nest. Up above was the narrow space where the road bed met the steep bank. She climbed the bank and squeezed herself into the tightest spot and settled down for a long wait. As she waited she listened. Several times she heard the engines of vehicles approach the bridge and cross over. The sound of the tires on the bed were amplified by the structure and roared in her ears. Sleep wasn't going to be possible. As the time passed, her various scrapes, cuts, and bruises began to sting and ache.

She passed the time in the only way that she could. She watched the stream flow under the bridge. The water was only five yards across and the bed was strewn with granite rocks, some only the size of pumpkins and others as big as a cow. The flow of the stream was constricted by the rocks and flowed past more rapidly than further downstream where she had usually gone for water. The sound of the water rushing around, over, and past the rocks created a pleasant gurgling and bubbling. Beneath the largest of the rocks a pool was created and the leaves arriving there whirled around for a bit before they were released to continue their journey. Along the nearside of the stream was a muddy looking beach that she thought she could leap in a single bound. On the far side the bank rose immediately from the water's edge. On her side the bank was entirely bare and sandy. The far bank was covered with knee high grass. She couldn't help but wonder why.

For a while she watched a family of small rodents roam around gathering materials and dragging them back to the small crevice where she assumed their nest was. Dark brown in color with pointed noses and bright eyes, they were smaller than the rats that inhabited the barn back at the Jang's farm but they had the same long tails. Country cousins she surmised. Although they were diligent at their task, there were also

exceedingly nervous and scattered at the first sound of tires hitting the road bed above. Once the vehicle noise receded in the distance, they returned to their work.

Jeong Sook's other neighbors were far less pleasant to spend time with. Within minutes of her arrival and settling down she was swarmed by mosquitoes. They relentlessly attacked any exposed skin including face, ears, neck and ankles. Over time they became emboldened by their sheer numerical superiority which led to their becoming gorged with blood and unable to avoid Jeong Sook's slaps. Although smeared with her own blood she felt a certain natural balance had been achieved. The nats seemed to arrive in clouds. Nose, mouth, eyes, in fact any moist place on her head and body had to be defended. Most of her cuts and scrapes had begun to scab over but the edges still had to be continually cleared of the 'no-see-ems'.

As the man made cavern warmed up in the afternoon sun the slight smell of decay became, at first noticeable, and then impossible to ignore. She never was able to pinpoint the origin or whether it's source was plant, animal or mineral. After a while she was forced to hold her nose.

Late in the afternoon she heard a vehicle stop above and doors open. Next there were voices and the sound of someone scrambling down the embankment. She froze and tried to curl into a ball that would be mistaken for a bundle of clothes if seen. Afraid to look but even more afraid not to look she raised her head for a look see. It was her husband and a man in the uniform of the local constabulary. They were looking around at both banks and the cop was shining a powerful search light into all the dark corners above. They exchanged comments in the dialect that Jeong Sook didn't understand. The cop shrugged his shoulders and said what might have been "not here, let's go." Then Jeong Sook let out her breath as she listened to them make their assent. When the car drove off she cried a little in sheer relief.

After the unexpected visit the passage of time was agony. She had no way to know the time but she watched the light fade and willed it to disappear. A couple of times she got up to go but forced herself to sit back down. Finally it was completely dark. She carefully slid down the bank and waited again. It might have been eight in the evening when she jumped the beach and worked her way across the stream on the larger rocks. Then she climbed the opposite bank and sank down again to watch and listen. The way was in front of her and her instinct was to sprint down the road but she resisted. It was still only evening and there was sure to be some random traffic on the road to town. On the right side of the road was another ditch that, while not giving her complete concealment, was enough to give her some cover as she walked bent at the waist. At the first sight of headlights or voices her plan was to throw herself flat and wait for whoever it was to pass. It was a good plan except that the ditch in many places was overgrown with brambles and she was forced to travel along the road side for various distances.

Having no idea about how long it should take her to get to the town Jeong Sook keep moving. She hadn't eaten anything in more than two days and felt weak and light headed but she didn't dare stop to forage for food. More than a couple times she had to fling herself into the bottom of the ditch to be out of sight of headlights passing up or down the road. Once she encountered a small pack of dogs that were out for the evening. They growled at her but as they gathered their resolve to rush her, she picked up three stones and threw them at the pack in quick succession. One yelped and they all turned and ran. She was hungry enough to have thought their meat might taste good but they were gone.

Throughout the night the mosquitoes continued to plague her. After a while she stopped bothering to slap them. As the sky began to grow light on the far horizon she knew that dawn was near. In an instant the night turned to full bright daylight. It was a truck on the side of the road that had turned on its head lights blinding her and driving her with a hop, skip, and a jump into the bramble filled ditch. In less than a moment there were three men in uniforms with flashlights on the lip of the ditch demanding in Mandarin that she come out with her hands up. Not ready to give up, Jeong Sook expended the last of her energy to scramble up out of the ditch and run but it was not to be. The three officers were on her before she could take three steps. They brought her down and cuffed her hands behind her back. Her luck had run out.