

Between Heaven and Earth Book: One - The Cost of Freedom - Chapter Ten - Mysterious Ways

Michael Downey
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Once Jeong Sook had agreed, it all went down surprisingly quickly. The egg lady nodded to the guard and he stood up. Jeong Sook had to wonder how much Korean he understood and what the egg lady's end was in this. He led the egg lady out the door and she turned to Jeong Sook and said,

"Wait, I'll be right back."

When she did return, Liu and a clerk toting a file folder were with her. There were about six documents, all in Chinese, to be signed.

"Don't worry. It's necessary," the older woman smiled and encouraged her. Jeong Sook signed and the Chief looked at each one and handed them to his clerk.

"You are to leave the People's Republic immediately by whatever means necessary. You are not to return and if you do you will be arrested, charged, convicted, and will serve a prison sentence. Then you will be deported." the Chief instructed her in Korean. "Do you understand?" He waited for her answer.

"Yes, I understand," she replied.

No mention was made of the dollars but it also was understood. The Chief Inspector stood up and his clerk gathered the file. Liu smiled warmly, said good luck, and headed for the door. The guard escorted Jeong Sook and waited for her as she changed into the ragged clothes she had arrived in, and collected the toothbrush and a few toiletries she had been given. She did take a moment to bid farewell and good luck to the mother and children she had shared meals with. Then the guard led her directly to the front door and put her on the elevator to the ground floor. At the rear door of the building the egg lady was waiting for her.

"Let's go princess," was all she said and then led the way to the front of the building where they flagged down a cab.

Twenty minutes later they were at the basement apartment where the egg lady lived. The one room contained a bed, a free standing closet, a two burner hot plate, and a small refrigerator. There was also an electric fan. The door off to the left led to a tiny bathroom. Both ladies used the toilet and then Jeong Sook sat on the floor. The egg lady busied herself opening the one window and turning on the fan. The room was warm and smelled of normal human habitation. Next the hostess peered into the fridge and came out with three rolls of kimbap. She put them in the microwave to warm up and put water on the hot plate to heat for ramen. With kimchi it was a feast for Jeong Sook who hadn't eaten much more than corn gruel in days. After they had both eaten their fill of the comfort food the talking began.

For the first hour Jeong Sook related her story of disaster and escape from the farm.

After a series of questions concerning the details of the great escape, the egg lady repeated her mantra.

"You should have waited. Now you are in a worse situation."

Jeong Sook bit her lip and said nothing. She wanted to explain again so her friend would understand but she thought there was no point.

"What can I do now?" She asked the egg lady. "I promised the police I would leave China as soon as possible. I don't want to go back."

"Listen carefully. You promised to leave China, not to go back to North Korea. The world is full of

countries you can go to. How much money do you have?" The older woman was a realist and got right to the heart of the matter.

"Older sister, you know I have no money. You know I had to turn over all my money to the police."

"Are you sure that's all you had?" The egg lady wanted to be clear on this point.

"Yes, of course," Jeong Sook had to say.

"Well, this is your first problem. You can't do anything without money. You have to earn enough money to pay the brokers to get you to another country."

"How can I earn money here. I'll work hard." Jeong Sook was desperate and surely she could work if she had a job. She was scared to death of the very word broker but what could she do?

"There are plenty of ways for a woman to earn money. It all depends what you are willing to do. How badly do you want to escape?" It was time that this princess learned the facts of life and it had fallen on the egg lady to explain them.

"Please help me, older sister. What do I have to do?"

"You have to know that there is a whole economy based on women in these parts. There are all kinds of jobs as long as you are able to perform. There are coffee shops, nightclubs, singing rooms, massage parlors, chat rooms, and straight up whore houses. The work is degrading but under the right circumstances you can put together a nest egg and make your escape. Most women just make up their minds, close their eyes, and do what has to be done."

Jeong Sook was sick to her stomach. She had imagined working in a grocery store, a restaurant, or shop. She rejected the flesh trade and other kinds of human trafficking. She thought of Hyo Jin and Han Sul that she had made promises to.

"There has to be another way. Is it not possible to get a factory job or work in a restaurant?"

"You are an undocumented economic migrant. The kind of job you could get would be at almost slave wages. Whatever you save above your living expenses somebody will scheme to get it away from you. You'll end up selling yourself in the end anyway. You might as well make up your mind at the start to do what you have to do to get out of China as soon as possible."

"I can't do that. There has to be another way."

The egg lady was sure and she sadly shook her head. Of course the princess would reject her advice but she would sell herself in the end.

"Ok princess, I'll put you on the bus in the morning for Harbin. It's a big city and you can try it your way. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Can't I stay here with you?" Jeong Sook implored.

"Not a chance. Too dangerous here. Try and get some sleep now."

The bus to Harbin took six hours. The egg lady put Jeong Sook on the bus just in time for the eleven fifteen departure. When Jeong Sook had woken up that morning, the house frau was gone. She was famished and made a cup of tea and ate the remnants of the kimbab left over from the previous night. While she was in the bathroom washing up, the older woman returned. The egg lady had a bag out of which she produced a set of brand new clothes. There was a cotton top, medium weight khaki pants, a sweater, and a pair of sneakers. There was also underwear and gym socks in a simple and warm style. Winter comes early in the north east provinces.

"Try these on. They will help you blend in with the locals," she was told.

At a stand outside the bus station the egg lady purchased a box lunch of rice, a few vegetables, and a dry looking apple. She put it together with a bottle of water and gave it to Jeong Sook for her lunch. Including the bus ticket, lunch, and the clothes she was into this venture for the equivalent of sixty US dollars.

Before she put the traveler on her bus, she gave her two more things, about forty dollars in crumbled US currency and some last advice.

"Whatever you do don't come back here. People are looking for you. When you get to Harbin, an old

friend of mine will meet you at the station. There is a small Korean restaurant on the second floor. Take a seat and order a cup of black tea. She will find you. She might find you a job. Lastly, don't talk to anyone. Stay away from uniformed police. Don't answer questions. Pretend you are deaf and dumb. That should be easy."

As she traveled north on the coach, Jeong Sook looked out the window at the passing scenery. She was determined to follow the advice she had been given and spoke to no one. She did her best not to look at anyone either and was satisfied to watch the bright autumn day rush past. When she felt hungry she opened the box lunch and ate. She felt grateful for the help she got from the egg lady no matter how reluctantly it was given. She thought of Hyo Jin and wondered where she was and if she would ever see her again. She couldn't forget her promise to the younger girl but she had no idea how she could even find her. The future seemed unknowable. When she thought about her father and daughters left behind, the heartache was beyond her endurance and she once again compartmentalized the past. There was only the future. She resolved to embrace the future and hoped that she could reconcile the past. The six hours flew past.

By far, Harbin was the largest city Jeong Sook had ever seen. Some two hours before the scheduled arrival, the country scene outside the window began to change. Traffic on the highway increased and small towns then urban areas began to appear more frequently. Gradually the rural scenes of fields, farm houses, and hills faded into light industrial and commercial areas of the outskirts of a big city. It was almost dark when the bus began to battle the dense traffic of the city of Harbin.

The lights of the traffic and the city itself were dazzling to the wide eyed small city girl. In Pyongyang, except for special occasions, the city became almost dark as they rolled up the sidewalks at sundown. Now she was in the big city. There were blocks of tall buildings and even skyscrapers as far as she could see out of the bus in any direction. Due to the congestion, the bus crawled through the city streets until it arrived at the station in the old center of town. When the bus stopped and the door was opened, everyone jumped up, grabbed their bags from the overhead, and pushed to the door. Jeong Sook screwed up her courage and joined the stream.

Once in the terminal Jeong Sook looked for the ladies room right away. Although old and not very clean it was several steps up from the facilities she had gotten used to on the farm and the market town. The building itself was huge with a cavernous main hall built in a noticeably Russian style. It took her twenty minutes to locate the Korean restaurant on the second floor. Nervously she took a seat at a table for two and waited. A waitress approached and spoke to her in Mandarin Chinese. Jeong Sook, not sure how to play deaf and dumb, smiled and said nothing. The middle-aged woman immediately switched to Korean and asked what she would have.

Jeong Sook ordered the black tea and sipped it as she waited. The restaurant had about a dozen tables that were mostly occupied with travelers eating ramen, mandu, and other Korean fast food. As she waited she overheard conversations in at least three languages including Korean, Chinese, and others she didn't recognize. As she waited she became increasingly anxious and worked to stay calm and act normal. After two hours she couldn't help wondering if she was in the right place. By 9:30, the place was mostly empty. Across the room was a man in his mid-forties eating ramen and kimchi. As he seemed to be the last customer besides herself, Jeong Sook wondered if he was her contact. She was sure the egg lady had said it would be a woman but she might be mistaken. The guy looked up at her several times as he finished his meal and even smiled at her. Now she was scared stiff. He could be a human trafficker or even a plain clothes policeman. She stared down at the table. When she looked up, he was standing in front of her.

"May I join you?" He spoke softly in Korean.

Now she was sure he must be a trafficker. She said nothing and looked down, deaf, dumb, and blind.

"Are you a Christian?"

What? She wasn't at all sure she had heard right. She said nothing but looked up. She wanted to bolt but she was frozen.

"I'm Reverend Kim Soo Baek. May I join you?"

He had produced a business card and offered it to her. She took it and saw that it said New Light Mission in English. On the other side it had his name and the same words in Korean.

"May I join you," he asked again.

This time she nodded yes and he took the seat across from her.

"Are you waiting for someone?"

He had a warm smile and a non threatening face. Jeong Sook decided to give up the deaf and dumb routine.

"Yes, I should meet my friend here but it seems she has been delayed."

"Are you a Christian?" It seemed important to him.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she replied.

"Do you know about Jesus," he continued.

She knew the name and about Christians. They were dangerous and undesirables in North Korea.

"Not much. Well I better be going."

At that moment a fashionably dressed middle-aged woman appeared and addressed Jeong Sook.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to be late. Have you been waiting long? Let's go and have some dinner. We have a lot to talk about," she told Jeong Sook and ignored Rev. Kim.

Surely this was her contact and she stood up and prepared to follow this stranger in this strange land.

"If you need my help, be sure to call me," Kim said as the women headed for the door.

Jeong Sook fingered the business card that was deep in the pocket of her slacks.