

Between Heaven and Earth Book: One - The Cost of Freedom - Chapter Eighteen - Gladly the Cross I'd Bear

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September 7, 2020



Three days on a beach with loved ones sipping a cold drink is not a long time. On the other hand three days on a train with a couple of young kids, the paralyzing fear of being randomly scooped up by the authorities and sent back to the land you are fleeing, and the uncertainty of what lay ahead was an eternity. Jeong Sook occupied three seats half way down the aisle on the left side with mom and the two children. Whenever possible she held the baby and tried to get her to sleep. She also talked and played with Kee Ho. The boy was quite active and never sat still for long. He snacked often, ran up and down the aisle when he could get away with it, occasionally napped, and looked out the window. Jeong Sook's kids were both daughters and were way more agreeable and pleasant than this guy.

For several hours, while both youngsters were asleep, Jeong Sook talked with Kum Hee. They talked about, first Kum Hee's kids, and then her own. A couple of moms discussing their kids was only natural and it created a bond. At the same time

they were both periodically looking around for the first signs of threat. The stress built up over time and Jeong Sook felt it in her belly and it radiated out. It was a real thing and was making her sick. It was harder and harder to appear to be in a normal state of mind. She began to worry that her appearance would give her away to the other passengers. She couldn't help but ask herself why was she caught in this situation. As this thinking continued, she began to lose her original determination and optimism. By the evening of the second day she could no longer eat and had to force herself to drink water.

That evening the train made a two hour layover that was unscheduled. Police officers started at both ends of the car and stopped at each row to check papers. Kum Hee bared her breast and began to feed the baby. It had worked before and was the best idea. Jeong Sook took the boy by the hand and told him they should go to the restroom. Scared out of her mind she gripped Kee Ho's hand as tightly as possible and half dragged him down the aisle. As they squeezed past the two cops she tried to meet their eyes and smile like a regular person. She was sweating enough to soak through her blouse. At the bathroom there was a line that lasted ten minutes. When she emerged from the ladies room, Kee Ho was gone and so were the officers. Back at the seats Kum Hee was changing the baby's diaper and the boy was scarfing down a bag of onion rings. She collapsed in her seat, closed her eyes, and began to tremble. Oh my God, I can't do this again.

A short time later there was a commotion outside of the left side of the car. Both women joined everyone peering out the windows to see what was going on. In the light of the overhead lights illuminating the road bed there were four policemen surrounding two figures on their knees with hands behind their backs. In horror, Jeong Sook recognized that the two young men they had started out with were being arrested. Now her trembling turned to shivering. She couldn't tear herself away from the window and was still watching when the others inside the car had all together decided it was not in their interest to witness something that was none of their business. Kum Hee pulled on her arm and indicated she should sit down. All that night Jeong Sook tried to calm down. She couldn't help remembering how helpful those boys were in carrying the baggage. She had never talked to them but she felt that their destinies were intertwined and their arrest was a terrible omen for the outcome for the whole group. She longed to see and even talk with Rev. Kim.

On the final day of the train trip Jeong Sook's mental and physical condition got worse. She reluctantly tried to withdraw from the young family. For several hours she played possum and finally took the baby again. At around three in the afternoon, Rev. Kim stopped by and asked Jeong Sook to follow him. Three cars toward the rear of the train they came to three empty seats. The pastor indicated for her to take the seat next to the window and sat beside her.

"We'll be at Kunming in less than four hours. How are you doing?"

"What happened to those boys?" she almost shouted.

"Take it easy Kim Jeong Sook. Try and keep your voice down. I don't know what happened. They were stopped by the police and one tried to run. It was only random and there is nothing we can do for them. Remember I told you such things were possible. The only thing we can do now is go on. Don't lose your courage. I'm depending on you to help with those kids."

"I don't think I can do it. I'm a wreck. I can't help thinking my life is full of unbearable things. How can I go on? I can't bear any more."

"Yes I know. Life is unbearable. Life is often a terrible thing. You've experienced a lot of trouble but God has brought you this far. He wants to take you further. All the way to freedom but you have to do your part. Can you understand?"

His voice was so sure and filled with compassion, she tried to understand.

He continued, "If anyone would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." These words of Jesus to his disciples were stark, powerful, and true.

Jeong Sook was struck by the simple words. What was her cross and how could she carry it? And then she understood. Her desire to be free meant everything to her. Did it mean enough to her to bear the life or death circumstances of this odyssey? She recalled some of the words to a hymn they had often sung back at the mission. It was a favorite of Rev. Kim. The words 'Gladly the cross I'll bear' filled her head. In an instant she had made up her mind. She would pick up her cross and follow where God led her. Her whole mind and body changed and she turned to smile at her pastor.

"Oh yes, 'Gladly the cross I'll bear,' she told him.

Kim could see her transformation. She was a different person and the light in her eyes returned.

"Yes, I knew you would get it. You can do this. I believe God will lead you to the otherside. Remember your faith will set you free. Pick up your cross now and do your part."

"I will, thank you." She was filled with optimism and gratitude.

"One more thing I need to tell you. The station in Kunming will be more dangerous now. We've made a special arrangement for the train to stop a mile from the station. We will get off and avoid the station. Someone will meet us there. The train is due in the station at seven thirty. Be ready to go at seven. When the train stops, stand up and head for the door. I need you to help the mom and children. Leave behind everything you can't easily carry. Once off the train, walk to the rear and I'll meet you. Have you got it?"

"Yes, of course," she was her old self again.

"See you outside."

As they moved southwest, hour by hour the temperatures rose. Now the windows were wide open and a soft wind floated through the car carrying the aroma of the tropics. Jeong Sook whispered to Kum Hee the new plan. They had already stripped off the heavy padded clothes they had left Harbin in. Now they stuffed two of the backpacks with the no longer needed garments. These they would leave behind. For the next hour and a half they chatted nervously. At five past seven when the train ground to an abrupt halt, they headed for the door. Jeong Sook had the squirming infant wrapped and in her arms. Kee Ho's mom had him by the hand and moved quickly to the exit. In the vestibule the door was open and no one was around. Although the door was open there was no boarding step. Jeong Sook turned and handed the baby to her mom. She then got to her knees and swung herself out the door and down to the gravel road bed. She turned and reached up into the car and motioned for Kum Hee to hand the infant down to her. Next the boy scrambled down and mom came last. As they trudged towards the last car, the train began to move. Squatting in the weeds the others waved to them.

They quickly and without a word joined the others in the brush. As the train picked up speed and departed the bushes to the left of the small group rustled and two men appeared. They were dressed in what looked like pajamas and sandals. Kim spoke to them in Mandarin and one replied in some local dialect. It was pretty sure that they were the guides that were contracted to take them to the safe house. After a few moments of Mandarin accompanied by some body language Kim spoke to the group.

"Let's go. They have a car."

The guides headed down a path through the rushes. They both had small flash lights to illuminate the

way. Kim, the two younger women, and the couple fell in right behind them. The older lady was next. It took a little longer to get the children up and moving. Again Jeong Sook carried the baby and Kum Hee led her son. He whined and complained that he was hungry. Mom told him we would be eating dinner soon. Rev. Kim had stopped down the trail and waited for the rear guard to catch up. The pace was fast, too fast for the women with the children. Although it was early evening it was dark and lights were visible ahead and off to the left. Jeong Sook was sweating through her light clothes and perspiration dripped down her forehead and into her eyes. Soon the baby began fussing and crying. She was hungry too.

It was not far to the road and after about ten minutes they emerged from the roadside scrub onto the blacktop. A ratty looking VW van was waiting with the door open and the engine running. They piled themselves into the van and immediately the headlights came on, the door was slammed closed, and they were off.

"We are on the outskirts of the city of Kunming. It's real close to the border. We'll spend the night in a safe place we have arranged. There will be plenty to eat and a chance to get some real rest. Soon we will send you off to cross the border. You are getting real close now. Cheer up!" The pastor's monolog was in Korean and they were all comforted by the words they could understand.

Jeong Sook wondered who the 'we' was that Rev. Kim often referred to. It seemed to her that he was doing and arranging everything. There was no chatting on the way into town. Everyone was exhausted and stressed out. Jeong Sook looked out the window, sweated, and dozed as Kum Hee feed the baby. When they arrived at their destination Rev. Kim had to wake everyone up.

The house was one story and was surrounded by tropical vegetation including palm trees. The oppressive heat and humidity reminded Jeong Sook that she was a long way from home. Together they gathered their things and followed the guides into a small courtyard at the front of the house. In one of the corners of the dirt packed yard was an open fire over which two women stirred a large cauldron. The smell of cooking rice reminded them all that they hadn't eaten much during their long march south and they were famished. Using body language the two cooks invited them to use the outhouse in the rear of the house and to wash themselves. Dinner would be in thirty minutes. The food was nothing fancy, rice, soup and vegetables with a little chicken, but there was plenty of it. Some kimchi would have made it perfect. On a full stomach they all bedded down. Kum Hee was up several times with the children but Jeong Sook slept through the night. She dreamed of eating kimchi.