

Between Heaven and Earth Book: One - The Cost of Freedom - Chapter Nineteen - The Home Stretch

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September 8, 2020



The following morning Jeong Sook was up early. Only Kee Ho was awake and Jeong Sook wished him a good morning. He let her know he was hungry. Of course he was and it was tough to wait for breakfast. She fished in her bag and came out with a package of cookies and gave them to him. She also located her small towel and her toothpaste. As she washed up she thought about how few and pitiful her possessions were. But she was alive and she began to think more of her future.

Back inside the house the cooks were busy preparing the morning meal and the others were beginning to stir. In the front courtyard she ran into Rev. Kim returning from somewhere. They greeted each other and he took her to a bench in the yard and invited her to sit.

"Did you sleep well?" he wanted to know.

"Yes, I was really tired. I feel like I could sleep for weeks."

"Sure, it's been a long way. You can probably get a little more shut eye today. Tonight you'll start the finale leg. The guides will take you to the border and get you across. By this time tomorrow you will be on your way to Thailand, God willing."

"Why Thailand?"

"The Kingdom of Thailand will give you refugee status. With this status, once vetted, they will allow you to fly to South Korea." This status was key to reaching the south and Thailand was the nearest country that would cooperate to get the refugees to safety.

"How soon will we get to the south?"

"There is a procedure that will take a little time. If all goes well folks can pass through Myanmar and Cambodia in a day or two. After that it will take about two weeks to be cleared to go on to South Korea. The danger lies in crossing the borders and we have to rely on local guides to get past the patrols. Once you reach Thailand you will be safe and it will be only a matter of time."

Jeong Sook took it all in and tried to imagine the next couple of days.

By eight o'clock it was already hot and humid in the little house and the refugees were up and having breakfast. Jeong Sook ate her fill of the white rice, kimchi, and a thick soup made with chicken parts and vegetables. She spent the morning hours chatting with Mi Young and her sister Mi Sook. They were only acquaintances from the mission thrown together by their common circumstances. They weren't really close. At about twenty eight, they were ten years younger and called Jeong Sook older sister.

Now that they were in the final stretch there was an excitement of anticipation in the air. The ladies babbled on as if they were on their way to a picnic or other fun outing. At first they reviewed the long journey by bus and train from the north. They each recounted their close calls with the railroad police and they speculated about the fate of the young guys who were taken off the train. Quickly the topic turned to their hopes and dreams for the future.

"I heard the South Koreans will give us an allowance to live on and let us go to school," Young Mi let them know.

"That's right, I'm gonna get an apartment in Seoul and go to design school," her sister chimed in. Her dream was to be a fashion designer.

"Yeah, me too. We can get a place together," Young Mi wanted to study International Trade and make a lot of money.

"What makes you think you are going to live with me? You are way too messy. Besides, I may have a boyfriend who will want to sleep over." They had had this conversation before.

"Give us an allowance, why would they do that?" It was the first time Jeong Sook had heard of such a thing and it didn't seem at all plausible.

"It's because they are rich. I met a guy who has been there and came back to China to find his girlfriend. He said it is staggering to see the shops, markets, and department stores. They are all richer than the people in Shanghai or Beijing. They are so rich they can support us and never even miss it." Mi Sook was so sure of this it filled her with great enthusiasm.

As for Jeong Sook, she wasn't so sure at all. To hang her hopes for the future on such dubious rumors seemed foolish. The girls continued to pontificate about how well they would be living once they reached the south. All this talk only served to increase Jeong Sook's anxiety about the future.

Soon the talk turned to the younger ladies' favorite topics, fashion and the characters and plots they had seen in South Korean dramas. Jeong Sook had seen some of the same dramas and assumed that they were just fantasy. She listened as the girls prattled on as it grew hotter and hotter. She sweated through her clothes without moving. Finally it was lunch time.

After another hearty meal most found spots down wind from the only electric fan and tried to nap. Jeong Sook spread a blanket on the floor near Kum Hee and the kids. Both kids were restless and resisted nap time. Eventually they all dozed off and the hottest part of the day passed.

Several hours later Jeong Sook was awoken by the sound of tires crunching to a stop on the gravel outside the front gate. Doors opened, slammed and she rolled over to see out the open front door. She saw Rev. Kim stride into the courtyard. He was dressed in a loose flowered shirt, baggy shorts, and sandals. On his head was a white hat and he was removing a pair of sunglasses. He has the right idea, she thought. Behind him were two men that looked like pirates. They both wore what looked like pajamas tied with red sashes. Both had earrings and clearly visible gold teeth. The two heads were covered by bandanas just like the desperados she had seen in comic books. They didn't look either Chinese or Korean. Rev. Kim began to gently arouse the sleeping. The pirates went immediately to the kitchen area, located bowls, spoons, and began to ladle the bowls full from the cauldron. They both squatted in the doorway and shoveled the soup into their mouths. As they ate they eyed the refugees as they began to stir. Of course, as it turned out, these guys were their guides and would be responsible to get them all across the border into Myanmar.

Rev. Kim got everyone up and told them they would be leaving in thirty minutes. In that time they had to get their stuff together and eat something. It was four thirty. It didn't take Jeong Sook long. She had a Nike bag with string shoulder straps that she could fit all her worldly possessions in. She had tossed all her warm weather clothes and was dressed in a long sleeve blouse with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Her slacks were also rolled up to her knees. For her feet, she had the running shoes she had bought on her first visit to a Chinese department store so long ago. She would slip into them on her way out the door.

After eating what she could, she helped the mom get her kids organized and fed. Rev. Kim worked the group and one by one shook hands, hugged, and bid them Godspeed. When he got to Jeong Sook, she was almost overwhelmed with emotion.

"Oh Rev. Kim, it's hard to say goodbye. I owe you so much. You saved me," she gushed.

"Not at all. It was the Father in Heaven that saved you. And you saved yourself. I was only in the right place at the right time. I've been blessed to have been here to help you."

"All the same, I'll always be grateful and can never forget you. I don't want to say goodbye."

"Of course it's not really goodbye. We'll meet again in Seoul. Look for me on Facebook when you get set up."

"I will, I will do that." She let go of his hand and he turned away. She wondered what kind of book he was talking about.

At five twenty, the van pulled away. The two pirates sat up front and the seven others squeezed in the

back. Rev. Kim stood at the gate to the safe-house and waved till the van was out of site. The guides, of course, spoke no Korean. They also spoke no version of Chinese that anyone in the van could recognize. They did speak some local dialect, a little pidgin English, and were fluent in body and sign language. Young Mi and Young Sook were in their glory because between them they knew around fifty English words. Rev. Kim had mentioned that it would take about three hours to reach the border with Myanmar. Then they would walk to the river crossing.

They had each been given two small bottles of water and two sweet potatoes wrapped in aluminium foil before they left the safe house. Jeong Sook wasn't at all hungry and although it was hot, conserved her water. On the other hand Kee Ho was continually famished and needed water to wash down the snacks he consumed out of his mother's backpack. Before long both of her bottles were empty. On one of the bathroom stops, the sisters tried to get the guides to let them know how much longer it would be. The driver pointed to a skin diver's watch the size of a saucer that he had strapped to his wrist. As best as anyone could make out he seemed to be indicating one more hour.

After the sun had sunk and it was full dark he was asked again and he displayed his expensive grill in a less than reassuring smile and said, "Soon, soon."

They had already turned off the divided highway and were now on a dark two-lane asphalt road. What seemed like a couple of hours later they slowed down and turned onto a dirt road. At some point the driver's partner got out and led the way with a flashlight. The vehicle headlights were switched off.

Next, "walk, walk, now, walk," the driver said in a low voice.

They all disembarked and the guides got them in a line. The driver, with his head lamp, led off and the other guy brought up the rear. Jeong Sook took Kee Ho's hand and followed behind Kum Hee who was toting the baby and several backpacks. At first the walk was easy. The trail was almost wide enough for a small automobile and the floor was packed earth. In short order the trail began to narrow until the brush on both sides had to be pushed aside. It became increasingly difficult to walk on through the thickening vegetation. Before long, Jeong Sook was carrying Kee Ho on her back. The whole line began to slow down and spread out. Mrs. Bae, the oldest at sixty one, was the first to sit down and ask for a rest.

The night air was thick with both humidity and mosquitoes. As they sat on the ground to rest, they also found that the floor and walls were alive with various creepy crawlies. The point guide came back and broke out two small green plastic bottles of bad smelling insect repellent. Even the fashion sisters slathered it on without hesitation. They were dressed in hot pants and T-shirts that left their limbs at the mercy of the damn mosquitoes. Jeong Sook had rolled down her pant legs and sleeves and so only had to protect her face and hands.

"Not far, not far, get up go, go," the guides urged them.

After climbing and descending a low rise the jungle gave way to a small clearing and through it ran a river. It wasn't much of a river. At about twelve yards across it might have been called a stream but it marked the boundary between China and Myanmar. The guide halted the column and indicated with hand signals to be quiet. Then he waded into the water and his form quickly disappeared into the darkness. The baby awoke and began to cry.