

Between Heaven and Earth Book: One - The Cost of Freedom - Chapter Seventeen - A Good Start

Michael Downey
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The very next morning, Jeong Sook was woken up from a dreamless sleep at oh-dark-thirty and was told that it was time to go. Meet in the dining room in thirty minutes. After her meeting with the pastor the afternoon before she had prepared her clothes and other things according to the instructions. She was ready to go fifteen minutes later. Before she went to the meeting place she laid down next to a sleeping Hyojin and hugged her one last time.

"Older sister, what is it?" Hyo Jin slowly woke up.

"Hyo Jin, it's time. I have to go." Jeong Sook couldn't help weeping again. "Please be safe and happy. We'll meet again someday. Until then I'll not forget you and will pray for you"

"Now? It's too soon."

"There is no time. Let's promise to meet again in Seoul."

"In Seoul, how can we find each other?"

"Don't worry, I'll find you again. Just believe and promise me."

"Oh yes, I promise and I believe you."

"No goodbyes, only see you again," Jeong Sook kissed Hyo Jin's tear stained cheek.

"See you again."

Jeong Sook took a moment to dry her own tears before she headed for the dining room.

The journey that they were about to embark on was nothing short of epic. From the far northeast of China to the border with Myanmar in the southwest would be similar to traveling from San Francisco to Washington D.C. By air it would be only a matter of hours. By car it would depend on how many stops you made along the way. By bus, the route and layovers would determine how soon you might arrive. In the case of this small group of travelers, air travel was out of the question since they had no documents for internal travel in China. Their method of moving across the great land mass of China would be by hook and by crook; sometimes on inner city busses, a long way by train, rarely by automobile, and when necessary on foot, or in a boat.

In the dining room the lights were blazing, there was rice on the table, and Rev. Kim was waiting for his small flock. Jeong Sook bowed in greeting and then took a seat at the table where Kim and a small group of travelers were already eating rice, kimchi, some other side dishes, and sipping soup. It looked better

than steak and eggs to her. The woman sitting across from her seemed to be about the same age as Jeong Sook and was coaxing a three year old to eat rice and kim from a spoon. Next to her was an infant wrapped up sleeping on a chair. How odd she thought. She thought this was going to be an arduous and dangerous journey.

"Can such young children really make it?" she wondered.

On Jeong Sook's left was an older lady, maybe sixty something? Next to her were Park Mi Young and her sister Mi Sook. They were part of Jeong Sook's circle at the mission. There were also two young men who were still eating. Including Rev. Kim they were eight.

"Good morning everyone. We are waiting for two more arrivals. Eat as much as you want to now. We have to be on our way by six o'clock." The pastor sounded ready to go.

Within a few minutes, two more travelers arrived. They were either a couple or brother and sister. They were lugging two backpacks each. Jeong Sook thought that Rev. Kim was frowning at them as they dropped their stuff and sat down to eat.

"Let's sing a song and open with a prayer. Jeong Sook, would you hand out the song books?"

From the self against the wall she gathered up an arm load of hymnals and distributed them to those at the table. She had done it many times during her stay at the mission and it occurred to her that this was the last time.

"Open your books to page 423 and let's sing," the pastor instructed them.

Led by his strong baritone they sang all four verses. When he closed his book he began to pray. Short and powerful, he asked God's blessing on their endeavour and prayed for the health and safety of each participant. In closing he implored the Lord that they would all pray together again in South Korea.

"From now we begin. As you know this journey will be tough and the end result is not guaranteed. You have all decided to go and from this moment please place your trust in God. Along the way we will pass through China and into another country. We have arranged for guides at each step of the way. The guides know the way but it will be up to each one of you follow the guides. It is important that you blend into the population as much as possible. Although we will be traveling as a group, as much as possible don't talk with each other. Your Korean language or you Korean accent will give you away. If you are stopped by the police or other officials, tell them you are traveling alone. Please don't give away the others. We have made this trip before and we can be optimistic that we will make it through. Let's go!"

Before leaving the building Kim attended to a couple of matters. He spoke with the couple and let them know that two backpacks was too much. He told them they could regret the load and asked them to whittle it down to only one each. They were reluctant. Whatever it was that they had in the bags was important enough to them that they wouldn't part with them. Not a good idea the pastor knew, but he didn't force them.

He also took a moment to introduce Jeong Sook to the babies' mother. He asked her to help the mom with the kids because if push came to shove, young children could prove to be the weakest link. Jeong Sook readily agreed but of course she didn't really know what she was getting herself into.

The first leg of the trip was by three taxis to the Harbin bus station. Once they arrived, Kim handed them each an express ticket to Shenyang. It would take five and a half hours. There they would board another bus for Beijing. From his tote bag Rev. Kim gave them each a ziplock bag with three rice balls and also two small bottles of water. They all split up and found seats in the waiting room. Jeong Sook sat with the mom and her kids and they whispered to each other. She found out that the baby was a girl and her name

was Sung Hwa. The boy was four years old and was called Kee Ho. The baby was sleeping and mom gave her to Jeong Sook to hold. Her brother slumped down in his chair, looked bored, and munched on the crackers his mom feed him. Jeong Sook looked around at the other passengers and saw three Chinese policemen working their way through the crowd checking papers at random. Just as easy as that they could be caught thought Jeong Sook. She held the baby tight and pushed down her anxiety. Before the cops got to their end of the waiting room their bus was called for boarding.

Under any other circumstances the early spring road trip would have been uplifting. Jeong Sook held little Sung Hwa and gazed at the passing countryside. Although the temperatures were in the mid forties the trees along the roadside were already pushing out their buds. In the distant hills the colors were a pastel green. It helped her to calm her mind. When the baby woke up and began to cry, her mom took her and began to nurse her. Jeong Sook tried to talk a little with the boy. He seemed to be interested in the scenery out the window but was more interested in one of the backpacks that was stuffed with snacks. His mom told him to slow down or he'd be sick.

The bus made two scheduled rest stops and the police were out and looking at documents. It seemed like it was only a matter of chance, but they used the restroom as quickly as they could and got back on the bus. If the cops decided to board the bus they were screwed. Jeong Sook caught glances of Rev. Kim and the others and they all got back on the bus looking real nervous. When the bus pulled out she felt a wave of relief pass through her. She and Kum Hee, the kids' mom, put their heads together and cooked up a story that they would tell the authorities if they were, God forbid, questioned. Kum Hee was on her way to Beijing to meet the children's father. Jeong Sook was her sister-in-law. At the first telling it sounded plausible but the more Jeong Sook thought about it, the more she realized it was real thin.

At Shenyang they had another forty-five minute wait for the next bus to Beijing. The bathroom and more snacks from a convenience store, the rice balls were long gone, and they were back in the relative security of a moving bus. Kum Hee's little family had three backpacks. One with snacks, one with disposable diapers, and the other with clothes for all three. Jeong Sook did her best to tote not only her bag but also at least two of the others in the terminal. She also tried to hold on to Kee Ho's hand but he was pretty slippery. She worried that she might lose him in the crowd.

They arrived in Beijing after midnight exhausted and famished. All together again they were shepherded by Rev. Kim out the front entrance and after a short wait they squeezed into a van for another one hour ride to a safe house. There was hot food and a room where they all laid down and slept. The baby cried most of the night.

By 7 a.m. they were all back in the van headed out on the next leg of the journey. Beijing Station is huge, busy, and the passenger rail hub for all of the People's Republic. For Jeong Sook and the others it was fraught with the anxiety of being routinely stopped and asked to produce the documentation that justified their right to be there or anywhere in China. The train ride to Kunming would take almost four days. Before they boarded, the van driver from the safe house distributed shopping bags filled with the rations that would sustain them on the long journey. There were more rice balls, a dozen smoked hard boiled eggs, packages of some kind of sweet bread, and large bottles of water in each bag. The two young guys helped Jeong Sook carry the three additional bags for mom and the kids onto the bus. Rev. Kim stopped by briefly, smiled warmly, and asked how they were doing. He also let them know that sometimes the police might board the train and ask them for their papers. If they start down the aisle, pretend to be sleeping or go to one of the restrooms. He touched Jeong Sook on the hand, patted Kee Ho on the head, and headed off to his seat in a different car.

For the first hour and a half the train dragged its way through the city and the suburbs. By noon they were barreling south down the coastal plain headed for the great rivers that crisscrossed China as they flowed into the sea.