

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Two - A Cross to Bear - Chapter Six - The Matter of Meaning

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For Jeong Sook it was nothing new to wonder what things meant. Since arriving in Seoul, she seemed to be constantly trying to figure out what things were all about. Upon disembarking from the flight from Bangkok, she was immediately taken into custody by officers of the South Korean Security Service. This came as no surprise since she was informed by the South Korean embassy that this was part of the normal procedure for refugees arriving from North Korea. She was placed between two officers in the back seat of a sedan and was driven to a location in the suburbs of the sprawling metropolis of Seoul. Along the way, Jeong Sook stared out the window at another mega city. She felt, once again, that she was far from home.

After close to forty minutes, the car turned off the highway and followed along a driveway to a gate flanked by what were unmistakably guard houses. The car stopped and was approached by a uniformed soldier with a submachine gun and a clipboard. Words were exchanged and IDs were examined. The young guard peered into the rear of the vehicle and took a long look at Jeong Sook. She

felt acutely her status as a North Korean and pretty much a prisoner. The guard stepped back, the gate opened, and they were waved through.

The facility's campus was like nothing Jeong Sook had ever seen before. It looked not at all like the cold forbidding buildings that housed the organs of state security in Pyongyang where she had gone to visit her father that last time. Instead it looked like a college campus with modern three story buildings, trees, green lawns, and even what was surely basketball courts, tennis courts, and a soccer pitch. It might have been a summer camp for the children of the elites of this new country.

At the intake building they parked and she was escorted up the wide steps, was turned over to the staff, and her processing began. Over the counter was a large banner that read,

WELCOME TO THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

She couldn't help wondering what it meant and what kind of welcome it would be. In North Korea there was no shortage of banners with benevolent words but they seldom meant what they actually said. As the security officers turned to leave, one of them smiled at her and said,

"Good luck in your new home."

It was all so confusing but she tried to be optimistic. The staff kindly but efficiently began to process her. First she was informed that she was not under arrest but that she would be interrogated by security experts to be sure she was eligible for asylum in South Korea. She was encouraged to cooperate with the officers

and staff and always answer all questions as honestly as possible. Her stay at the facility would depend on how quickly her story could be verified but she could anticipate it taking about ninety days. During that time the staff would make her stay as comfortable as possible. She was then given a three page print out of the facility's rules. For thirty minutes the document was explained and she was asked if she had any questions. She didn't and she was asked to sign it on all three pages. She was given a copy of her very own.

Next she was taken to a changing room where she was given two jumpsuits, underwear, and toiletries. In exchange she gave up all her possessions including the temporary travel document she had entered the country on. Next she was fingerprinted and photographed. With all the unpleasanties out of the way she was escorted to her dormitory. It was called C block and was a five minute walk away through the serene grounds. On the second floor she was shown to what was known as a pod. It had an open common area with sofas, writing tables, and a television. There were four rooms off the commons and Jeong Sook was told that hers was number 3. The room was small, had a single bed, a free standing wardrobe, a desk with a lamp, and a chair. It was so much to take in all at one time but so far there was nothing harsh and the staff continued to be kind and efficient. She was told that dinner was at six p.m. in the cafeteria on the first floor. They recommended she take a rest until then. She had only one question; where was the bathroom? The answer was go out the door and turn right. The ladies bathroom was two doors down on the right. She couldn't miss it.

When she was alone she wondered where the other occupants of the pod were. She tried the entrance door and it was not locked. Will wonders never cease?

For the next three months, Jeong Sook lived as a guest of the Republic of Korea and its security services. In the beginning it was all so unreal. In the north, just the mention of the organs of state security struck fear into the hearts of the general population. It was their job to maintain control through such terror. When her own father fell into their clutches, it was gut wrenching for her and the terror radiated out to relatives, friends, and associates. Within a short time she was dropped like a hot potato by her husband, in-laws, friends, and colleagues.

Although she was quite apprehensive at first, as it turned out, it wasn't like that at all here. In fact, on a certain level it was nothing but pleasant. The living arrangements were conducive to rest and relaxation. She had lots of free time every day to read, watch South Korean TV, and sleep. The food was surprisingly good and plentiful. She ate as much delicious white rice, a variety of side dishes, and even meat and fish as she wanted every day. Her roommates were also easy to get along with. They had been asked not to discuss their circumstances with other refugees but no one monitored conversations in the dorm. Mostly she and the others were friendly but not overly talkative. All were only hopeful and looking forward to their release into society. During her time in the pod, Jeong Sook saw the others come and go as their processing came to an end. She didn't get too close to anyone and looked forward to the day she too would be released.

Of course there was the stress and tension of the interrogation sessions. There were no rubber hoses, no water boards, or threats of beatings with a telephone book but the interrogators were straightforward and direct. They asked her to write her story in detail and then required her to tell it again and again. Over the course of several weeks, she told the same story so many times that, although she tried to be honest, she didn't always get it right. The interrogators caught every inconsistency and grilled her over them.

Once her story was straight they began to focus on things concerning her family. Most of all they wanted to know more about her father and the Chon Do Kyo organisation in Pyongyang. They focused on his arrest and sentencing. She told them what she could but the whole line of questioning greatly distressed her. The sessions continued for around six weeks, five days a week, and for five hours a day. She had weekends off; after all, this wasn't the DPRK.

Finally she was presented with a five page document and was asked to review it. She was told to be

careful and make any corrections she thought were warranted. It was amazingly comprehensive and she found no discrepancies from what she could recall. Once she was sure, they asked her to sign each page.

She wondered what it meant and she asked the chief.

"Would you tell me what this document is for? What does it mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything. It's just your story. We need to verify a few things and will get back to you."

And they did get back to her over the next few weeks. On several occasions she was called in to clear up what they told her were things that didn't fit or seemed to conflict with what she had told them earlier. They also pressed her for more information on her father and why he had been arrested. Finally they wanted to know more about her husband, ex-husband really, and why they had divorced. She tried to not only answer honestly but to keep the narrative straight which was no easy matter. In the end they seemed to be satisfied with her responses and once again they let her know that they would be getting back to her. The intelligence officers never indicated that they were suspicious of her but neither did they offer her any assurances that she would pass the test.

One Monday morning after breakfast she was told to report to the director's office in the administration building at 11 a.m. She nervously found her way to the third floor office marked Director and sat in the outer office for fifteen minutes. When she was shown in, a middle aged man in an expensive looking suit and tie rose and greeted her. He thanked her for coming and invited her to have a seat on a sofa next to a low coffee table. All this only increased her anxiousness. As they waited for tea to be served the Director chatted with her about her stay with them. After sipping his tea the director smiled warmly and announced that she had been granted asylum and status as a refugee. She would be allowed to stay in South Korea. Jeong Sook began to cry with happiness and a sense of relief. A secretary was summoned and the formal documents were reviewed and signed by the director, Jeong Sook, and the secretary as a witness.

"From this moment on you are a citizen of the Republic of Korea. When you leave here you will go to the first floor where you will be issued your official National Identification Card. From today you will have all the rights and duties of a citizen of our great republic. Congratulations!" He seemed to be genuinely happy to welcome Jeong Sook.

For her part, she was overwhelmed by emotion. She couldn't process all the emotions fast enough to respond with anything more than tears. Luckily for her, there was an open box of tissues on the table and she used them to staunch the flow.

The director continued, "You will be leaving us today and you will be going over to the folks at Hanawa to ease your way into this society. They do a great job for the refugees and you will be able to pick up a lot of tips on how to live and prosper here. You will be with them for about four months and after that you can be released to live in our society. Welcome to the Republic of Korea and I wish you the best of luck in your new life. You deserve it."

Finding her voice for the first time Jeong Sook said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you so much."

The director walked her to the door with his arm around her shoulders and bid her farewell. The rest of the day passed in a blur and by dinner time she was at her new home with the government run social service organization, Hanawa. As she lay alone in another new bed that night and as the days emotions drained away she wondered again what it all meant. Through all the turmoil she was coming to the realization that her life was a search for meaning and she longed to know that all this heartache actually meant something. That might make the difficulties worth bearing.