

KANG YoungsookExcerpt from *Rina* (Ch. 1)**The Border**

The soldiers walked slowly towards the twenty-two escapees, muzzles pointed at them. A girl who had been licking her lips with a dry tongue stood suddenly and opened her mouth to say something. “I told you not to move!” shouted the soldiers. The girl knelt down in her place again, and looked at the faces of the soldiers who had come near. They were carrying rifles, but they, too, looked as though they were starving to death.

The name of the girl, who was short and had an oval face with yellow pimples on her forehead, was Rina. Rina was sixteen years old, and was born the oldest girl to parents who were laborers in a coal-mining area. After school, Rina went to a job training center for youth and assembled simple machine parts late into the night. When she grew sleepy and tired of the work, she brought the screws under her nose, saying to them, “Die, die,” and then threw them down at her feet one by one.

One of the soldiers walked over and stood before the people who were kneeling down in small groups. The rubber soles of the soldier’s shoes had fallen apart, looking like the mouth of an angry toad. The soldier bent down, and with his finger tapped the head of the boy who was sniffing next to Rina. The boy was trembling and Rina could feel the tremor through her arm.

“Sing something. Don’t you know any songs? Sing a song, any song, that you learned at school. I’m bored to death.”

The boy said, “I don’t go to school,” and began to cry even louder. The boy’s father who was sitting a few steps away with a scowl on his face, tried to soothe the boy but it was no use. The frightened sound of the boy sobbing echoed throughout the border region, as dark as a cave. It was rumored that little boys captured during escapes were sold off into other countries and forced to work night and day, and that little girls were sent from place to place in different countries to work as prostitutes, to be freed only when they were dying of disease. Whenever Rina heard such stories, she fell into confusion. It was difficult for her to decide which was worse: to live in a tiny house in a coal-mining town, where even the laundry was grey, or to go live in a foreign country, even if it meant becoming a prostitute.

“I can sing.”

The moment Rina said this to the soldiers a baby and a toddler began to cry. They kept on crying, being hungry, and the mothers, not knowing what to do, just kept offering them their nipples as though they were milk machines.

They said the border was about two kilometers from where they were. Ever since her father told her that he had decided to flee the country, Rina had been dreaming about the border every night. The sounds of wind and gunfire never ceased at night, and pillars of fire shot up here and there. Those who were captured during escape were lined up naked and shot to death, after which their corpses were burned to cinders. An owl with sullen eyes kept a watch on everything that was going on.

Still, Rina did not doubt. She believed that the border, spread out like a green riverbank in the distance ahead, would open up any moment. She believed that the green riverbank would rush towards her like a wave and open up like the sky. She also believed that an invisible hand would draw all the escapees into a safe net, and take them across the border, like magic.

The twenty-two escapees consisted of three families and young laborers who worked at a sewing factory; they were born and had lived all their lives near the border. “I found some people to escape with. We should flee this country.” When her father quietly made this important announcement, Rina thought he was lying. Her father was the kind of person who couldn’t even conceive of such a thing as crossing the border into another world. Rina remembered something an old woman, a distant relative in town, had said before she starved to death several years ago during a famine: “Even the greatest idiot stakes his life on something, at least three times in his life. When those three times are over, his life is over.” The words of the old woman, slipping out from between the few teeth that remained in her mouth, were hard to comprehend, but that was the gist of it.

The soldiers, with rifles in their hands and cigarettes in their mouths, were still loitering around among the people, who were trembling with fear. Then Rina saw a white, round ball of light, headed in their direction from afar. The light was only a little speck at first, but grew larger and larger and soared up high into sky, turning into a dazzling blue.

“Look, a light!” Rina yelled despite herself. What was running towards them from far away was not a light, but a small truck that delivered meals to the border checkpoint. The women held hands, sniffing and thinking it was all over for them. The man in the passenger seat got off first, and then the driver got off, and went right into the checkpoint. “Is that the guy?” The fathers whispered, looking anxious.

The men were smoking, on the other side of the lighted window of the checkpoint. After several minutes, the man who had been sitting in the passenger seat of the truck came

out, and called together the fathers, the heads of the families. The fathers stood awkwardly, their feet asleep, and greeted him; then they scattered away, turning around, and took out the money they had been keeping in their bundles or clothes. The man took the money from the fathers and counted them, licking their fingers, and put them all in one stack and went back into the checkpoint. Then he came back out, and took into the checkpoint the bundle of provisions the escapees had collected. "Those sons of bitches," said the factory workers, and made as if to run into the checkpoint at once, but sat back down in a moment. As those in the checkpoint lay the food out on the table and ate and drank to their heart's content, the escapees could only listen to one another swallow saliva.

The man came out of the checkpoint after a good while. The man, wearing tight-fitting pants and a jacket, and only his eyes, nose, and mouth showing through his simple clothing, was the first guide that would take the twenty-two escapees into a third country. They couldn't take a direct route to the land of P, their final destination, and had to make a detour through several countries. Their fate depended on this guide. When Rina saw the face of the guide's dark face and clear-cut features, she felt happy, thinking she was destined to fall in love with him.

Finally, the twenty-two crossed the border, without hearing a single gunfire. The border wasn't on the broad expanse of the riverbank, spread out like a green belt, nor was it on the sparkling river surrounded by a silver pier. The border was just a part of a steep, quiet mountain path, blocked on all sides with no path of retreat. The moment they crossed over the border, Rina felt as though a piece of candy that had been stuck in her throat slipped down into her stomach, letting her breathe again.

A downward path, not so steep, led down on the other side of the border. The twenty-two, including two infants on their mother's backs, began to go down in quick steps, twitching their hips, as though they had been scathed by fire. Even the silhouette of the path was dim, and only the clothes and bundles could be seen in a haze. The guide, standing at the front, led the people in a swift and quiet manner. The older people began to cough, being out of breath, and the babies cried at intervals. Rina paused once in a while, when her toes began to dig into the ground, and her ankles went numb. Her feet hurt more in going down than in going up the mountain.

Rina had thought that her father had deliberately kept from her what time they would be leaving. There was no chance in the world that he would have left her little brother behind, and he wouldn't have left his wife behind because it would be difficult to marry again; she was sure that she was the only one in the family he wouldn't really care about, even if she got shot to death or dragged away to some strange land. But it wasn't as though

she could have put on more sturdy shoes if he had told her in advance what time they would be leaving. The only two pairs she owned had long grown so old that they were no longer in a state to be worn; but now, the images of the shoes her friends had been wearing flashed through her mind one by one. “If I’d been told in advance, I would’ve stolen those white sneakers that looked light, with thick soles,” Rina thought ruefully.

The twenty-two finally arrived at the mouth of the river that was the gateway to the first of the third countries. The guide demonstrated how to cross the river, taking his shoes off and pulling up his pants above his knees. One by one, everyone followed the guide into the river. The river, dried up from the drought, was so shallow that the water didn’t even come up to Rina’s waist. The people, as soon as they stepped into the river, turned around and bowed towards the border they had just crossed, rubbing their hands together. Rina was very short, so a factory worker carried her on his back. She was so nervous that her buttocks tensed up.

Both the upper and lower streams of the river were overflowing with a procession of people trying to escape. The people didn’t ask anything about one another—how they had crossed the border, or why they were trying to cross the border into another country. Only the sound of the river, flowing rapidly between the two bridges, and the shadows, grew bigger.

The procession of escapees stretched out on the high riverbank. Below the riverbank were rice paddies and dry fields, where the long line diverged; after a long walk, only the twenty-two remained again. Twenty-two adults with two babies walked the narrow path between rice paddies. The guide was the first in line, and Rina’s father the last, with Rina walking in front of him. Rina felt relieved only when she shook her hands about in the air, and could touch the person in front of her.

“Let’s take a break.”

As soon as the guide spoke, the twenty-two dropped down in a row on the levee. The older people heaved a dry cough. When the babies started whining again, the mothers got up, bowing in apology even though they had done nothing wrong, and offered the babies their breasts. Rina walked on, not liking her place in the back of the line, and fell flop into a ditch. The ditch was deeper than she thought, and the guide reached his hand down and pulled her up. Her mother, who had been sitting near the front of the line, with Rina’s brother clutched in her arms, scolded her.

“Don’t be so impatient, or we’re going to abandon you in some strange land,” she said.

“No one’s as impatient as you are! People might abandon you, not me,” Rina said.

As people broke out into snickers, Rina's mother glared fiercely at her. Rina's mother was nineteen when she had Rina. Whenever Rina did something wrong, her mother would say, "I had you when I was nineteen." Every time she did, Rina turned upon her, and her mother would laugh and say, "That means you're going to have a baby in three or four years, just like me." Rina couldn't tell whether those words were a blessing or a curse. She hated her mother, who always held her son close to her chest wherever they went, and she hated her little brother; and it seemed that now, this hatred seemed to be what was sustaining her through the hunger. The babies began to cry louder and louder. The guide took out some candies from his jacket pocket and gave one to each mother, and told them to soothe the babies as soon as possible.

The path grew steeper and steeper, and the people reached a low, bare hill. It seemed that everywhere, whether within or without the border, even the little kids had to go searching for firewood for heat. What was more, spontaneous fires broke out in the mountains, to be extinguished only when everything was burnt up.

When they had climbed over the mountain and nearly reached level ground, they heard a sound of explosion coming from the darkness in the distance. It was as loud as the sound of a state-of-the-art tank that could push its way through a jungle, but as it turned out, it was only the sound of a motorcycle. Startled, everyone ran deep into the mountain or crouched down, without heeding the guide's instructions. Rina wondered for a second where her family was, but she was pressed flat against the ground and couldn't get herself up, because of the white light on her back. She lay there, face down, fearing that someone would hit her on the head with a club and drag her away. The smell of damp dirt on her nose calmed her fears.

The motorcycle randomly flashed its light everywhere, then disappeared without a trace. People began to grow restless. The babies cried shrilly, and everyone kept heaving sighs, looking stunned, as though they had just had a brush with death. They couldn't tell how much time had passed, and no one told them what was ahead. Their eyelids grew heavier and heavier, and their old sneakers kept making them trip on their feet and sprain their ankles.

Drained of energy, Rina dozed off as she walked. Orange lights flared up before her eyes. Snug blankets and cotton fillings swelled up and down in the orange light. The white flour balloons were small at first, but grew bigger and bigger, big enough to wrap her entire body in it, then puffed up into a warm loaf of bread, then wrapped her in itself. Wherever she stuck her tongue out, sweet bread filled her mouth. But that was only for a moment, and soon, Rina was walking a tightrope. She couldn't take another step, feeling dizzy and

out of balance. She wanted the sun to come up so that she could see everything that was before eyes, and she just wanted to lie down somewhere and sleep.

Sparkling lights came into view only when they had walked and walked the flatland, and dawn came on. The guide took the twenty-two to a run-down house, standing by itself on the edge of the flatland. He opened the wooden door, and immediately, they saw a dirt floor, two beds on one side, a table in the middle, and on top of the table, a bowl with strands of noodles stuck to it. An old woman, with less than a handful of hair remaining, lay on one of the beds, as still as a picture, and a woman, who seemed to be either the old woman's daughter or daughter-in-law, was sitting next to the table sewing. The guide opened the cabinet, taking something out and putting something in, as though he were in his own house. They wouldn't have understood one another anyway, but the old woman on the bed and the woman at the table, and the twenty-two escapees, stared at one another as though to see who was poorer.

The twenty-two sat in a circle on the dirt floor, waiting for someone to give them something to eat, staring at the ceiling and the door. Then, when their eyes met the eyes of someone sitting before them, they glared, their expressions full of discontent. After waiting and waiting without getting any food, the people began to doze off, being exhausted. Rina took her sneakers off, and shook out the dirt stuck at the bottom. The layers of cotton on the insoles that touched her feet was thin with wear, and caked with the dirt that got in when she fell into the ditch.

The guide placed a packet of sleeping powder each on the palms of the mothers, saying, "We have to walk even more from now on, so feed the babies the sleeping powder, so they won't cry. Hurry, and let's get on our way again."

Rina became very curious as to what else was in the bulging jacket pockets of the guide, from which emerged candies and sleeping powder. The mothers mixed sugar in the bowls of water that the woman of the house gave them, and dissolved the sleeping powder in it, and fed it bit by bit to the tired babies. The babies, who had been sucking on their thumbs, tasted the sweet water dripping into their mouths, and began to suck harder. Then, at last, a man burst out, "Damn it, don't we get anything to eat?"

"You can reach your destination only if you keep your temper at bay. This is only the beginning. You crossed the border only a few hours ago," the guide said.

Rina wanted to applaud him for the resolute look on his face, but restrained herself. The safety of the twenty-two was in the hands of the guide, so no one dared make a retort. The dawn air, touching their shoulders, was chilly. The farmhouses, standing together in groups beyond the fields and roads, showed only a corner of their roofs, or a single door,

whenever the mist shifted. The sound of a dog barking could be heard for a while, but then it grew quiet. Rina hugged herself, as her sneakers and her entire body grew damp with the dawn mist.

They walked for quite some time on a winding road where white birch trees grew in small clusters. The mist was lifting, and the sky turned bluer and bluer; then when the sky had reached its bluest, the people, to their surprise, saw a colorful bus standing before them. The guide talked at length, in a language the people didn't understand, with the driver who had a bunch of keys and a spectacle case hanging at his waist. The twenty-two sat in a group by the road, staring at the guide when he spoke, then at the driver when he spoke.

The guide gathered up the fathers. The fathers took out money from their bundles or underneath their clothes, and put it on the guide's palm. The guide counted the money, gave a part to the bus driver, and put the rest in his own pocket. At that moment, one of the fathers suddenly pounced upon the guide, and took him by the scruff of his neck, saying, "Damn you, you already took our money at the border checkpoint. Why are you taking more now?"

The guide spit through his teeth, and freed himself at once from the grasp and said, "That was for getting you across the border, and this is for bringing you all the way here and getting you on the bus. I've fulfilled my duty, and I'm leaving. If you get caught, you die, but I die as well."

"You can't leave us here in a country where we don't even understand the language. You bastard, you have to take us somewhere safe!"

"Where would it be safe for you?"

At the guide's words, everyone grew quiet. Rina stared off after the guide, who was taking quick steps on the misty road, in the opposite direction of the bus. And then she ran after him, as though she had an important confession to make. But when he turned around, she didn't know what to say. She hesitated for a while, her head hanging down. The guide gazed at Rina's face, then reached out a hand and gently stroked the strand of hair that was stuck on her forehead. Only then could Rina open her mouth.

"Can I have some sleeping powder?"

The guide reached into his bulging jacket pocket, and took out a few white packets and handed them to her, saying, "Too many of these will kill you."

Rina stared at the back of the head of the guide, whose fate seemed to be one of forever crossing back and forth between borders. Soon, however, the mist shrouded him, and he was no longer visible. The fathers, still enraged, seized the foreign driver, whose language they couldn't even understand, and begged him to find another guide for them.

The driver, regardless of their appeal, started the engine and told them to go relieve themselves, pointing first to his own pants zipper and then to the rice field, looking at each of them in the eye. Rina went down the steep levee. An older girl from the sewing factory was urinating with her buttocks showing. Both their buttocks were lean, for they didn't eat very well, but they felt no shame. Rina pinched the other girl's buttocks. Then the girl pinched Rina's buttocks, and the two broke out into giggles. The moment she shook herself off after urinating, Rina felt a blade of grass graze her crotch, and her shoulders shuddered. She felt ticklish, just as she did when thin raindrops fell onto her face, and her entire body trembled momentarily.

The twenty-two barely managed to fit into the minibus, whose colorful coat of paint was peeling everywhere. The driver gave the men a cigarette each, and kept talking on and on in a loud voice.

The bus ran endlessly on a winding road. The bus kept running, while the men who had smoked a foreign cigarette on an empty stomach, the women who had breathed in the cigarette smoke, and the babies who had taken sleeping power, all slept like a log.

When Rina awoke from sleep, her eyes blinded by the sunlight pouring in through the window, the bus was standing in front of a little marketplace. The driver's seat was empty, and a smoky smell, along with the smell of meat, floated up into the bus. The people opened their eyes and looked out the window, stretching their shoulders. The people near the entrance of the market were sitting in twos and threes, absorbed in gambling, or eating noodles, wearing whitish shirts, with their unwashed hair sticking up into the sky. The babies here were carried on their mothers' backs, their legs stretching straight out as though in punishment.

"I feel even less like going. We don't even know if they'll let us in at P," the sewing factory girl said, leaning her head on Rina's shoulder. "You're a big whiner, aren't you?" Rina said, and began to tickle her armpit. The girl didn't laugh, no matter how long Rina tickled her armpit, which was damp with sweat. In a moment, the driver got on the bus. He must have had eaten something by himself, for the bridge of his nose and his forehead were sleek with grease, and he had changed into a short-sleeved shirt. A man got up and asked the driver, "Don't we get something to eat?"

The driver, of course, didn't understand his words. So this time, the man made a gesture of eating with a spoon. Then the bus driver pointed to the bus door, crisscrossed his wrists, and acted as though someone was putting handcuffs on them and dragging him away. At his skillful acting, the people turned their gaze out the window, unable to say a word.

The bus began to run. On the narrow, high mountain path, the bus rocked quite a bit, and Rina's bottom was hovering up in the air almost the whole time. Below the mountain was a deep precipice, from where you could never be salvaged if you fell. There was no sign of human beings, and the only thing that got in their way from time to time was herds of black cows or old sheep, running around by themselves with bells on their necks.

On its way down the mountain, the bus came to an abrupt stop. The driver went outside, and everyone, curious to see what was going on, gathered to the front of the bus. Mounds of dirt and huge rocks, which had fallen from the mountain, were blocking the path. The driver came on board, and dragged several men down by their sleeves. As the men cleared the path of the dirt and rocks, the driver sat back at ease, smoking. When the path was cleared, the bus started again. The men, put to sudden labor when they were already drained of energy, fell back into sleep, exhausted.

Between the high and deep mountains could be seen a brown river in the shape of a small triangle. The river grew bigger as the bus approached nearer, and the triangular shape was broken, revealing an enormous cement dam in the upper part of the river. The river wasn't wide, but the yellowish water wound around the high mountains, flowing like a serpent. "This isn't a land for people, either," someone said, breaking the silence. The river got muddier as they went, because of the inflow of mud and sand. Rina pressed her face against the window, thinking, "Even if the twenty-two of us all fell into the river and died, the water wouldn't look any different for it. The river always swallows everything up, without leaving a trace. No one would know we were here. It's like we're floating up in the air."

Translated from the Korean by Jung Yewon