

READING EXERCISE

The Adventures of Lola Badiola

CHAPTER 55 – THE CROSSING

No-one can imagine what it's like to spend six hours trapped in a cold, dark container surrounded on all sides by dead bodies. No-one can predict what an experience like that might do to a person's sanity. And so, when the old grey man and his grandson opened the doors to their refrigerated truck, they had no idea in what state of mind they would find their passenger.

Park stepped out and rubbed his eyes.

"Are you ok?"

Park looked around at the environment in which he found himself, then he focused on the boy and his grandfather.

"I'm fine."

The old man nodded his head in approval. This defector had character and his chances of completing the journey were good.

"Head straight to the river and await the signal."

The old man patted Park on the back and then got back into the car. "Don't forget to send us a postcard." He said in a deadpan voice as he accelerated away to his business rendez-vous with the Chinese.

Park's legs were like jelly. He tripped over a couple of times as he headed to the banks of the river. Then he sat down and waited for the signal to cross, whatever that might be. In the darkness of that cold winter night, he noticed something ominous about the ice and snow that covered the water. It was moving. It had been a mild winter by North Korean standards and therefore the river wasn't frozen solid. This was going to be a more difficult and dangerous crossing than he had imagined.

As the minutes and then hours passed, Park started to feel sleepy. He kept his eyes firmly fixed on the other side of the riverbank but every time he blinked his eyelids felt heavier. There was no sign of the secret police, no puffs of cigarette smoke, no noises in the distance, so he started to relax. He watched a bat swoop up and down the river in front of him chasing insects for its dinner. It was a hypnotic sight. Slowly but surely, his mind wandered from the conscious to subconscious. The last thing he remembered, before he fell into a deep sleep, was the sound of the bat's wings as it fluttered past his forehead.

Park was awoken by the lights of a torch shining in his eyes.

"Kim Lee Sohn?"

Park grunted.

“Do you speak English?”

Park was utterly disorientated. He hadn't slept for more than a couple of hours in the previous three days. His whole body was stiff from sitting in a stress position for six hours in the refrigerated truck.

A huge hand grabbed his stick-thin arm and lifted him to his feet. He found himself standing next to a giant.

“Look at me!”

Park looked up and into the eyes of the stranger. He had never seen a westerner in the flesh, nor smelt one. He was equally as fascinated as he was fearful of this foreign creature.

“I am here to take you across the border. Do you understand?”

Park nodded.

The Westerner put a harness around Park's waste and attached it to the back of his own belt with a rope so that the two of them were physically inseparable.

“Follow me. Put your feet exactly where I put mine.”

The Westerner took two steps towards the river pulling Park's flimsy body along with him. Park stumbled into the back of his new companion, as if he were a drunkard walking into the great wall of China. It became immediately obvious to both of them that this way of getting across the river wasn't going to work.

The giant knelt down and motioned for Park to jump onto his back. Park followed the instruction and, like a little boy on the back of his father, was raised to height that felt both frightening and exhilarating.

The Westerner stood at the river's edge and plotted a path across the slow-moving ice. If either of them fell into the water at this time of year they would perish from hyperthermia within the hour.

The giant was about to take his first step when he was hit hard by something from the side. Both he and Park fell to the ground, still attached by the rope and harness. Park quickly recovered his senses and, from the floor of the embankment, he could see the boots of two soldiers standing either side of them. They were not the boots of the secret police, who had proved easy to evade over the last 56 hours, they were the boots of the Special Operations Forces. North Korea's finest and bravest soldiers. The two agents must have tracked every step that Park had taken up until this point.

One of the boots lifted in the air and moved in the direction of Park's head. The little programmer moved out of the way just in time to avoid his skull being cracked open. He felt himself being pulled to his feet by the harness as his giant companion stood up to face the enemy.

The two soldiers attacked the Westerner from both sides. They didn't use guns or knives. They wanted to overwhelm him. He was worth much more to them alive than dead.

There was no doubt in Park's mind that the giant would have been able to withstand the onslaught if he had been free from the harness, but, as it was, Park acted as a deadweight preventing the westerner from properly defending himself.

For two minutes Park was thrown around like a rag doll as the three men fought each other, until eventually the two tough Koreans had their man pinned to the ground. One of them was lying face down on top of his chest, the other had his arm around the giant's throat in a stranglehold. Slowly they were squeezing the oxygen out of his system until he was on the brink of fainting.

Park watched in horror. He assumed that as soon as they had the westerner under control they would eliminate him from the equation. It was the agent that they wanted, not him. A survival instinct was triggered in the primordial part of Park's brain. He reached inside the pocket of his Russian army jacket. He felt the cold, sharp steel of the kimchi knife that he had grabbed before heading out on his date with the Girl with the Almond eyes. He drew the knife from his pocket and raised it above the neck of the soldier who was holding down the chest of his companion.

The westerner could see exactly what was about to happen and pleaded for Park to do it. The soldier who was strangling the westerner cried out to his companion. But it was too late. Park took careful aim at the thick, tanned, throat of his enemy and drove the sharp jagged point of the Kimchi knife directly into his jugular vein. The reaction was immediate - a fountain of blood that cascaded over everything in a two-metre radius. The injured soldier let go of the giant and writhed around in agony before he quickly passed to another world.

Park then used the knife to cut through the rope and free the giant to fight the other soldier unimpeded. It wasn't long before their roles were reversed, and the Korean now found himself in a head lock. The giant used his immense strength to subdue his adversary until he fainted from the lack of oxygen. Then the westerner pulled out a gun, attached a silencer and shot three bullets into the head of the unconscious soldier.

He checked both men for weapons and documentation. He took a photo of their faces, their equipment and the environment in which they lay. Then he filled the soldiers' pockets with stones and, one by one, dragged them to the river, pushing their bodies under the slow-moving ice.

Finally, he turned to Park, and said:

"Good work. Let's go."

READING COMPREHENSION

1. Why are the old man and his grandson worried about Park?
2. How does Park feel after his journey in the truck?
3. Describe the Tumen river.
4. What happens to Park as he is waiting for the agent?
5. How does the agent intend to take Park across the river?
6. Who do they get attacked by?
7. What is the objective of these men?
8. How does Park help the agent?
9. What does the agent do to the two men after they have been killed?
10. Will they get across the Tumen River and into China?