

The Crossing: One Family's Daring Rescue

A twenty minute documentary from ABC's *Nightline* (1998)

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The Crossing's timing is significant. Tens of thousands of North Korean refugees have escaped starvation and political oppression and are hiding out in China in sheer terror of being arrested, repatriated and executed. In response to their desperate plight the U.S. Congress has drawn up a bill that would earmark up to \$80 million to help feed, clothe and move to safety people who escape North Korea. Senator Sam Brownback has also introduced legislation allowing North Korean refugees to apply for refugee status or asylum. Human rights advocates have protested China's policies of repatriation, often leading to death. But China fears an uncontrollable influx of North Koreans if it ends forced repatriation. To compound problems, North Korea has publicly acknowledged that it has nuclear arms.

The Crossing provides a dramatic and inspiring account of author Helie Lee's courageous rescue of relatives from North Korea. Her story presents a microcosm of the troubles and hardships experienced by the North Korean people. It is a compelling story of faith, love and Lee's fulfillment of a promise to reunite three generations of her family.

For forty-one years Helie Lee's grandmother, Hongyong Baek, never gave up hope that her eldest son, Yong Woon, who disappeared during the Korean War was still alive. Her last words to him were "come back to me unharmed, I beg you, I will be here waiting." Then in 1991 an unexpected letter arrived informing her that her son was still alive. Two years later as economic conditions deteriorated in North Korea, all communication stopped. In 1996, Lee's first book, *Still Life with Rice*, was published. Without realizing that her book would be a success in the United States and throughout Asia, she had not anticipated that the book's references to her uncle would put his life in jeopardy. Since Hongyong Baek was eighty-five and had been hospitalized twice by poor health, the family moved quickly to rescue her son.

In April 1997 Lee, her father and grandmother flew from Los Angeles to Seoul to Beijing and finally to a remote area that borders North Korea. Their mission involved extensive planning, frustration, bribery, delays, physical hardships and tremendous risks. In viewing the documentary, the audience witnesses the harrowing crossing of the Yalu and observes the fear and paranoia that split the family. Five members of the extended family decide to stay behind. Those who flee carry rat poison that they will ingest if border guards catch up with them. They fear that those that have stayed behind will die. They ultimately travel by car and train across China to the South Korean embassy in Hanoi. The other five members of the family escape, but they are forced to hide for months in Beijing awaiting word on their request for political asylum. Ultimately they receive fake identification and get permission to fly to Seoul via Ulaan Baatar in Mongolia. Several weeks later all branches of the family unite in Seoul for the first time. After Hongyong

Baek embraced Yong Woon, all members formed a semicircle in front of her, lowered their heads, and bowed deeply before her.

This film has been used very effectively in the classroom. Students who have read Helie Lee's books, *Still Life with Rice* and/or *In the Absence of Sun*, will appreciate being able to visualize the members of the family. The documentary serves as a glowing tribute to the life of her remarkable grandmother and conveys an understanding of the Korean people's longing for reunification of their country.

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The Crossing is available by contacting ABCNewstore.com or 1-(800) 505-6139. Order number is N98January 16-01. VHS is available for \$39.95 plus \$5.95 for shipping (private use). The price for institutional use is \$79.95 plus \$7.95 for shipping. Orders may take up to six weeks for delivery.