



MY  
ESCAPE  
FROM  
NORTH  
KOREA

A Thousand  
Miles to  
Freedom

EUNSUN KIM  
WITH SÉBASTIEN FALLETTI

TRANSLATED BY DAVID TIAN

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# A Thousand Miles to Freedom



*My Escape from North Korea*

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WITH SÉBASTIEN FALLETTI

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*For the youth of North Korea:  
That you may find  
freedom and the right to dream*

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*Everything recounted in this book is true. However, to protect the members of my family who still remain in North Korea, I am writing under a pseudonym, and other names and details have been changed.*

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*December 199*

For nearly a week, I had been alone in our tiny, freezing apartment in Eundeok, the town in North Korea where I was born. Other than a coffee table and a wooden dresser, my parents had sold all of our furniture to buy food to fill our stomachs. Even the carpeting was gone, so I slept on the cement floor in a makeshift sleeping bag pulled together from old clothes. The walls were completely bare except for two framed, side-by-side portraits of our “Eternal President” Kim Il-sung and his successor, the “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il, staring down at me. Selling these portraits would have been considered sacrilege, punishable by death.

Even though darkness was starting to fall on this late December afternoon, I could still just manage to read what I was writing. Once the sun went down, I would have no more light—electricity no longer worked in the apartment, and besides, the lightbulbs had been gone for quite some time already. There was no more heating, either, but I hardly felt the cold at all, because I was completely exhausted after several days without eating. I was sure that I was about to die of hunger.

And so I started to write my last will and testament.

I was eleven years old.

*Earlier that Dec*

For the third time in the past week, I decided to go out in search of my mother and Keumsun, my oldest sister. They had left our apartment six days ago for Rajin-Sonbong, a large city nearby, to try to find food, since there was nothing left to eat in Eundeok. Mustering up all the courage I had within me, I crossed the bridge over the river and took the main road up to the train station. There were not many people walking along the sidewalks, but even so I made sure to get a good look at everyone who passed by, just in case my mother was coming back from the other direction. On my left, I glimpsed the noodle shop where I used to love eating, where my dad had taken me on special occasions. A little farther up the road, I caught sight of the photo studio where my family had once had a family portrait taken. When I finally reached the bus station, I was given permission to ride for free in the back of a crowded shuttle bus on the way to Rajin-Sonbong, a trip that takes about an hour. I was probably allowed on for free because I was still a child.



Throughout the entire trip, in my desperation to find my mother, I nervously scrutinized every car and every truck we passed along the way. My efforts were in vain; at the terminal, I found myself alone amid a barrage of uniformed men. In front of me, an electric fence protected the entrance to Rajin-Sonbong. A special permit was required to enter the city. I must have waited at the gate for a good hour or so, hopefully and anxiously watching everyone who walked out, searching for my mother's face. Unfortunately, neither my mom nor Keumsun emerged from the crowd. At last, disheartened, I decided to return home, since nightfall was rapidly approaching.

I had made the same journey twice before, but after this trip, I was sure the two of them would never come back to me. Something must have happened to them. Or maybe, it occurred to me, they had decided to abandon me. With a heavy, bitter heart, I began to resent my mother. As she was leaving, she had told me she would bring back something to eat "in two or three days." She left me fifteen North Korean won to live on, which, at the time, seemed like quite a large fortune in my eyes. I was thrilled at first—I'd never had so much money before in my life. My eyes shone brightly with excitement. Like a real adult, I proudly went by myself to the *jangmadang*, the market next to the river. At the market, I bought a block of tofu, and then I returned to our little apartment on the second floor of our building. There, I ate the flabby tofu by the spoonful, rationing it so that it would last until my family returned. For two days, I stayed at home, watching people on the street through the window. Ever since my father had died a few weeks earlier, on November 11, my sister and I no longer attended school. We were too busy looking for the roots and timber in the mountains which we needed to eat or sell to survive. Besides, we would have been embarrassed to go back to school, since we no longer had any presentable clothes. We had sold everything we had and were wearing ragged clothes. When I went outside these days, I was always afraid of running into classmates.

\* \* \*

After forty-eight hours had passed, hunger began to gnaw at my stomach, and my fear of being abandoned started to swell. When I finished eating the tofu, there was nothing else left in the apartment to eat. And my mom had still not returned home yet. I lay down and tried to sleep on the floor, closing my eyes and counting to ten in my head; surely, she would come back by the time I was finished. But when I got to ten, nothing happened, so then I counted in reverse from ten to one. Still, nothing changed.

Soon, I started skipping meals. On the balcony, I found some dusty turnip leaves, left over from when we had spread them there to dry in the sun. I grabbed some of the least discolored leaves to boil and make into a soup. For two days, I survived on this tasteless concoction.

Another two days passed, during which time I didn't eat anything. Except for my third trip to Rajin-Sonbong, I no longer even had enough energy to go out and beg or steal. Little by little, my body started to get used to the stabbing hunger in my stomach, but I lost all of my strength. Overcome by my weakness, I tried to sleep. I felt like the ground was going to open up and swallow me, like I was going to get sucked into the depths of the earth.

Suddenly, I realized I was going to die soon. This was it. By the time my family came back, it would be too late. Ever since the start of the Arduous March—the great North Korean famine of the mid-1990s—I had known I wasn't going to make it through alive. I had become so used to the idea that I wasn't even afraid of dying anymore. Even so, I knew that I didn't want to leave the world like this, without a trace of myself left behind. At once, I decided to write my testament. I wanted to tell my mom all that I had gone through. I wanted to let her know that I had waited for her, that I had tried my best to find her. And, especially, I wanted her to know that I felt abandoned.

In the drawer of the coffee table, I fished out a small notebook and a pencil from among the few valuable items that we had not sold. The paper in the notebook was of good quality. Crouched under the twilight, I started to write my will. In the notebook, I recounted all my trials and tribulations, as well as my three voyages to and from Rajin-Sonbong. Clenching my pencil tightly, and full of despair, I filled out an entire page.

Mom, *I wrote*. I am waiting for you. I have been waiting for you for six days. I feel like I'm going to die soon. Why haven't you come back to me yet?

After finishing the page, I started crying and fell to the ground as the darkness of night gradually began to envelop me. Suddenly, I heard noise coming from the stairs. My heart started to skip.

Alas, it was just the neighbors, returning home to their apartment.

I left my will on the coffee table and, my face soaked in tears, I laid myself down and closed my eyes. I was sure that I was never going to wake up again.

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March 201

The automated doors slam shut. The train I'm taking rattles back and forth as it passes through the underground tunnels of Seoul's subway system. As I lean against the glass window, a medley of bright colors from advertisements starts to appear on the dark walls of the tunnel, with slogans that I can't seem to make out. Everything here in Seoul, South Korea, moves so quickly, including the metro.

My name is Eunsun Kim and today, as I write this, I am twenty-five years old.

If you were to look at me, you would probably assume I was just like any other college student. Because of my slight figure, you might not even realize that I am older than all of my friends. In about forty minutes, I will arrive at the entrance of Sogang University, one of the best universities in South Korea. My campus is not as impressive as those of the prestigious Korea University or Yonsei University, but regardless, I feel right at home there, with its familiar landmarks and the many friends I have made.

I have my day already planned out. Equipped with my black-and-orange Samsung laptop, I am planning to spend the day preparing for my exams in the library. With my iPhone in its purple case, I will text my friends and arrange a quick meet-up at the Starbucks on campus. I like the caffe latte—the espresso is a bit bitter for my taste. After getting my coffee, I'll go back to the library, where I will try not to fall asleep while reading my textbooks. At Sogang University, I study Chinese language and culture, and later you will understand what led me to these subjects.

In South Korea, the competition to get the best grades is fierce, but still, I try my best. Few of my classmates are even aware that I did not have the opportunity to go to school for many years, and for the most part, I try to maintain a low profile to avoid drawing attention to the delay in my education. I enjoy learning and studying, especially at the beginning of each semester when the professors are fresh and enthusiastic. Later tonight, around ten o'clock, I'll return to our little apartment, situated right in the heart of Seoul, where I'll see my older sister, Keumsun, and my mother.

\* \* \*

Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, is a true metropolis, with over fifteen million residents, a skyline covered with tall skyscrapers, and an extensive highway system. The mighty Han River flows through the middle of the city, but in winter, when the river is frozen, you can just walk directly across it.

the river without using any of the bridges. Behind the river stand several steep mountains, and at the summit of one of them sits an immense tower built for television broadcasts. The Namsan Tower is the symbol of Seoul, the city that took me in, the city that I now call home. Here, traffic jams sometimes last for hours on end, even during heavy July rains, and the rent for apartments is sky-high. But life here is also so exhilarating, so convenient, and everything moves so fast. High-speed Internet is available everywhere. There is something interesting and fun to do on every street corner, both day and night.

I often meet up with my friends in Sinchon, a student neighborhood, to drink *maekju*, a local beer, in the bars that never seem to close. In the bars we also eat dried octopus and grilled *jjukkumi*, “baby” species with five arms each—a real treat. They are small enough that you can swallow them in just one bite. My friends refuse to believe me when I tell them seafood is fresher and tastier in North Korea. But it’s true! They don’t always understand me, because I come from a different world entirely. And most people could never even begin to imagine this other world where I was born and raised.

\* \* \*

The high-speed train vibrates below my feet. All around me, *ajumas*—the Korean term used to address married or middle-age women—watch their favorite shows on their cell phones with antennas sticking out. Some students, perched atop their high heels and holding on to the train’s metal bars for balance, are listening to their iPods. Others, staring into their pocket mirrors, are applying mascara. They disdainfully ignore the street vendor trying to sell his Frank Sinatra CDs. Talking through speakers on wheels that he drags along behind him, the vendor tries to peddle his CD collection to the old gentlemen on the train. As the train travels from station to station, the platforms fill up and empty almost mechanically.

The silence of the South Korean metro allows me to ruminate for a moment. I begin reflecting on my memories of the train stations in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, that I visited with my dad such a long time ago. The stations were so magnificent and luxurious, with big beautiful purple chandeliers, like something you might expect to see in a major Hollywood film. The train stations in Seoul are much blander. I will remember the trip we made to Pyongyang for the rest of my life. I was nine years old, and we were by ourselves, Keumsun, my father, and me. Mom didn’t come with us; she preferred to stay back home and take care of things at the apartment. Even though the famine was already taking hold and we had nothing to eat, the trip to Pyongyang felt magical. There weren’t any skyscrapers in sight, but we saw a hotel under construction that reached a hundred and fifty meters in height. Workers and machines dangled from the top of the hotel. From such a distance, they appeared so tiny that they looked like little ants.

\* \* \*

Only three stations now separate me from the Sogang University campus, and my heart starts beating

faster and faster as the train accelerates. The speed of the train makes me feel a certain melancholy in my heart: it reminds me that I am from a completely different world. Where I'm from, it took two long days to get from Eundeok, the little town where we lived, to Chongjin, just ninety-five kilometers away, where my grandparents lived. The trip to Chongjin was always an exhausting one. We would pass through frigid temperatures, and we were always crammed together in the train like farm animals. We relieved ourselves of bodily waste using little tins we carried with us. If we moved, we would lose our spot to someone else. In South Korea, I can travel the same distance in under twenty minutes on a high-speed train. Back in North Korea, only the capital had modern amenities, like the metro stations that I found so dazzling.

I now find myself thinking of everyone I left behind, all of the people from whom I have heard nothing at all since I left my country. Then I was eleven years old, hungry, and without a home. My aunts, my uncles, my friends at school ... have they survived the famine? On the train, another rider stares at me out of the corner of his eye, as if I am some outsider who doesn't belong here. Still, I have tried my hardest to blend in, with my high heels, short skirt, and tight jacket. Whether or not I have succeeded in looking like I'm from South Korea, the reality is that I was born in Eundeok, a small industrial village in North Hamgyong Province, on August 15, 1986, in North Korea. In my quest for liberty and freedom, I have finally reached South Korea, after a nine-year journey across China and Mongolia. Here in Seoul, I have a passport. I no longer have to live in hiding, and I have built a new life for myself.

However, my memories of the north regularly come back to me, and one question in particular still haunts me: Why must the people of my home country continue to live in such suffering? Since arriving in Seoul, I have learned, through reading various books and newspapers, that the misery of North Korea is the fault of an absurd totalitarian regime. The country is a complete economic disaster. The Kim family dynasty, the world's only communist dynasty, ruthlessly crushes any dissent.

These answers do not satisfy me and do little to assuage the unease in my heart. On the contrary, in fact, these answers make me feel totally powerless. I live barely forty kilometers from the barbed-wire border that separates me from my homeland, and yet there is nothing that I can do for my people, who are drained of energy by the famine and by the repression of an unrelenting totalitarian regime. For the twenty-five million people who live there, North Korea has become a true hell on earth, forgotten by the rest of the world. Even South Koreans, who share the same blood heritage, seem to have forgotten about the plight of their northern counterparts. At times, I feel overwhelmed by this sense of helplessness, by the feeling that there is nothing I can do to help my brothers and sisters to the north.

\* \* \*

*“Sinchon Station.”*

The robotic voice coming from the loudspeakers breaks the silence of the train and pulls me away from my thoughts. I get off the train and start walking up the stairs in my usual automaton-like manner. This time, however, as soon as I step back aboveground, I decide that I will no longer sit back

and do nothing. I have to tell my story to the world. I have to tell my story to give a voice to the millions of North Koreans who are dying slowly and in silence. And I have to tell the world about the hundreds of thousands among them who have tried to escape from that hellhole, who are presently hiding in China, fearing for their lives. Here I am, twenty-two miles deep into the promised land South Korea. And yet here, refugees from the north are still treated as second-class citizens, when the only sin we are guilty of is refusing to die from starvation.

Because my North Korean brothers and sisters do not have the ability to speak out for themselves I am writing on their behalf. One day, I am sure, the two Koreas will reunite. It will be a long and complicated process, but it *will* happen. For the Korean peninsula to reunite, we are going to need the help of the entire world. But in order to find the solution, we first must understand the roots of the problem.

Since that fateful day in December when I was eleven years old, the day I wrote my will, I have, along with my mother and my sister, found some of these roots.

This is my story.

---

As a young girl, I never could have imagined that my life would change so quickly and so drastically. I didn't know it then, but after the winter of 1997, I would no longer have my childhood. For many years, up until I was nine years old, I was a very happy little girl. I had everything I could possibly want in life.

\* \* \*

Eundeok, my hometown, was located on the northeastern tip of the mountainous country of North Korea, fewer than fifteen kilometers away from the Tumen River, which separated the country from China and Russia. On the other side of the river, it took less than one hour to get to the sea. During the winter it was bitterly cold, and the snow stayed for weeks on end under an immense blue sky. Sometimes, I had to go to school trudging through a thick fog of white. My birthday, on the other hand, was in the middle of summer and was always warm and humid. It was on the same date that we celebrated the day Korea was liberated from Japanese rule in 1945. My birthday was always a very happy time.

Although it was surrounded by factories, my hometown was not very large. In just one hour, you could tour the entire town. On the horizon, you could make out a few trees on the mountains far away, but the nearby hills were all stripped bare, because the forests had been razed for firewood. Before reaching the first few buildings in town, you would find several mines that had become famous; many former, now disgraced, leaders from Pyongyang had been sent to work in them as punishment. The army also had several bases nearby, just like they do everywhere else in the country. We lived in perpetual fear of an invasion from the United States or from their ally, South Korea. Whenever I climbed the mountains to collect mushrooms, I caught sight of some large cannons, more or less hidden in the landscape. A little farther up, there were some barracks that we tried to avoid, because the men in the army had a bad reputation. They often abused their power to take advantage of poor people or those less fortunate. If a group of soldiers ran into a man smoking a cigarette, for instance, they could ask him to hand over his pack of cigarettes. If the man said no, the soldiers would make sure he learned to never refuse them again.

In the middle of Eundeok flows a river, with a large bridge linking either side. I sometimes liked to wade in that river, from which I lived ten minutes away by foot. The biggest buildings in the city

all made of gray cement, with balconies painted white or pink, had at most five floors. There were no advertisements anywhere. All of the walls there were either bare or plastered with propaganda praising our “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il and the “socialist paradise” he had created for us in North Korea. The building in which I lived was only three floors, with heavily cracked walls.

“This building is bound to collapse,” all the neighbors used to say.

In spite of everything, for the first few years of the 1990s, I generally felt pretty content. Nothing made me happier than to have my father pick me up after school. Some days, he would take me to the movies, using tickets he had gotten ahold of as a result of his connections at work. He worked at a weapons factory called “January 20th,” named in commemoration of the day that Kim Il-sung, the founder of North Korea, paid it a personal visit. In North Korea, the names of most buildings were dates, in honor of visits from North Korean leaders. This policy of naming things after dates was one of the practices meant to maintain the cult of propaganda surrounding our heads of state, but it was only much later that I understood this.

Every time we went to the movies, my dad would meet me in front of the theater during the afternoon. I walked to the theater all by myself, like I was a real adult. But it was not enough to simply have a ticket. The hardest part was finding a seat, because people always rushed to get into the theater. So my dad would mount me up high upon his shoulders as we made our way through the crowd. Going to the movies and sitting on my dad’s shoulders in the darkened theater were some of the happiest moments of my life. We watched films about brave heroes fighting against the imperialist Japanese colonizers. All around the screen, there were inscriptions that read, “Let us all unite behind the great general Kim Jong-il!”

Sometimes, my dad would also take me to street vendors to buy some *naengmyeon*, “cold noodles,” a North Korean specialty from Pyongyang. We would bring a bowl, and my dad would proudly present the young lady working there with food coupons given to him by the government. After receiving the noodles, we would take them home to eat. I had never tasted anything so delicious. Even if there wasn’t quite enough to satisfy our hunger, that couldn’t ruin the happiness I felt at being able to eat these noodles.

In those years, my parents would never have been able to imagine that they would soon be dying of hunger, because they came from “good” families. That is to say, their families were part of the elite class; they had connections in the army and in the Workers’ Party, which ruled North Korea. When my parents were very young, they both lived in Pyongyang, a privileged city reserved only for the elite. My grandfather was a highly ranked officer who dreamed of one day sending my mother to Kim Il-sung University, the most prestigious university in our country and the school where Kim Jong-il himself had studied. To ensure my mom could get the good grades necessary for admission, her father bribed the teachers by renovating the playground. Unfortunately for him, my mom was a tomboy who didn’t really care much for school—she wanted to become a driver. What’s more, on the day of the big university-entrance exam, she arrived late. And just like that, my grandfather’s ambitious plan for my mother collapsed.



Since then, however, my mother has proven herself to be a person of remarkably strong character, a trait which, without a doubt, saved my life. She was essentially the head of our house. She's not very imposing in size, but she is highly intelligent and very determined. Even when she falls ill, her face still looks healthy and strong and doesn't show anything out of the ordinary. In this respect, I am a lot like my mother. When I was little, any time I was feeling sick, I could never get anyone to believe me because I still appeared healthy, and I was always sent off to school anyway. Maybe it was this ability that allowed me to survive while others did not.

In Eundeok, it was my mother who, thanks to her job working at the hospital, provided the household with food. Whatever food we needed she brought from the cafeteria at work, which kept us from going hungry for many years. She often complained about my father and his lack of common sense. She found him to be both too naïve and not physically strong enough. I remember looking at their wedding photo and thinking that he looked fairly robust, but then I would have to remind myself again that in reality, he had indeed become quite frail. Once, my mother sent him out to steal corn from the cornfields, so that we could have something to eat. Not only did he come back empty-handed but he was also missing his coat. He must have given it to the farmers who caught him in the act and threatened to denounce him to the regime. Mom was *furious*. In Korea, if a man wants a woman to respect him, he needs to be strong. Their marriage was arranged by my maternal grandmother as my mom was leaving Pyongyang for Chongjin, the large port city on the eastern shore of North Korea.

My dad had no business sense, but there was one thing he was passionate about: writing. At the factory, it was always he who volunteered to write reports and propaganda. Above all, he had a head of gold, and as his daughter, that was good enough for me.

I could also always count on my older sister, Keumsun, to protect me whenever I felt trouble coming my way. If boys ever came to bother me, she didn't hesitate to confront them. Although we were once mistaken for twins, I don't think Keumsun and I look very much alike. She is two years older than I am, but she is smaller, with darker skin, and large eyes that contrast with mine. On the other hand, we have the same nose, and you can definitely tell that we belong to the same family. More than anything, Keumsun has always had this dynamic personality; she is confident in herself and can persuade just about anyone that she is right. In Eundeok, my parents' friends nicknamed her the "Little Adult" because of how grown-up she seemed.

\* \* \*

As a child, I enjoyed going to school and I was a good student. Every morning it was the same routine. While it was still dark out, Mom would wake us up. Then I washed my face with cold water, which in winter was often freezing. After cleaning myself up, I carefully ironed my school uniform, which consisted of a navy blue skirt, a white blouse, and a little red scarf that signified membership in the Children's League. I was not yet allowed to wear the little pin with Kim Jong-il's likeness on it that everyone pinned over his or her breast after joining the Youth League.

While it was still not yet light outside, I would rush out to find my friends in the big esplanade

the center of town. At seven o'clock sharp, we marched to school row by row, class by class, all while singing songs in praise of our country's leaders:

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"Even though we are small, our spirit is large! We are always ready to serve the great general Kim Jong-il!"

One of my favorite songs was called "A Thousand Miles of Learning." The lyrics recounted the young Kim Il-sung's odyssey across mountains in China while he was fighting the Japanese imperialists.

After ten minutes of military-style marching, my classmates and I would stop all at once and the teachers would come to inspect our uniforms. Finally, once we passed inspection, we were allowed to enter the classroom. We started every day with a silent reading, generally a page about Kim Jong-il's youth from which we had to draw lessons about how to behave ourselves. One time, we read a story about Kim Jong-suk, Kim Jong-il's mother, who was gathering grains in front of the intrigued eyes of her son.

"Why are you doing that, Mommy? We have enough to eat already," asked the future dictator of our country.

"Because not a single one of our country's precious resources should go to waste," responded his mother wisely.

I didn't always understand the hidden message in each of these anecdotes, but I tried to commit them to memory anyway, because the teachers asked us to do so.

In class, I often looked around furtively. There were forty of us, sitting at tables aligned neatly along the floor.

The teacher's large wooden desk sat atop the platform at the front of the classroom. On the wall behind it hung a blackboard and, above that, there was a portrait of Kim Jong-il, carefully watching us at all times. At the back of the room, there was a stove, which we used in winter to heat up our lunches.

Every morning when the teacher entered the room, she selected one of us to read the page about Kim Jong-il out loud. Studying the lives of our country's leaders was one of the most important subjects we had at school, along with mathematics, Korean language arts, and the communist ethic.

We were expected to sit in class silently. Even the tiniest bit of disturbance was met with public humiliation: in front of the whole class, the teacher would beat us with her pointer stick. At the time, I thought it was only fair that these troublemakers should be punished in this way. However, I should add that I never received this kind of treatment myself, because I was considered a good student.

Nevertheless, my status as a good student did not excuse me from the self-criticism sessions that were mandatory for everyone in the country, whether you were a factory worker or a student. In my classroom, at the end of each day, each person had to confess his or her misdeeds in front of the entire class. I remember one day I made a critical remark while toiling in the teacher's garden, a task assigned to the "good students."

"What's the point of gathering all this corn if we won't be able to eat it?" I grumbled to myself.

“That individualistic attitude is unacceptable in the socialist society of North Korea!” my teacher sharply rebuked me, when she called me over after a classmate denounced me.

The next day, I reluctantly had to do my self-criticism. As soon as I finished, as payback, I denounced the behavior of the classmate who had sold me out. To be honest, I felt a sense of sadistic pleasure in getting revenge because I was jealous of this girl. Her dad worked in the same factory as mine, but since he was ranked one level higher than my father, her family received better provisions than mine did.

At school, you needed to respect the class hierarchy. At the beginning of each year, we “elected” a class president and other people responsible for other important tasks. Even though officially there were free elections, there was only ever one candidate for each position. It’s only now, as I reflect back on my childhood, that I realize the elections were just for show.

Here’s an example of how the elections went: Once, the day before the election, the teacher called me over privately, probably because I was a good student. The next day, she asked the class:

“Do any of you have a candidate in mind?”

The room was silent. After a few moments had passed, I nervously lifted my finger and pointed to one of the students:

“Kim Song-ku,” I said, following the orders I had been given the night beforehand.

“Do we all agree?” the teacher asked the class.

Without hesitating, the class unanimously approved, and this is how my friend Kim Song-ku was elected. His father was a carpenter, and we suspected that his father was supplying the teacher with firewood. In North Korea, the best way to ensure the success of one’s children in school was to offer gifts to the teachers. This was something that my parents never seemed to understand.

One time during the elections, however, I received quite the surprise. The teacher asked the students to elect someone to be responsible for cleaning up the classroom after class each day. It wasn’t the most glamorous of jobs, but it conferred a certain status of prestige in the school. A boy stood up and announced my name. My cheeks turned bright red as soon as he said my name. At that age, I was still very shy around boys and didn’t really talk to any. I’d never really noticed this boy before, but after that day, I developed a secret crush on him. His badge had two stripes and three stars, which was considered a very high honor. I had only two stars. These emblems designated the hierarchy of the class, the best of whom had three stripes and three stars. The teacher awarded the stripes and stars to reward the best students, the ones who were smartest, or those who volunteered for a class duty. She also often rewarded those children whose parents were generous toward her or toward the school. For example, once when a window broke, a boy’s parents offered to pay for its repair. Just like that, their son was promoted in the class hierarchy. This was how things happened in North Korea. Unfortunately for Keumsun and me, my parents never fully understood how this system worked.

For a long time after I was nominated to clean the classroom, I wondered if the boy who had nominated me had done so because he liked me or because he had been told to do so by the teacher. T

this day, I still do not know.

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I don't know what's become of him, and I will probably never find out.

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I will remember one fateful afternoon in July 1994 in vivid detail for the rest of my life.

I was nearly eight years old. It was pouring rain outside. At the time, we were living in a small house, and the rain was pounding down so hard that the roof was leaking. With my dad, I was running from one end of the room to the other trying to arrange buckets to collect the rain and avoid flooding in the house. Suddenly, we heard a loud knock at the front door. When we opened the door, we found a man who looked quite bewildered standing on our porch, dripping wet. It was the head of our neighborhood, known as the *inminbanjang*. Just the mention of his name struck fear throughout the neighborhood, because he was in charge of monitoring and reporting to the authorities everything that happened on our block.

The entire country was littered with these worrisome people, who even to this day ensure that the regime maintains its iron grip over the lives of twenty-five million North Koreans.

“Make sure you watch the news tonight,” the *inminbanjang* ordered us, and he seemed as confused as we were. There must have been something important planned for the broadcast that night.

Then, as quickly as the man had arrived, he disappeared again through the pouring rain. It was the first time we had ever received this kind of directive from him.

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When the news came on that night, I sat in front of the television next to Keumsun and my father. We were a little excited because we were very curious to find out what was going on, but we were also a bit nervous. Something truly extraordinary must be happening. As usual, the anchorwoman in her traditional Korean outfit, in the middle of Pyongyang with the Taedong River in the background, appeared on screen. But this evening, she carried a sullen look on her face, like she was on the verge of crying.

“President Kim Il-sung has died,” she announced suddenly, fighting back tears.

My father was paralyzed from shock. The anchorwoman might as well have told us that the sky had just collapsed. My sister and I watched our father nervously. The images being displayed on the television had us all stupefied. I didn’t really understand everything that was going on, but I knew something unimaginable must have just happened.

Shortly afterward, my mother came home from work in tears. I’d never seen her like this before.

At the hospital, she had learned of the news with her coworkers, and one of them had suffered a heart attack from the shock. On that day, many people across the country died from shock. My mom was devastated, because she loved our president with all her heart. In Pyongyang, when she was a child, she had gone to school near Mangyongdae, the little farmhouse where Kim Il-sung was born. Going to Kim Il-sung's birthplace has become a national pilgrimage for North Koreans; I visited it myself when I was very little. My mom told me that once, Kim Il-sung himself visited them at school—my mom stood within one meter of him! He was very tall and had a warm smile, according to my mother. He always looked very cheerful and friendly on the pervasive portraits of him throughout the country, like the one sitting above the entrance to the train station at Eundeok.

He was a god to us, and the mere possibility that he could die seemed unthinkable. Could we still live without our god? Without our father? He was the man who had liberated us from the clutches of Japanese rule, he was the founder of our nation, he was the father of all North Koreans. When his death was announced, daily life took a hiatus across the entire country until the funeral, which was televised a few days later. All around North Korea, scenes of mass hysteria broke out: soldiers rolled around on the floor in tears, women yelled in anguish. On the TV screen, the rain falling behind him, the anchorwoman explained that “even the sky was mourning the death of the Great Leader.”

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Today, even as I am living in the heart of Seoul, this phrase continues to resonate in my mind, because for me, it represents the indoctrination that we were subjected to and that is still in full force in North Korea. That day, on July 8, 1994, I truly did believe that the sky was crying from despair at the death of Kim Il-sung. I know now, of course, that the downpours were because we were in the middle of monsoon season, and it always rains a lot in Korea during that time of year. But at the time, I was completely brainwashed and believed everything I heard in school and at home. There was no reason for me not to believe—there was no way for me to hear any other version of the truth. Even the adults had no outside information with which to compare what we were learning in school and on TV.

My expatriation has allowed me to unlearn some of the propaganda fed to us and let me judge reality through my own eyes: my country is ruled under the hands of a bloodthirsty family dynasty. The Kims are not our loving fathers, but are ruthless tyrants. However, today, the overwhelming majority of my fellow countrymen to the north have no way of seeing the truth. My people are completely isolated in a closed-off world. They cannot be blamed if they don't revolt, because they don't know how to form their own opinions and they don't fully understand the true scope of their misfortune. It's difficult to measure the harsh reality of the dictatorship. Internet access is limited exclusively to the highest-ranking members of the Party. Watching foreign television programs, making phone calls abroad, or exchanging mail with foreigners are all strictly forbidden and punishable by imprisonment in one of the country's infamous labor camps.

Nevertheless, largely as a result of bribery, more and more information has been filtering through the Chinese border, thanks to street vendors and smugglers. But their influence barely makes

it past the surface. Along the border between North Korea and South Korea, the world's most heavily militarized border, watchtowers and mines form an impenetrable wall: no messages can reach North Korea except for a few pamphlets denouncing the Kim regime's crimes, sent over the heavily fortified border by balloon. Many families torn apart by the end of the Korean War in 1953 remain without news about their parents who live on the other side of the Demilitarized Zone, or "DMZ." Such is the name given to the barbed barrier that still separates the two sides of the Korean peninsula.

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Like everyone else, on the day after Kim Il-sung's death, I was devastated. In the early morning, my mother sent Keumsun and me to the mountains to collect flowers in Kim Il-sung's honor. It was a task that we carried out, just like all the other children in North Korea, on the birthdays of each one of our leaders. If you came back empty-handed, or worse, with yellow flowers, you could get into a lot of trouble. You would become a laughingstock and be punished by the teachers. Yellow was considered the color of our enemies, the Americans. We thought that all Americans were blond, and so we were taught to hate the color yellow.

On this evening, July 9, 1994, there was not a single flower left standing after the children had raided all the flower fields.

As for me, after collecting flowers, I came back and attended a ceremony downtown for public grieving and, in the midst of that frenzy, I started to cry as well. I didn't know exactly why I was crying, but I felt that it was necessary to do so. I remember that standing right next to me, there was a girl who did not manage to actually cry.

*She's just pretending*, I thought while watching the single tear forming in the corner of her eye. She had no choice but to at least try. She risked being looked down upon if her eyes remained dry.

However, our pain was genuine. We loved Kim Il-sung and his son and successor, Kim Jong-il, with all our hearts. They were to us what Santa Claus is to other children across the world. April 15 and February 16, their respective birthdays, were marvelous days for the kids. We received one kilogram of sweets each on them. The night beforehand, we were always about as excited as we could possibly be, and I could never manage to fall asleep. The morning of their birthdays, with my uniform completely clean, I would proudly go collect my clear plastic bag of goodies with the inscription "We have nothing to envy in the world" written on the exterior. I suppose that this was one way the regime ensured we understood that there was no one happier than us. Inside the bags, there were packs of chewing gum, toffees, sugar-covered soybean paste, and cookies. On the way back, I would hold my bag tight against my body, hidden underneath a cloth that my mom had given me, in order to avoid having my sweets stolen by other children.

\* \* \*

Even after I arrived in South Korea, it took me a long time to see the truth about my home country. I did not want to believe that Kim Jong-il was a ruthless dictator. In Seoul, I read a book written by Ki

Jong-il's former Japanese cook, who fled to Tokyo to escape from his clutches after having prepared sushi for him for many years. In his book, Kenji Fujimoto recounts in great detail the cruelty of our leader. It was so far from the image of a saintly guardian that I had learned about in school that, first, I refused to acknowledge what I was reading.

In school, as a child, every morning we would read an anecdote about the exemplary life of Kim Jong-il. In a fairytale-like story, we were told that, on the day he was born, a star appeared above Mount Paektu, the enormous volcano where our nation was founded several millennia ago. We sang songs in praise of our liberator, the great Kim Il-sung. When I visited Pyongyang as a little girl, my dad showed me a tree in a park situated along the Taedong River, which, as a young boy, Kim Il-sung had climbed in order to try to catch a rainbow. I was told that was how he had gotten the idea to launch a socialist revolution.

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Today, these lies have been dispelled in my mind. In Seoul, I have learned about the horrific labor camps in my home country, where at least a hundred and fifty thousand prisoners are slowly dying right this moment. I was unaware of the existence of these camps when I lived in North Korea; I only knew that people were disappearing. In Seoul, you often hear about other defectors who have escaped like I have. I understand now that our country was in fact a vast prison, where the detainees were unaware of the extent of their misfortune, since their first priority was always fighting for their lives.

All of these questions came back to me in November 2010, many years after my escape, when North Korea suddenly bombarded a South Korean island in the Yellow Sea. Four people were killed as a result of the attack, just sixty-six kilometers away from Seoul. My sister and I thought that war was about to break out.

“They are insane!” Keumsun said to me.

For me, I do not believe that there will be an all-out war, just like I don't think the regime will ever give up its power, nor will it abandon its atomic weapons, which it is building in secret. And I constantly wonder if I will ever get the chance to return to North Korea, a North Korea liberated from tyranny and free of pain and hunger.



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