

# In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom

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"I am most grateful for two things: that I was born in North Korea, and that I escaped from North Korea."

Yeonmi Park has told the harrowing story of her escape from North Korea as a child many times, but never before has she revealed the most intimate and devastating details of the repressive society she was raised in and the enormous price she paid to escape.

Park's family was loving and close-knit, but life in North Korea was brutal, practically medieval. Park would regularly go without food and was made to believe that, Kim Jong Il, the country's dictator, could read her mind. After her father was imprisoned and tortured by the regime for trading on the black-market, a risk he took in order to provide for his wife and two young daughters, Yeonmi and her family were branded as criminals and forced to the cruel margins of North Korean society. With thirteen-year-old Park suffering from a botched appendectomy and weighing a mere sixty pounds, she and her mother were smuggled across the border into China.

I wasn't dreaming of freedom when I escaped from North Korea. I didn't even know what it meant to be free. All I knew was that if my family stayed behind, we would probably die—from starvation, from disease, from the inhuman conditions of a prison labor camp. The hunger had become unbearable; I was willing to risk my life for the promise of a bowl of rice. But there was more to our journey than our own survival. My mother and I were searching for my older sister, Eunmi, who had left for China a few days earlier and had not been heard from since.

Park knew the journey would be difficult, but could not have imagined the extent of the hardship to come. Those years in China cost Park her childhood, and nearly her life. By the time she and her mother made their way to South Korea two years later, her father was dead and her sister was still missing. Before now, only her mother knew what really happened between the time they crossed the Yalu river into China and when they followed the stars through the frigid Gobi Desert to freedom. As she writes, "I convinced myself that a lot of what I had experienced never happened. I taught myself to forget the rest."

In *In Order to Live*, Park shines a light not just into the darkest corners of life in North Korea, describing the deprivation and deception she endured and which millions of North Korean people continue to endure to this day, but also onto her own most painful and difficult memories. She tells with bravery and dignity for the first time the story of how she and her mother were betrayed and sold into sexual slavery in China and forced to suffer terrible psychological and physical hardship before they finally made their way to Seoul, South Korea—and to freedom.

Still in her early twenties, Yeonmi Park has lived through experiences that few people of any age will ever know—and most people would never recover from. Park confronts her past with a startling resilience, refusing to be defeated or defined by the circumstances of her former life in North Korea and China. In spite of everything, she has never stopped being proud of where she is from, and never stopped striving for a better life. Indeed, today she is a human rights activist working determinedly to bring attention to the oppression taking

place in her home country.

Park's testimony is rare, edifying, and terribly important, and the story she tells in *In Order to Live* is heartbreaking and unimaginable, but never without hope. Her voice is riveting and dignified. This is the human spirit at its most indomitable.

Yeonmi Park is a human rights activist who was born in North Korea.

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## Prologue

On the cold, black night of March 31, 2007, my mother and I scrambled down the steep, rocky bank of the frozen Yalu River that divides North Korea and China. There were patrols above us and below, and guard posts one hundred yards on either side of us manned by soldiers ready to shoot anyone attempting to cross the border. We had no idea what would come next, but we were desperate to get to China, where there might be a chance to survive.

I was thirteen years old and weighed only sixty pounds. Just a week earlier, I'd been in a hospital in my hometown of Hyesan along the Chinese border, suffering from a severe intestinal infection that the doctors had mistakenly diagnosed as appendicitis. I was still in terrible pain from the incision, and was so weak I could barely walk.

The young North Korean smuggler who was guiding us across the border insisted we had to go that night. He had paid some guards to look the other way, but he couldn't bribe all the soldiers in the area, so we had to be extremely cautious. I followed him in the darkness, but I was so unsteady that I had to scoot down the bank on my bottom, sending small avalanches of rocks crashing ahead of me. He turned and whispered angrily for me to stop making so much noise. But it was too late. We could see the silhouette of a North Korean soldier climbing up from the riverbed. If this was one of the bribed border guards, he didn't seem to recognize us.

"Go back!" the soldier shouted. "Get out of here!"

Our guide scrambled down to meet him and we could hear them talking in hushed voices. Our guide returned alone.

"Let's go," he said. "Hurry!"

It was early spring, and the weather was getting warmer, melting patches of the frozen river. The place where we crossed was steep and narrow, protected from the sun during the day so it was still solid enough to hold our weight—we hoped. Our guide made a cell phone call to someone on the other side, the Chinese side, and then whispered, "Run!"

The guide started running, but my feet would not move and I clung to my mother. I was so scared that I was completely paralyzed. The guide ran back for us, grabbed my hands, and dragged me across the ice. When we reached solid ground, we started running and didn't stop until we were out of sight of the border guards.

The riverbank was dark, but the lights of Chaingbai, China, glowed just ahead of us. I turned to take a quick glance back at the place where I was born. The electric power grid was down, as usual, and all I could see was a black, lifeless horizon. I felt my heart pounding out of my chest as we arrived at a small shack on the edge of some flat, vacant fields.

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But there was more to our journey than our own survival. My mother and I were searching for my older sister, Eunmi, who had left for China a few days earlier and had not been heard from since. We hoped that she would be there waiting for us when we crossed the river. Instead the only person to greet us was a bald, middle-aged Chinese man, an ethnic North Korean like many of the people living in this border area. The man said something to my mother, and then led her around the side of the building. From where I waited I could hear my mother pleading, "Aniyo! Aniyo!" No! No!

I knew then that something was terribly wrong. We had come to a bad place, maybe even worse than the one we had left.

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I am most grateful for two things: that I was born in North Korea, and that I escaped from North Korea. Both of these events shaped me, and I would not trade them for an ordinary and peaceful life. But there is more to the story of how I became who I am today.

Like tens of thousands of other North Koreans, I escaped my homeland and settled in South Korea, where we are still considered citizens, as if a sealed border and nearly

seventy years of conflict and tension never divided us. North and South Koreans have the same ethnic backgrounds, and we speak the same language-except in the North there are no words for things like "shopping malls," "liberty," or even "love," at least as the rest of the world knows it. The only true "love" we can express is worship for the Kims, a dynasty of dictators who have ruled North Korea for three generations. The regime blocks all outside information, all videos and movies, and jams radio signals. There is no World Wide Web and no Wikipedia. The only books are filled with propaganda telling us that we live in the greatest country in the world, even though at least half of North Koreans live in extreme poverty and many are chronically malnourished. My former country doesn't even call itself North Korea-it claims to be Chosun, the true Korea, a perfect socialist paradise where 25 million people live only to serve the Supreme Leader, Kim Jong Un. Many of us who have escaped call ourselves "defectors" because by refusing to accept our fate and die for the Leader, we have deserted our duty. The regime calls us traitors. If I tried to return, I would be executed.

The information blockade works both ways: not only does the government attempt to keep all foreign media from reaching its people, it also prevents outsiders from learning the truth about North Korea. The regime is known as the Hermit Kingdom because it tries to make itself unknowable. Only those of us who have escaped can describe what really goes on behind the sealed borders. But until recently, our stories were seldom heard.

I arrived in South Korea in the spring of 2009, a fifteen-year-old with no money and the equivalent of two years of primary school. Five years later, I was a sophomore at a top university in Seoul, a police administration major with a growing awareness of the burning need for justice in the land where I was born.

I have told the story of my escape from North Korea many times, in many forums. I have described how human traffickers tricked my mother and me into following them to China, where my mother protected me and sacrificed herself to be raped by the broker who had targeted me. Once in China, we continued to look for my sister, without success. My father crossed the border to join us in our search, but he died of untreated cancer a few months later. In 2009, my mother and I were rescued by Christian missionaries, who led us to the Mongolian border with China. From there we walked through the frigid Gobi Desert one endless winter night, following the stars to freedom.

All this is true, but it is not the whole story.

Before now, only my mother knew what really happened in the two years that passed between the night we crossed the Yalu River into China and the day we arrived in South Korea to begin a new life. I told almost nothing of my story to the other defectors and human rights advocates I met in South Korea. I believed that, somehow, if I refused to acknowledge the unspeakable past, it would disappear. I convinced myself that a lot of it never happened; I taught myself to forget the rest.

But as I began to write this book, I realized that without the whole truth my life would have no power, no real meaning. With the help of my mother, the memories of our lives in North

Korea and China came back to me like scenes from a forgotten nightmare. Some of the images reappeared with a terrible clarity; others were hazy, or scrambled like a deck of cards spilled on the floor. The process of writing has been the process of remembering, and of trying to make sense out of those memories.

Along with writing, reading has helped me order my world. As soon as I arrived in South Korea and could get my hands on translations of the world's great books, I began devouring them. Later I was able to read them in English. And as I began to write my own book, I came across a famous line by Joan Didion, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." Even though the writer and I come from such different cultures, I feel the truth of those words echoing inside me. I understand that sometimes the only way we can survive our own memories is to shape them into a story that makes sense out of events that seem inexplicable.

Along my journey I have seen the horrors that humans can inflict on one another, but I've also witnessed acts of tenderness and kindness and sacrifice in the worst imaginable circumstances. I know that it is possible to lose part of your humanity in order to survive. But I also know that the spark of human dignity is never completely extinguished, and that given the oxygen of freedom and the power of love, it can grow again.

This is my story of the choices I made in order to live.

## PART ONE

### North Korea

#### One

##### Even the Birds and Mice Can Hear You Whisper

The Yalu River winds like the tail of a dragon between China and North Korea on its way to the Yellow Sea. At Hyesan it opens into a valley in the Paektu Mountains, where the city of 200,000 sprawls between rolling hills and a high plateau covered with fields, patches of trees, and graves. The river, usually shallow and tame, is frozen solid during winter, which lasts the better part of the year. This is the coldest part of North Korea, with temperatures sometimes plunging to minus-40 degrees Fahrenheit. Only the toughest survive.

To me, Hyesan was home.

Just across the river is the Chinese city of Chaingbai, which has a large population of ethnic Koreans. Families on both sides of the border have been trading with one another for generations. As a child I would often stand in the darkness and stare across the river at the lights of Chaingbai, wondering what was going on beyond my city's limits. It was exciting to watch the colorful fireworks explode in the velvet black sky during festivals and Chinese New Year. We never had such things on our side of the border. Sometimes, when I walked down to the river to fill my buckets with water and the damp wind was blowing just right, I could actually smell delicious food, oily noodles and dumplings cooking in the kitchens on the other side. The same wind carried the voices of the Chinese children who were playing on the opposite bank.

"Hey, you! Are you hungry over there?" the boys shouted in Korean.

"No! Shut up, you fat Chinese!" I shouted back.

This wasn't true. In fact, I was very hungry, but there was no use in talking about it.

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I came into this world too soon.

My mother was only seven months pregnant when she went into labor, and when I was born on October 4, 1993, I weighed less than three pounds. The doctor at the hospital in Hyesan told my mother that I was so small there wasn't anything they could do for me. "She might live or she might die," he said. "We don't know." It was up to me to live.

No matter how many blankets my mother wrapped around me, she couldn't keep me warm. So she heated up a stone and put it in the blanket with me, and that's how I survived. A few days later, my parents brought me home, and waited.

My sister, Eunmi, had been born two years earlier, and this time my father, Park Jin Sik, was hoping for a son. In patriarchal North Korea, it was the male line that really mattered. However, he quickly recovered from his disappointment. Most of the time it's the mother who makes the strongest bond with a baby, but my father was the one who could soothe me when I was crying. It was in my father's arms that I felt protected and cherished. Both my mother and my father encouraged me, from the start, to be proud of who I am.

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When I was very young, we lived in a one-story house perched on a hill above the railroad tracks that curved like a rusty spine through the city.

Our house was small and drafty, and because we shared a wall with a neighbor we could always hear what was going on next door. We could also hear mice squeaking and skittering around in the ceiling at night. But it was paradise to me because we were there

together as a family.

My first memories are of the dark and the cold. During the winter months, the most popular place in our house was a small fireplace that burned wood or coal or whatever we could find. We cooked on top of the fire, and there were channels running under the cement floor to carry the smoke to a wooden chimney on the other side of the house. This traditional heating system was supposed to keep the room warm, but it was no match for the icy nights. At the end of the day, my mother would spread a thick blanket out next to the fire and we would all climb under the covers—first my mother, then me, then my sister, and my father on the end, in the coldest spot. Once the sun went down, you couldn't see anything at all. In our part of North Korea, it was normal to go for weeks and even months without any electricity, and candles were very expensive. So we played games in the dark. Sometimes under the covers we would tease each other.

"Whose foot is this?" my mother would say, poking with her toe.

"It's mine, it's mine!" Eunmi would cry.

On winter evenings and mornings, and even in summertime, everywhere we looked we could see smoke coming from the chimneys of Hyesan. Our neighborhood was very cozy and small, and we knew everyone who lived there. If smoke was not coming out of someone's house, we'd go knock on the door to check if everything was okay.

The unpaved lanes between houses were too narrow for cars, although this wasn't much of a problem because there were so few cars. People in our neighborhood got around on foot, or for the few who could afford one, on bicycle or motorbike. The paths would turn slippery with mud after a rain, and that was the best time for the neighborhood kids to play our favorite chasing game. But I was smaller and slower than the other children my age and always had a hard time fitting in and keeping up.

When I started school, Eunmi sometimes had to fight the older kids to defend me. She wasn't very big, either, but she was smart and quick. She was my protector and playmate. When it snowed, she carried me up the hills around our neighborhood, put me in her lap, and wrapped her arms around me. I held on tight as we slid back down on our bottoms, screaming and laughing. I was just happy to be part of her world.

In the summer, all the kids went down to play in the Yalu River, but I never learned how to swim. I just sat on the bank while the others paddled out into the current. Sometimes my sister or my best friend, Yong Ja, would see me by myself and bring me some pretty rocks they'd found in the deep river. And sometimes they held me in their arms and carried me a little way into the water before bringing me back to shore.

Yong Ja and I were the same age, and we lived in the same part of town. I liked her because we were both good at using our i...

Other Books



Friend, Paek Nam-nyong's *Friend* is a tale of marital intrigue, abuse, and divorce in North Korea. A woman in her thirties comes to a courthouse petitioning for a divorce. As the judge who hears her statement begins to investigate the case, the story unfolds into a broader consideration of love and marriage. The novel delves into its protagonists' past, describing how the couple first fell in love and then how their marriage deteriorated over the years. It chronicles the toll their acrimony takes on their son and their careers alongside the story of the judge's own marital troubles. A best-seller in North Korea, where Paek continues to live and write, *Friend* illuminates a side of life in the DPRK that Western readers have never before encountered. Far from being a propagandistic screed in praise of the Great Leader, *Friend* describes the lives of people who struggle with everyday problems such as marital woes and workplace conflicts. Instead of socialist-realist stock figures, Paek depicts complex characters who wrestle with universal questions of individual identity, the split between public and private selves, the unpredictability of existence, and the never-ending labor of maintaining a relationship. This groundbreaking translation of one of North Korea's most popular writers offers English-language readers a page-turner full of psychological tension as well as a revealing portrait of a society that is typically seen as closed to the outside world.

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