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In Order to Live

A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom

Written by Yeonmi Park

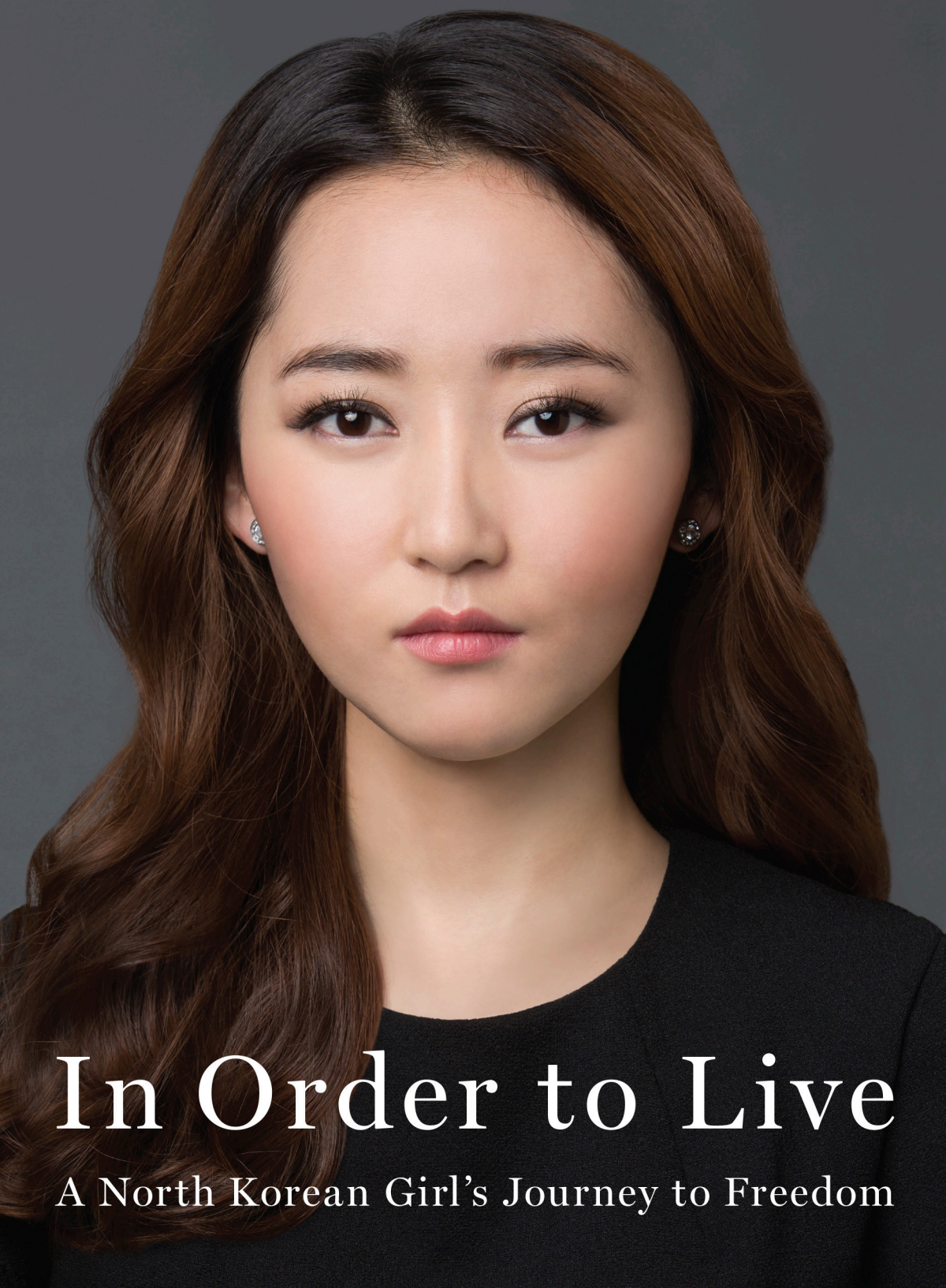
With Maryanne Vollers

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YEONMI PARK



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*For my family,
and for anyone, anywhere, struggling for freedom*

We tell ourselves stories in order to live.

—*Joan Didion*

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.

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.

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 imaginations to create our own toys. You could find a few manufactured dolls and other toys in the market, but they were usually too expensive. Instead we made little bowls and animals out of mud, and sometimes even miniature tanks; homemade military toys were very big in North

Korea. But we girls were obsessed with paper dolls and spent hours cutting them out of thick paper, making dresses and scarves for them out of scraps.

Sometimes my mother made pinwheels for us, and we would fasten them on to the metal footbridge above the railroad we called the Cloud Bridge. Years later, when life was much harder and more complicated, I would pass by that bridge and think of how happy it made us to watch those pinwheels spin in the open breeze.

When I was young, I didn't hear the background noise of mechanical sounds like I do now in South Korea and the United States. There weren't garbage trucks churning, horns honking, or phones ringing everywhere. All I could hear were the sounds people were making: women washing dishes, mothers calling their children, the clink of spoons and chopsticks on rice bowls as families sat down to eat. Sometimes I could hear my friends being scolded by their parents. There was no music blaring in the background, no eyes glued to smartphones back then. But there was human intimacy and connection, something that is hard to find in the modern world I inhabit today.

At our house in Hyesan, our water pipes were almost always dry, so my mother usually carried our clothes down to the river and washed them there. When she brought them back, she put them on the warm floor to dry.

Because electricity was so rare in our neighborhood, whenever the lights came on people were so happy they would sing and clap and shout. Even in the middle of the night, we would wake up to celebrate. When you have so little, just the smallest thing can make you happy—and that is one of the very few features of life in North Korea

that I actually miss. Of course, the lights would never stay on for long. When they flickered off, we just said, “Oh, well,” and went back to sleep.

Even when the electricity came on the power was very low, so many families had a voltage booster to help run the appliances. These machines were always catching on fire, and one March night it happened at our house while my parents were out. I was just a baby, and all I remember is waking up and crying while someone carried me through the smoke and flames. I don’t know if it was my sister or our neighbor who saved me. My mother came running when someone told her about the blaze, but my sister and I were both already safe in the neighbor’s house. Our home was destroyed by the fire, but right away my father rebuilt it with his own hands.

After that, we planted a garden in our small fenced yard. My mother and sister weren’t interested in gardening, but my father and I loved it. We put in squash and cabbage and cucumbers and sunflowers. My father also planted beautiful fuchsia flowers we called “ear drops” along the fence. I adored draping the long delicate blossoms from my ears and pretending they were earrings. My mother asked my father why he was wasting valuable space planting flowers, but he ignored her.

In North Korea, people lived close to nature, and they developed skills to predict the next day’s weather. We didn’t have the Internet and usually couldn’t watch the government’s broadcast on television because of the electricity shortage. So we had to figure it out ourselves.

During the long summer nights, our neighbors would all sit around outside their houses in the evening air. There were no chairs; we just sat on the ground, looking at the sky. If we saw millions of stars up there, someone would remark, “Tomorrow will be a sunny day.” And we’d all murmur agreement. If there were only thousands of stars,

someone else might say, “Looks like tomorrow will be cloudy.” That was our local forecast.

The best day of every month was Noodle Day, when my mother bought fresh, moist noodles that were made in a machine in town. We wanted them to last a long time, so we spread them out on the warm kitchen floor to dry. It was like a holiday for my sister and me because we would get to sneak a few noodles and eat them while they were still soft and sweet. In the earliest years of my life, before the worst of the famine that struck North Korea in the mid-1990s had gripped our city, our friends would come around and we would share the noodles with them. In North Korea, you are supposed to share everything. But later, when times were much harder for our family and for the country, my mother told us to chase the children away. We couldn’t afford to share anything.

During the good times, a family meal would consist of rice, kimchi, some kind of beans, and seaweed soup. But those things were too expensive to eat during the lean times. Sometimes we would skip meals, and often all we had to eat was a thin porridge of wheat or barley, beans, or black frozen potatoes ground and made into cakes filled with cabbage.

The country I grew up in was not like the one my parents had known as children in the 1960s and 1970s. When they were young, the state took care of everyone’s basic needs: clothes, medical care, food. After the Cold War ended, the Communist countries that had been propping up the North Korean regime all but abandoned it, and our state-controlled economy collapsed. North Koreans were suddenly on their own.

I was too young to realize how desperate things were becoming in the grown-up world, as my family tried to adapt to the massive

changes in North Korea during the 1990s. After my sister and I were asleep, my parents would sometimes lie awake, sick with worry, wondering what they could do to keep us all from starving to death.

Anything I did overhear, I learned quickly not to repeat. I was taught never to express my opinion, never to question anything. I was taught to simply follow what the government told me to do or say or think. I actually believed that our Dear Leader, Kim Jong Il, could read my mind, and I would be punished for my bad thoughts. And if he didn't hear me, spies were everywhere, listening at the windows and watching in the school yard. We all belonged to *inminban*, or neighborhood "people's units," and we were ordered to inform on anyone who said the wrong thing. We lived in fear, and almost everyone—my mother included—had a personal experience that demonstrated the dangers of talking.

I was only nine months old when Kim Il Sung died on July 8, 1994. North Koreans worshipped the eighty-two-year-old "Great Leader." At the time of his death, Kim Il Sung had ruled North Korea with an iron grip for almost five decades, and true believers—my mother included—thought that Kim Il Sung was actually immortal. His passing was a time of passionate mourning, and also uncertainty in the country. The Great Leader's son, Kim Jong Il, had already been chosen to succeed his father, but the huge void Kim Il Sung left behind had everyone on edge.

My mother strapped me on her back to join the thousands of mourners who daily flocked to the plaza-like Kim Il Sung monument in Hyesan to weep and wail for the fallen Leader during the official mourning period. The mourners left offerings of flowers and cups of rice liquor to show their adoration and grief.

During that time, one of my father's relatives was visiting from northeast China, where many ethnic North Koreans lived. Because he

was a foreigner, he was not as reverent about the Great Leader, and when my mother came back from one of her trips to the monument, Uncle Yong Soo repeated a story he had just heard. The Pyongyang government had announced that Kim Il Sung had died of a heart attack, but Yong Soo reported that a Chinese friend told him he had heard from a North Korean police officer that it wasn't true. The real cause of death, he said, was *hwa-byung*—a common diagnosis in both North and South Korea that roughly translates into “disease caused by mental or emotional stress.” Yong Soo had heard that there were disagreements between Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il over the elder Kim's plans to hold talks with South Korea. . . .

“Stop!” my mother said. “Don't say another word!” She was so upset that Yong Soo would dare to spread rumors about the regime that she had to be rude to her guest and shut him up.

The next day she and her best friend were visiting the monument to place more flowers when they noticed someone had vandalized the offerings.

“Oh, there are such bad people in this world!” her friend said.

“You are so right!” my mother said. “You wouldn't believe the evil rumor that our enemies have been spreading.” And then she told her friend about the lies she had heard.

The following day she was walking across the Cloud Bridge when she noticed an official-looking car parked in the lane below our house, and a large group of men gathered around it. She immediately knew something awful was about to happen.

The visitors were plainclothes agents of the dreaded *bo-wi-bu*, or National Security Agency, that ran the political prison camps and investigated threats to the regime. Everybody knew these men could take you away and you would never be heard from again. Worse, these weren't locals; they had been sent from headquarters.

The senior agent met my mother at our door and led her to our

neighbor's house, which he had borrowed for the afternoon. They both sat, and he looked at her with eyes like black glass.

"Do you know why I'm here?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," she said.

"So where did you hear that?" he said.

She told him she'd heard the rumor from her husband's Chinese uncle, who had heard it from a friend.

"What do you think of it?" he said.

"It's a terrible, evil rumor!" she said, most sincerely. "It's a lie told by our enemies who are trying to destroy the greatest nation in the world!"

"What do you think you have done wrong?" he said, flatly.

"Sir, I should have gone to the party organization to report it. I was wrong to just tell it to an individual."

"No, you are wrong," he said. "You should never have let those words out of your mouth."

Now she was sure she was going to die. She kept telling him she was sorry, begging to spare her life for the sake of her two babies. As we say in Korea, she begged until she thought her hands would wear off.

Finally, he said in a sharp voice that chilled her bones, "You must never mention this again. Not to your friends or your husband or your children. Do you understand what will happen if you do?"

She did. Completely.

Next he interrogated Uncle Yong Soo, who was nervously waiting with the family at our house. My mother thinks that she was spared any punishment because Yong Soo confirmed to the agent how angry she had been when he told her the rumor.

When it was over, the agents rode away in their car. My uncle went back to China. When my father asked my mother what the secret police wanted from her, she said it was nothing she could talk

about, and never mentioned it again. My father went to his grave without knowing how close they had come to disaster.

Many years later, after she told me her story, I finally understood why when my mother sent me off to school she never said, “Have a good day,” or even, “Watch out for strangers.” What she always said was, “Take care of your mouth.”

In most countries, a mother encourages her children to ask about everything, but not in North Korea. As soon as I was old enough to understand, my mother warned me that I should be careful about what I was saying. “Remember, Yeonmi-ya,” she said gently, “even when you think you’re alone, the birds and mice can hear you whisper.” She didn’t mean to scare me, but I felt a deep darkness and horror inside me.