

Exit Out of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

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I am North Korean.

I am living in Exxxx now, but I will always be North Korean.

I neither want to hide it, nor do I try to.

It is not a 'sin' to be North Korean. I am not ashamed of being North Korean.

However, I am not able to reveal my name because I do not want to do things that may harm the security of my brothers, sisters and relatives in North Korea.

I would appreciate the readers' kind understanding of this need for confidentiality.

Most people wish to hide their past.

I also tried to bury my past memories and tried not to think about it.

The reason I am trying to speak about my past that I have wished to forget, is to help other North Korean women who suffered from experiences I endured. I wished that the world would know of the sufferings of women in North Korea, and help them heal from the pain.

This is not sophisticated writing, but I do hope you will read it.

Escape from North Korea

I cry as I write this. I can feel my eyes tearing as I write my story.

If the tears from my eyes will help toward women's rights, I feel my tears will be valuable.

People in their senior years would often talk about their youth in their twenties when asked to share good memories. I would agree with this, even though I have not lived half of my life. It is when all people realize their dreams and hopes. It is usually the golden era of life when their love and romance bear fruit.

However, it was the most painful and hurtful period of my life where big scars in my heart became deeper and deeper. This wound could be healed, but I am still not certain of this.

I had dreams and hopes.

In my youth, it was to teach students, hold their hands, and sometimes caringly chastise them to make their dreams come true.

The dream came true and I did taste it. It was, however, as fleeting as waking up from a dream.

It was a worrisome sigh rather than hope that came from my heart as a young teacher. The children's faces I saw did not show bright smiles or hope. In an age when they should be learning and playing, they were concerned about food and hunger; and some found themselves estranged from their parents, only to become orphans. This broke my heart, and was painful to observe.

Not long after such painful encounters with these children, a big, dark cloud was soon to come over my own life.

My mother left home after her business failed; my father became ill from the shock of his wife leaving, and the entire family responsibility was then left on my shoulders.

I had been a student all my life and it felt like the world was collapsing. I had to quit my studies and I wept very often. I could not think of how to survive. My father fell ill under haemorrhage, but there was no medicine available. I could not sit there and do nothing, so I sold my family's assets. I wanted to save my father first. However there was not much improvement in my father's condition. I became angry toward my father at times.

Soon, another disaster struck me. My brother came home, after escaping from the military base. He was caught dealing gold illegally, tarnishing his military service records.

The military police stayed in my house to arrest him and my brother was chased.

It drove me crazy to have military officials in my house where there was not even enough wood to burn for heating.

My father secretly told me to leave. He said, "Take your brother. You must live, you must."

It was my father's will.

Not even able to observe my father's death, I left. Leaving him lying in the cold room, I left for a journey that would never bring me back home.

Once I saw a title of a song called, "Father's Youth". My father had a dream and youth, but he had to sacrifice everything for the children. I will never see him again. I bow in deep gratitude to my father and say, "Thank you. Thank you, I wish you a good life and health where you are."

He may be buried somewhere but I do not even know where. He 'came back' to earth perhaps to help me. It is all in appreciation to my father that I am here alive and writing this now.

This is how I left my home where I was born and raised - and arrived into the strange land of China. There was no guarantee that everything will work out fine, but I chose to go to China where my life became radically different full of storms and dark clouds.

My youth was one of darkness and evil - full of despair and pain.

Human Trafficking

People often talk about human trafficking. It makes me sad to hear them talk about it. This is my first time that I reveal that I also was sold to China through human trafficking. I would deny it when I was asked. It was shameful so I tried to hide it. It was too remorseful to talk about it and tears would fall before I began to speak about it. I realized though that I was not the only person who suffered through this.

If you resisted the brokers, you will be killed. The brokers would 'play' [sexually engage] with the women who would become sold like objects. I was sold into China for 5,000 wan (£500) at 22 years of age. The situation was similar to auctions. People would gather and choose who they wanted. There were all kinds of people - old people, disabled...etc

I was sold to a farmer in Hxxxxxxx. It was a long journey in a bus. I was very frightened as if I were going to my own death and burial.

I ended up in a very simple cabin. I used to live in an apartment in North Korea. I had not even seen a cabin before in North Korea but there were many in the rural areas of China. The toilet was just about to collapse and the foul smell leaked into the house. I could not escape. People in the village had their eyes on me. They would threaten me saying I would be stripped naked, raped in public, and would be reported to the police and that I would be killed secretly.

I was frightened, living as a stranger in a strange world with no body I knew. I wished to die, but I remembered my father. So I was determined to overcome the hardship.

It helped to learn the Chinese language. I watched TV all day and learned Chinese.

I was demanded to produce a child, whatever the reason or situation. I did not wish to, but it did not work out as I hoped. I became pregnant. I never regret having my son, though. It was ultimately my son that gave me strength to sustain myself.

I asked my husband to allow me to live separately. My poor husband had no money to buy a house. One man offered a free hut made for a security guard. I was so thankful to the man. It was a small security hut 1.8 x1.8 meter composed of one room and a kitchen area. It was just big enough for two adults to sit in. I put a shelf on the wall to place blankets and clothes. It was a cold, wooden house. I had to dig up the ground to find rotting pieces of wood to use as fuel.

My husband was a chronic gambler. He left out of the house early in the mornings and did not come home until very late. I had to bail water and walk up a steep hill to the house even when I was pregnant. I once fell into a deep hole that stored *kimchi*.

The expected date for the birth of my son was coming soon. I thought of my mother. I missed my mother when I was sick/nauseous and when the expected date came closer. I wept.

The house was so cold, and the water-basket at the windows froze each morning as I woke up. I started to feel the approach of my baby in my womb around 4 a.m. one morning. The baby was just about to come, but the man who was supposed to be my husband was out gambling.

I went through labour for eleven hours by myself. I thought both the baby and I would die. A passer-by found me and brought a mid-wife home. The old woman said, "This is too much even for the ones who were sold to this place." I gave birth to a son. I forgot the pain for a moment and cried out of joy. There was no one to cook seaweed soup for me, but I was so happy to have a family. I had no money, no milk. I put sugar in the water to feed my baby and waited for the milk to come from me. Two days passed and my baby stopped crying. The mid-wife returned and reprimanded me, stating that I almost killed my baby. Having not eaten, there was no milk from me. My baby tried to suckle from my breasts but only resulted in sore nipples. But I had to forget my pain for the baby.

The gamble addict tried to sell my baby to pay for his debts. I was so disappointed and could not say a word. I wanted to draw a sword to his neck.

Ten months passed. My baby developed fever and diarrhoea but I could not give him medicine or a flu shot. But I finally received some help - Some people brought him medicine and injection. But my son missed the appropriate time for treatment and still has weak lungs and bronchitis to this day

My husband was only into gambling and would not even help his family. I had to live on rice put out for the animals and collected vegetables that were going to be disposed of. I lived like a beggar. I could not live like that anymore. It was lunar New Year. All families prepared good food to greet the New Year, but I was alone with my baby.

I made a decision. I told myself, "I will leave." The next day, I left the place with my baby on my back. I went to a person that I used to know and asked for a place to stay; and that I would do anything to support myself and my son. He said I could not do it alone and needed to bring my husband. I agreed in hopes that it may change my husband to be in a new place away from his old friends. I called my husband and moved into our new house. I grew bean-sprouts and got some cow leather and tore it to thinner pieces. It was hard work. My hand ached. My husband would take some of the finished goods and throw it away because I had left the lights on late night and disturbed his sleep. Next day I was reprimanded because of the lost bit and only to receive less money.

I did not stop. I sold bean sprouts and saved a little money to give my son some clothes, but my husband took the money for gambling.

I could not celebrate my son's first anniversary and could not take a photo of him. The picture I have now is the one I took later with the money I earned working in restaurant.

I would often say, "I am sorry my son."

I worked all day and even gave private lessons to students, but my husband wasted the money in gambling. Once when my son was three years old, he said, "Mom I have to go to nursery on Sunday because there is no one to care for me except the landlord." There was no one to take care of my child because I had to work. My son still remembers this. This breaks my heart and the memory does not go away.

Seven years passed when another disaster came upon my life.

The Chinese intelligence broke into my house to arrest me after the seven years of fearful nights hiding. I begged and tried to excuse myself but they would not listen to me. They placed hand-cuffs on my wrists and I was sent to a Chinese prison on 30 April, 2004.

There were no visitors allowed. Soup and hard bread were served for seven days. Then I was taken to Yxxxx prison. Handcuffed, the police followed me even to the toilet. I could not escape.

At the Yxxxxx bun prison, they first searched my body. I was naked with shame and anger. They hit me saying I tried to cover myself. They asked for money but I told them, "I don't have a penny on me. Do whatever you want." Then they would hit me again. I came in at 7 a.m. and interrogation went on until midnight. All my shoes and clothes except the ones I was wearing were taken from me.

The cell was full of North Korean people. There I found out that the prison was specially made for the North Koreans. People were made to believe that they had to arrest North Koreans for whatever the reason. China might be known as a member of UN and supports human rights. But, they indeed are no different from North Korea that oppresses and steals.

The world must know that the pain of North Korean people exists not only in North Korea but also in China. I felt somewhat relieved to have been free from the marriage with the man, but was agonized to have left my son there. "Survive until I come back" - I looked up skywards and sent my prayer.

The body search happened everyday. One had to stand naked in front of men. I was ordered to squat – ordered to "sit down and stand up" numerous times for a possibility that women could have hidden money in their vaginas. They repeated this. Devils, they are beasts in human masks. The worse beasts are in North Korea.

I was in Yxxxxx for a week and sent to North Korea.

In A North Korean Prison

Even though I was sent to North Korea as a criminal, there was some joy of coming back to my home country. But this soon changed into anguish and despair. I thought that because we are all same Koreans, and that since we left out of desperate hunger, our intelligence officers will not treat us badly... I do not know what to say. Maybe I was too naive. It could not have been more different that this. I was extremely shocked and tried to reassess the reality of my current situation, but only repeated beatings and cursing came back.

Since I had never been to a North Korean prison, I thought that a NK prison, like one in China, would have at least some room for a person. I was speechless when I found out the actual circumstances. The corridor was jammed full of people and there was not even space to place a foot. The toilet was at the front end of the corridor and shared by both men and women. There was only a minimal covering, so everyone could see everything when people stood up. There were three rooms the size of 1.5 X 1.5 meter full of people. Just like in the Chinese prison, body searches, discipline, and training began. Female guards kicked old people calling them bad names. I thought Korea was a most polite country but this image disintegrated rapidly.

They did not understand even the "m" of "morals". They took everything worth anything. Soap, toothpaste, towels. etc. Prisoners were given identity numbers. My number was 232. They called your number instead of your proper name.

Sleeping was even worse. There was no space for me when I asked for it. They kicked me with their brass-tipped boots. The pain would last for a month when one was kicked. I could not walk. People would just lie over one another and so on. If they do not do it well, they will call out, "Down!, Up!" It seemed there was only one discipline in North Korea. After one hour, people will lie on top of you and you cannot say anything if the person's toe came in your mouth. One was too exhausted and just had to sleep.

Breakfast consisted of a tiny portion of noodles in broth. Everybody ate it out of hunger. I had diarrhoea and needed to go to the toilet. You had to say, "Sir, can 232 go to number 1(or number 2)?" instead of,

"can 232 go to the toilet?". Then the guard would let you go if they were in a good mood. But some bad ones did not even answer. I would ask again but they would say, "be quiet".

I could not stop and ran to the toilet. As punishment, they forced me to clean the toilet with my bare hands without water. It was not a regular toilet with flushing water. You can not imagine how disgustingly filthy it was. I cringe now and never want to think of this again.

When women had their menstrual periods, no sanitary pads were available, so women would cut towels and use them. There was no water, though. I was caught washing a towel one morning. As punishment, I was ordered by the guards to place the bloody towel on top of my head. Blood dripped from the towel on top of my head down my face; and I had to say "I am sorry" all morning. It was disgusting and I felt like I was going to collapse.

I decided that I would stop eating to avoid further humiliation in using the toilets, but did so secretly.

There are so many spies in the prison. I did not eat for thirteen days. There is a saying "live if your mind is clear even if you are caught by a tiger." I never loosened my heart or will. There were many people suffering from malnutrition. However, I had to be strong to survive. There were body cavity searches every week. People who tried to escape to South Korea were sentenced to life-imprisonment and remained in prison. Next, I was transferred to "xxxxxxx training camp" and then to the "security camp".

After thirteen days of fasting, I came out of the evil gulag. I felt relieved but more worried about the future. I had to go to the provincial correction camp, the gulag of death, and could not even walk. In training camp, they make you work until you are sent to the provincial camp. You build a house, and demolish a house.

In the hot summers, you can not wash yourself; and are not allowed to go to the toilet freely. Every night the guards put two baskets in the room and locked the door. There are more than one-hundred people and we had to use the baskets as toilets. The rice we were fed were like stones – it was sent from China to feed the pigs. North Koreans eat what the Chinese fed to their pigs.

I was sent to the 'provincial collection camp'. The building was not too far from my house. I remember passing by the building but never had been aware that it was a camp. It was in a center where I grew up, went to school and lived with my family for more than twenty years but I could not even see them.

From there I was sent to a farm. We were treated just like cows or horses. People had to carry heavy burdens barefooted. Four women stood in front of one carriage. They had to bear heavy loads of fertilizers and run. No one would imagine how people can do this. The people were made to be cattle. Shoes were not allowed in fear of escape. People might think this is a fictitious story, but it is true. We were human shovels that made hills into land.

Work began at 4:30 a.m. and we went to sleep at 11 p.m. Meal times were less than one hour for all three meals. There was a male guard in toilet. If you lagged behind or acted slowly, the guards beat you. I could not even think about my son. I only thought of survival. I had to live in a way much less than an animal to survive. People were dying one by one. It was hard to watch. Upon waking up, the guards took your shoes off to avoid escape.

From early morning till late night one had to work barefooted. It was a pure hell. The North Korean countryside was not paved but was very rough and full of stones and sharp glass. If one stepped on glass one had to work bleeding and lame. We slept in one room in the village. All the doors were locked except one entrance. Even in the summer, all the doors are locked and there were so many people you could not even sleep. In front of the main entrance a guard slept on a bed. Two baskets are put in the room for toilets. Lights are kept on when sleeping.

One day I woke up and my legs would not move. My foot became so big from infection and swelling. I had to go for the morning work but could not walk. The guards beat me up accusing me that I did not want to work.

I was working on a corn farm but had to crawl. My trousers became soggy from the morning dew and soiled heavily from dirt. After meals I was too tired and could not walk. I felt great pain and one of my legs became paralyzed. I noticed I could no longer feel my leg. On the second day, my legs became so

swollen that I had to cut off the trouser leg. My leg started to blacken. Guards sent me to the provincial camp. They made me walk over the hill. This took a whole day when it usually takes two hours.

The guards then said I had to amputate my leg to have a 50% survival chance. I was sent to the local security camp. They wished to avoid having a casualty in their institution. On the particular day, there was only one guard because everybody was on Liberation day holiday. I was put in an underground prison. There were two rooms, one for men and the other for women. No lights existed and it smelled foul. But it was comfortable. I felt cold and hungry in the hot summer.

The outside temperature was between 38-39 degrees, but there was no medicine. My fever started when the leg became swollen. In the day time, the guards let you get some sunshine. When I tried to air out my legs, I saw blisters. I thought it was becoming better, but it smelled strange when blisters began to pop.

People in the cell said the room smelled like a rotting corpse. So I sat outside during the day time. They took me to a hospital. Doctors declared that my leg should be amputated and did not do any treatment. You don't have to pay for the medical service in North Korea but it was just a daydream. The security camp released me with my uncle's signature. My uncle then left me, saying he wished to never see me again.

Clueless, I felt relieved from their guard, but had nowhere to go. It was a hot summer. My legs were rotting even more quickly. Flies would sit on my leg during the day and the rats at night. With nowhere to go, I survived outdoors with a plastic-sheet covering myself. It was too cold even during the summer. Insects were crawling on my legs, and my feet were rotting with the skin hanging loose. I could see the bone blackening.

I was afraid of dying, so I prayed to the sky and prayed, "God, Buddha please save me. Please let me see my son."

I went to the security camp (police-station) again. It was the only way to survive.

In North Korea there is an orphanage centre. I arrived at the police station begging to send me to the orphanage for a week. Passers by gave me some food to eat out of compassion.

I was like a beggar. My hair became tarnished; insects were crawling all over my body. I was an animal. No one would be able to imagine living like this. After a week, the station decided to send me to the orphanage. The other leg began to swell, as well as my hands, too.

Then heaven helped me - a man appeared in front of me. He was an herbal doctor and saw me sitting at the police station for a week. He secretly beckoned me to come to the corner. If one engaged with a North Korean person who was caught hiding in China, one also became a 'criminal'. He looked at my leg and carried out treatment.

He unwrapped the gauze on my leg and looked at it and did not say a word for a while. He could not say a word out of shock. He carefully placed his herbs in my rotting bone. He wept quietly. I pray for this person always. Wherever he is, I pray that he is happy and healthy.

I stayed at a vagabond orphanage shelter. There were only children. The man gave me white powder to extract all the gangrene. I spent two months caring for my leg. I could not walk and had to ask children to help to go to the toilet. This was a heavily guarded area.

Three months passed and they let me pick corn to eat. I was once caught stealing corn, and the guards were 20 to 30-year old men. They wanted to force sex on me, but I told them they would be infected by my gangrene. This spared me.

This place and people were not of the hometown that I used to live in. Everything changed. There is a saying that even mountains and rivers will change over ten years, but even people have changed.

This is how I survived - I am writing my experiences.

It is not organized, but I am just writing down things that I remembered.

Cxxxxx in North Korea

I went to see my uncle.
I wanted to visit my father's grave.
My uncle however sent me away. He would not listen to me when I begged with tears.

I knelt down and cried on my father's grave after finding it. "I am sorry my father. I can not see you when I came back. I will not come back to this land again. ...My father who died for his children's success." I wept. I still see my father in my dream with bright smile; and he helps me whenever there is difficulty. "Thank you father."

Final Escape from North Korea.

I left North Korea again. This time, I was sold by a North Korean to China. I had no other option. I walked 40km with my leg that was still not recovered fully. I walked thinking of my son. We left at 2 AM and arrived at 10 PM at Hxxxxx... I quietly ran and met my son. I met my current husband there, too.

Now, I am happy. I am a proud mother of my three children and a 'princess' in my house. I sometimes pinch my leg thinking if it is real. I will live for my children.

I hope there will be unification between North and South Korea so that all the North Korean children will find their parents and live happily. When will my country be unified? In my generation? The whole world should support peace in North Korea and in unification between the North/South; and live in peace and happiness in a peaceful world.

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